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a winning tradition

# That Special Southwestern Spirit

Photographs by Darleta Floyd Coward

By Pat Kourt



Editor's Addendum: The 1987-1988 Lady Bulldogs team made a good start by winning the twelfth annual Queens' Classic at Wayland Baptist University in Plainview, Texas, on November 28, 1987. Two Southwestern players--Sharon Blair and Patrice Malphus--were named to the All-Tournament Team, and Lady Bulldog Stephanie Wyatt was

honored as the "Most Valuable Player" of the tournament. The Ladies' 68-62 win over the Wayland Flying Queens in the Finals marked the first time the Queens had been defeated by an NAIA team on their home court in Hutcherson Center, which was constructed in 1971.

The early 1980's found Western Oklahoma spotlighted in the nation as the place to find work, to strike oil, and to get rich. But--that economic high soon became a depressing low. Hundreds of workers were quickly unemployed, and oil rigs (the "Oklahoma state tree" at the time) became scarce. With uncertainty as the prevalent mood in 1981, most people in the area needed a morale boost or a glimpse of success. The Southwestern State Lady Bulldogs basketball team of Weatherford produced just that. They provided a spirited sparkle which still reminds the nation that Western Oklahoma continues to boom--at least in women's collegiate basketball.

That Lady Bulldog sparkle began as a glint of an idea in the mind of Southwestern's president, Dr. Leonard Campbell, who wanted a competitive women's basketball program to be developed. The college of five thousand students dropped out of the AIAW (Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women) and joined the NAIA (National Association of Athletics), which is comprised of approximately 550 small colleges. Next, six basketball scholarships were set up to garner top players from Oklahoma and surrounding states.

Most crucial of Campbell's spring decisions was the hiring of John Loftin, who was a fourteen-year veteran coach. His established record showed 243 wins and 65 losses at various Texas high schools and Murray State Junior College in Tishomingo. A native of Tulia, Texas, Loftin believed in a philosophy that a good basketball player is someone much like himself who persevered at shooting baskets on a dirt court beside the chicken house on his family's farm.

Ironically, on the same day Coach Loftin was hired, Kelli Litsch, a high-school All-American from Fay, Oklahoma, informed Southwestern officials and Loftin that she was turning down USC and Louisiana Tech to become a Lady Bulldog. She wanted to remain close to her hometown fans and family who had supported her since grade school.

Along with Litsch that first year, Mary Champion, who had been a star guard at Connors State Junior College, left her studies at the University of Science and Arts in Chickasha and



rekindled her basketball expertise under Loftin's guidance.

In addition, Chelly Belanger of Weatherford, a student at Colorado State University, signed with Southwestern. Anita Foster, a bank teller who played center on a Dallas summer league, moved to Weatherford for the fall semester. Pat Jacques, Foster's high-school teammate, joined her at SOSU. Jan "Cheese" Cheadle moved to Southwestern after an All-State quality career at Carnegie High School. Too, Deana English, an All-Stater from Elmore City and Fletcher's Susan Pueschel brought more talent. Mindy Mayfield of Yukon returned to play her sophomore year. Junior team members included Vickie Seal and Susan Mounts, who transferred from Western Oklahoma State and Northern Junior College respectively.

The strenuous recruiting of Coach

Loftin definitely reaped rewards. He began long practices the first week of September to prepare for the 1981-1982 season. Thel Shelby of Hollis served as team trainer while Demetriss Beacham acted as manager.

In early January, the Lady Bulldogs were ranked Number 1 and had 11 wins with no losses. The team averaged 73 points a game, and the number of spectators crowding into the Rankin Williams Fieldhouse grew from 300 in November to more than 2000 in January. Loftin called it a "fairy tale." In March the new NAIA National Champions had won 34 games with no losses, and Loftin was named "Coach of the Year." The team scored 241 points in the national tournament, averaging 80.3 points a game. They scored 99 field goals for a tournament high. Kelli Litsch won the coveted MVP award. The dazzle had begun!

The next season was practically a repeat. A former Murray State forward, Dee Dee Woodfork, proved to be a top recruit. Loftin described her as one of the "quickest, best jumpers" in women's basketball. Carie Kephart, Canton, and Joanna Freeman, Moore, were freshman teammates who joined Theresa Patterson, Pittsburgh, and Mary Scarlett, Clinton, as new Lady Bulldogs. The team averaged 67.1 points and outscored opponents by 12.7 points. With a 30-4 season record, the women reaped the rewards of the experience of their first championship year. Anita Foster, Kelli Litsch, and Mary Champion were named to the NAIA All-Tournament Team with Litsch spotlighted as the "Most Valuable Player" again. Coach Loftin enjoyed his top coach title once more. Kemper Arena in Kansas City had proved to belong to the Ladies again.

