

OKLAHOMA STATE Returns to Nation's Elite

By Bill Ballew

In the early days of NCAA softball as we now know it, Oklahoma State was synonymous with success on the diamond. Under the leadership of legendary head coach Sandy Fischer, the Cowgirls reached the Women's College World Series on six occasions, including five times in an eight-year span, between 1989 and 1996. Along the way OSU fielded some of the game's more prominent players, including such two-time All-Americans as Shari Johnson, Michele Smith, Melanie Roche and Kim Ward.

When Fischer departed the top job following the 2001 campaign after 23 seasons of leading the Cowgirls, the program endured some tough times. Fischer's replacement, Margaret Rebenar, inherited the unenviable job of replacing one of the sport's most heralded coaches at the same time softball was starting to skyrocket in popularity across the country. In Rebenar's five-year stint with OSU, the team finished below the break-even mark twice and concluded only one season in the national polls, finishing 14th in 2003.

Those difficulties led to the hiring of Rich Wieligman as Oklahoma State's third head coach in program history, beginning with the 2007 season. The change in coaches, however, did not result in an immediate change in fate. The Cowgirls went 25-33 in their first year under Coach Wig, followed by a 26-25 mark a year later. Greater strides occurred in



Rich Wieligman



Kat Espinosa



Julie Ward

2009 when a 36-22 record included a trip to the NCAA Tournament and the Tallahassee Regional. In 2010, OSU finished the slate in the national rankings by placing 23rd with a 44-16 record and a spot in the Tucson Regional.

As impressive as that progress may have been, it paled in comparison to what Wieligman and the Cowgirls were able to accomplish in 2011. Oklahoma State won 42 of 62 games, marking its second straight 40-win showing, and earned its third consecutive NCAA Tournament appearance. OSU then traveled to Tennessee and stunned the fifth-ranked Volunteers in back-to-back games to advance to its first Super Regional. The Cowgirls responded to being in Stillwater by posting a pair of triumphs over Houston to reach the WCWS in nearby Oklahoma City.

"We've held our ground each year I've been here," Wieligman said. "We've improved and then built on that. Last season was our third year in the Regionals and our first time in the Super Regionals. But the step to the World Series was a big one for us. I feel like we've been getting better each year and doing a better job of handling the big games. I like where we're at and I like how the program has progressed. We just need to keep holding on. The bar is up there and we just need to keep reaching for it. It's great because our kids got a taste of the World Series and they understand what it takes to get there. They want to get back and win some games at that place."

Wieligman and his brain trust, which includes assistant coach Clarisa Crowell and pitching coach Tom Gray, were named the Midwest Region Coaching Staff of the Year by the National Fastpitch Coaches Association in 2011. For Wieligman, the recognition serves as yet another barometer in gauging the tremendous impact he has had at every stop as a collegiate coach.

An All-America baseball player at Lubbock Christian in 1984, Wieligman played professionally in the Philadelphia Phillies and Detroit Tigers farm systems before toiling briefly in Japan. He returned to the United States to coach but still had the itch to play and turned his attention to the fastpitch ranks with DR Engine, based out of Odessa, Texas. Wieligman helped guide the team to

the national championships in 1995 and 1997, and he was named the MVP of the 1995 ASA national tournament.

Wieligman proceeded to move into the coaching ranks and made impressive contributions as an assistant at Baylor and Texas Tech prior to being named the hitting coordinator at Texas A&M under head coach Jo Evans. His impact on the Aggies' offense piqued the interest of OSU athletic director Mike Holder, who envisioned Wieligman as being ready for his shot at guiding a team in the Big 12.

"I don't know if I have a different approach," said Wieligman, referring to his background as a power hitter and batting instructor. "It probably sometimes hinders me because when you've played the game, it gives you a different outlook. I played the game every day and I learned you can't let one game or one at-bat bother you. If you do, you're going to be 0-for-20 in a hurry. That's the way I let our girls play. You can't let one bad game bother you or get you down because you have to get back up and play pretty quick. If anything that's what I might bring to the table that's a little bit different. I don't like to dwell on what happened in each game. I just want to keep getting better."

In order to improve at the Division I level nowadays, teams must adapt to changes in the game. Wieligman has done just that by building a roster that includes impressive athleticism as well as the ability to hit the ball out of the park. With the Big 12 boasting as much pitching as any conference in the country, Wieligman wants to make certain his squad has as many options to score runs as possible, a strategy that starts when he's on the recruiting trail.

"We look at getting good hitters and good athletes who are good in the classroom," Wieligman said. "We like to have good all-around softball players who are good students. We have to put a team together, but we're always trying to get more speed and power. You hate to get too extreme as far as speed is concerned, but that is one thing you can't teach. And the faster you are as a team, the better off you are. At the same time, you don't want to give up power in place of speed because you have to drive runners in. So we look at getting a good balance of both speed and power. That's



Tamara Brown



Ari Morrison

TEAM SPOTLIGHT

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our main goal because you want to have the opportunity to win games in different ways.”

One of Wieligman's early coups involved the signing of first baseman Julie Ward. She was heavily recruited out of St. Lucy's Priory School in Altadena, Calif., but kept an open mind while considering her options regarding where she might attend college. Stillwater, Okla., was not a place she knew a lot about but soon discovered it could be a perfect fit, especially under the guidance of Wieligman.