That second season of victory was climaxed with an appreciation banquet at which 300 area fans toasted the team's success and organized the Booster Club. It was led by Charlie Williams of the Security State Bank. They could hardly wait for the 1983-1984 opening game. Some fans like Pickle Ice of Fay were described by SPORTS ILLUSTRATED writer Jill Leiber as "fiends" as far as being devoted followers of every Southwestern game. Ice remarked to the reporter, "I'll sell a cow if I have to, to get myself to the nationals."

Just as enthusiastic as Ice were Doyle and Fay Jackson, who often treated the team players to dinners. Monty McCrary of Fay has compiled more than seven scrapbooks filled with the Lady Blues' memorabilia; many articles and pictures are from periodicals throughout the nation.

However, enthusiasm at its height for the team was summed up by Weatherford-KBXR radio sportscaster Chuck Edwards with his favorite broadcast expression "Holy Guacamole!"

In September, 1983, five of the team players were joined by several new players. Among them were Cari Hayes, an All-American guard from Connors Junior College, Diana Dees, who had played for Loftin at Murray State, along with Shorna Coffey, Leah Carpenter, and Shelly Brown. Also, Ellisia Fountain, Desiree Bowers, and Kim Fennelly brought strength to the team. Thel Shelby served as Loftin's optimistic

assistant coach while Jason Maxwell, trainer, and Beryl Sifford, manager, completed the Lady Bulldog squad.

By the second week of December, the team had dwindled in number. Foster, Litsch, Coffey, Cheadle, Dees, Fountain, Mayfield, and Woodfork were the only teammates who remained or who were uninjured.

What was Loftin's third season at Southwestern to hold in store? Optimism was still high among players and fans. With a 31-1 win-loss record, the Ladies became Bi-District Champions. Although the sparkle may have dimmed a bit from the previous two years, the 1983-1984 season was quite commendable.

Fans of the 1984-1985 basketball season were eager for another few months of excitement, anticipation, and, hopefully, a national title. Helping the team throughout the season were freshman Angie McBrayer (Weatherford), Dane Ferguson (Custer City), and Pendra Hamar (Hydro). Marilu Dunard of Troy, Missouri, was an asset with her frequent assists and rebounds. Also, veteran players Lisa Segard, Delisa Stroud, and Donna Beed delighted the fans with their action on the court.

As if to satisfy the fans' wish for another national title, the Lady Bulldogs won 34 games and allowed no opponent to defeat them. Loftin expressed his surprise at the women's winning their third national title because they did not have a strong defensive player on the inside. Anita Foster, a key player from previous years, was missed greatly. However, Kelli Litsch helped to turn the season into a winning one. By defeating Saginaw Valley, Michigan, the team wrapped up a great schedule. Loftin reflected that the final game was the most exciting one he had experienced in his years at Southwestern. Litsch, a six-foot senior, was named national tournament "Most Valuable Player" for the third time. Shelly Brown and Litsch were named to the All-Tournament Team. Other departing seniors were Cari Hayes, Jan Cheadle, and Ellisia Fountain.

At that point, the Lady Bulldogs had the most national tournament victories with 11. They also had the most consecutive wins by winning the first seven games in the first three tournament appearances. Kelli Litsch set records with 257 tournament points;

most field goals attempted, 175; most field goals made, 102; most free throws, 53; most free throws attempted, 65; and most rebounds, 110.

As the excitement of another crown faded over the summer, Coach Loftin faced a new team without the direct talent of Litsch. Instead, she would work beside him as assistant coach. Yes, 1985-1986 was the year to build and to find strong replacements for the May graduates. Although the success of the Ladies was not as remarkable as previous seasons, they were conference champions with a 20-0 record.

The team roster included Shelly Brown and Sandra Smith, who were the leading rebounders in the conference. Marilu Dunard, Renvy Evans, Lisa Freeman, and Dena Phelps handled the ball with quickness and accuracy. Others wearing the Bulldog white and blue were Terri Prim, Dawn Brooks, Lisa Segard, Demetris Beachamp, Dane Ferguson, Donna Beed, and Delisa Stroud. Of course, Donna Douglas also served as an important leader on the team.

By season's end, the staff planned for more new faces on the team. In general, the recruiting methods of the Southwestern coaching staff involve watching AAU games in Norman during the summer; watching high-school girls playing in the Western Oklahoma area; and making many telephone calls for prospective out-of-state athletes.