“It's funny because when I was getting recruited, Oklahoma State was not at the top of the rankings,” said Ward, who became OSU's career home run leader during her junior year. “My coach had even told me, ‘If you want to go to a World Series, I wouldn't recommend you go there.’ But I came out here on a visit and I liked the coaches and I liked everything about it. I knew there was a lot I could learn from Coach Wigs and that's one of the main reasons I came here. He was a left-handed power hitter and first baseman and I knew I could learn a lot from him.”

Wieligman also did a good job early in his tenure at OSU in selling recruits on the impact they could have in reestablishing the program as one of the nation's elite. That type of opportunity interested short-stop Chelsea Garcia, who also had offers from Tulsa and Oklahoma City but liked what the Cowgirls and the Big 12 Conference had to offer.

“I told my dad when I was being recruited that both Tulsa and OCU are great academic schools, but I really wanted to challenge myself and see if I could hang in the Big 12 and big-time Division I softball,”



Tarah Ettinger



Chelsea Garcia

said Garcia, who led the Cowgirls with 12 home runs and 55 RBI last year while hitting .333. “I wanted to put myself in the most challenging situation. I just loved the atmosphere in Stillwater. It's very family-oriented, especially our team. I just really wanted to go there and now I don't want to leave.”

The Cowgirls will enter the 2012 season with six position starters and three pitchers returning from last year's team that finished eighth in both the NFCA Coaches poll and the USA Softball poll. While Ward and Garcia return as starters on the dirt at first and short, respectively, Wieligman is looking to replace third baseman Mariah Gearhart and second baseman Alysia Hamilton, the team's top two hitters from a year ago. Among the candidates are freshman second baseman Hannah Bowen and freshman Gessenia DeLaCruz at the hot corner. Utility players Tamara Brown and Sam Chrisman, both juniors, also are expected to be in the mix. Catcher Ashley Boyd graduated, but senior Kelsea Schultz and sophomore Tarah Ettinger started 28 games between them in 2011. Freshman Taylor Woodall also could be a candidate for activity behind the dish.

“We have some positions that are open and you need kids to step up and prove they want it,” Wieligman said. “But the fall is tough. They're going through strength and conditioning and then practice on top of that. It gets to be some long weeks there for a while. But I believe that hard work makes them tough and better players for the spring season.”

One luxury the Cowgirls have is their depth in the outfield. Sophomore Ari Morrison leads the pack after hitting .310 last spring. Seniors Sam Diffendaffer and Kelsey Anchors and junior Amy Graham struggled at times at the plate in 2011 but are solid defenders and possess the experience that should make the glove work in the garden one of the team's strengths. Freshman Shelby Davis also figures to be a strong

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candidate for playing time.

The OSU pitching is expected to be formidable with the return of Kat Espinosa. The junior righthander went 23-10 with a 2.20 ERA in 45 games, including 10 starts, last year. Sophomore righthander Simone Freeman is back in the circle after going 9-8 with a 2.53 ERA in 28 outings and 22 starts. Sophomore Morgan Hawkins, who went 6-0 with a 1.21 ERA, is also available after putting together a solid debut as a freshman.

"I'm encouraged. I believe our seniors have stepped up and are doing a good job of leading us," Wieligman said. "It's tough when you lose the players we lost but that's also the fun part of fall practice, trying to find yourself as a team and discovering how you need to get ready to play as a team. I think we've come a long way in the last couple of weeks, but I do believe our core group that is back is really strong and are going to be good leaders for us."

Both Ward and Garcia say that being a leader and good example for younger players is not a new role. After all, their performance on the field over the past three years has garnered plenty of respect from all of their teammates. Part of that respect can be attributed to the way Wieligman coaches, which includes trusting everyone to do her job without panicking during those times when things might go a little awry.

"It's like we've been led into the roles we have now," Ward said. "It's not like we have to make any drastic changes. In the case of Chelsea and me, I believe we're natural leaders on the field and people naturally gravitate

toward us. It's not like we have to try extra hard. Everyone is catching on, and I think we're going to be fine as a team based on the way we're working together. Everybody is learning, and we're trying to get through practice with learning experiences. That's something that happens throughout every fall. Everyone is getting better and more team-minded."

No one questions whether or not the Cowgirls will be in the mix for the championship in the ultra-competitive Big 12. Half of the eight teams in the WCWS last spring came from the conference, and the pitching is expected to be dominant once again from top to bottom. Despite the challenges that await, the OSU players believe they have a chance to return to ASA Hall of Fame Field in Oklahoma City during the first week of June.

"Last year is last year and we can't expect to get back to the World Series just because we made it there in 2011," Garcia said. "Our approach is to take everything game by game and pitch by pitch and play as hard as we can. Coach always says we have a blue-collar mentality and that we can't get complacent about anything. We know we're not entitled to anything and that we have to work for whatever we want."

It is that type of attitude that puts a smile on the face of Wieligman. In his first five years as the Cowgirls' head coach, he has instilled a winning approach that comes from outworking the competition and making the most of every opportunity his team is given. The scoreboard may not always reflect the outcome he and OSU want, but he knows that more often than not his team will be on the winning end. As a result, through hard work and a commitment to excellence, success is once again synonymous with Oklahoma State softball.

"Stillwater is a great place to be and is a place I consider to be one of the best-kept secrets at the college level," Wieligman said. "We get kids on campus and they have no idea what we have until they get here. Lots of kids fall in love with this place when they arrive. Our goal is to continue along that same road and represent this school the best way we know how."