Recruiting for the new season was successful. Headlines in the DAILY OKLAHOMAN sports section on March 18, 1987, read: "Southwestern Adds Fourth Crown." An opening suggestion remarked that maybe the NAIA national tournament should be renamed the "Southwestern Oklahoma State Invitational." Even though the comment may have had a casual tone, Coach Loftin savored the championship more than any other because women's basketball had improved all over the nation since he had begun coaching; competition was tougher than ever.

A leader of the 1986-1987 squad included forward Joyce Boudreaux, who made a final basket to give the Lady Bulldogs a 60-58 win over North Georgia in Kansas City. Another teammate was Rhonda Smith, who was named District Nine's "Player of the Year." Both Rhonda and Joyce were chosen for the National All-Tournament team, while Donna Douglas of Tuttle

made the All-Tournament second team. Others sharing the team spirit included Peaches Brown, Stephanie Davis, Dena Phelps, Amelia Green, Trainer Billy Eggers, Sandra Smith, Tracie Wynn, Sherri Suggs, Tanya Andrews, Michelle Denton, student coach Jason Maxwell, and manager Donna Brence. The women finished the season with 21 consecutive wins and a 30-2 record.

Cheers were loud as the team displayed its fourth "NAIA National Champions" banner. They were welcomed home in Weatherford by several hundred fans, and Coach Loftin was lauded for his amazing record (179-16) since his 1981 start at Southwestern.

How can young women from different backgrounds and states play together so well to continue this spirited winning tradition? They like their coach, even though he is tough and tries "to keep them straight." He says the women share two characteristics as players--coming from winning programs and having winning attitudes.

In Loftin's efforts to guide the Lady Blues, several noteworthy accomplishments have been made. A few should

be mentioned. Kelli Litsch is the only athlete in NAIA history, man or woman, to be named a four-time All-American in any sport. In addition to Kelli, Chelly Belanger, Anita Foster, and Shelly Brown were named NAIA All-Americans. Numerous free-throw and field-goal records are held by Litsch, both locally and nationally. Some of the women have also played in special honor games.

Is there life after being a Lady Bulldog? The closeness of the team players does not diminish with graduation from Southwestern; in fact, it is not unusual to see some of the former teammates eating pizza together or enjoying a game of tennis. Although they are geographically scattered, they keep in touch. Just what are these past champions doing? Kelli Litsch is still assistant coach with the Lady Bulldogs. Cari Hayes assists with coaching at East Central. Susan Mounts coaches at Plainview, Texas, while Thel Shelby and Deana English both coach at Duncan. Chelly Belanger is a veterinarian in Dallas. Anita Foster works in a Dallas post office. Mary Champion

continues her coaching duties, and Marilu Dunard coaches in Wichita Falls, Texas. Coach Loftin remarks that seventy percent of the players on the championship teams have graduated from college. That in itself is commendable.

Will the dazzling Southwestern tradition continue? The fans think so. Although they see the future as producing improved teams at East Central of Ada, Northwestern of Alva, Oklahoma City's Oklahoma Christian College, and Shawnee's Oklahoma Baptist University, most predictions say that the Lady Bulldogs are still the team to beat. With their astounding record and brilliant coaching, the Southwestern team has helped to develop women's basketball into top-quality competition for both players and spectators.

Because of that spark of competition and success on the basketball court, people forget temporarily the declining economy and troubles of Western Oklahoma. They realize that competitive excitement is still possible.

Thanks, Lady Bulldogs, for sharing that special Southwestern spirit! ■

the people, yes

## Okies

By Margie Snowden North

THOSE CALIFORNIANS SPAT OUT THE WORD  
AS THOUGH IT WERE SOUR GREEN APPLES.  
GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM, THEY SAID.  
FRUIT TRAMPS. OKIES.

BUT WE PICKED THEIR PEAS IN BUSHEL BASKETS  
AND THEIR FRUIT IN CRATES  
AND WORKED IN THEIR CANNERIES  
AND BUILT THEIR HIGHWAYS.  
OKIES DID ALL THAT  
AND WE DIDN'T NEED A THANK-YOU  
NOR A SMILE,  
BUT A PAYCHECK THAT BOUGHT A CAR  
AND BUILT A TRAILER HOUSE  
AND GOT GAS WITH SOME LEFT OVER  
SO WE COULD GET BACK TO WESTERN OKLAHOMA  
WHERE WE WANTED TO BE  
IN THE FIRST PLACE.

*of sky and trees*

## Watcher

By Margie Snowden North

Autumn sunlight flashes,  
plays on car windows  
Tires hum on concrete  
going somewhere,  
places unattainable  
to the watcher in the field.  
Cotton rows beckon  
Cotton sack awaits

The watcher bends over his work,  
resolute  
Duty and the cotton sack weigh heavily  
pull him back  
from places out there.