

**Lance Jeter (6-3, 230, Jr.).** Jeter started his career in college athletics as a wide receiver on the Cincinnati football team. Now he's a point guard for Nebraska, having arrived in Lincoln this season as a junior college transfer.

**Toney McCray (6-6, 205, So.).** McCray averaged 16 minutes a game coming off the bench as a freshman, but they were assertive minutes, as he launched shots with the confidence of a featured scorer. He also blocked shots with surprising regularity for a 6-6 freshman. McCray injured his elbow in September, but is said to be doing OK.

**Brandon Richardson (6-0, 190, So.).** Though he was sidelined for four games by a shoulder injury, Richardson averaged 15 minutes a game last year as a red-

shirt freshman and proved to be an excellent perimeter defender, recording 25 steals in just 414 minutes.

**Quincy Hankins-Cole (6-8, 240, Jr.).** A junior college teammate of Jeter's, Hankins-Cole is billed as a strong rebounder.

**Ray Gallegos (6-3, 175, Fr.).** Gallegos is a combo guard from greater Salt Lake City who will see some minutes this season coming off the bench and playing point guard, according to Sadler.

**Brandon Ubel (6-10, 220, Fr.).** Praised as a "true" power forward (meaning he's 6-10), Ubel hails from Overland Park, Kansas, and could see immediate minutes in Niemann's absence.

## Oklahoma

**2009:** 30-6 (13-3 Big 12), lost to North Carolina 72-60, NCAA Elite Eight

**In-conference offense:** 1.13 points per possession (1st)

**In-conference defense:** 1.02 points allowed per possession (4th)

**What Oklahoma did well:** *Ride Blake Griffin all the way to the Elite Eight.*

The Big 12 has produced three exceptional underclassmen in the last three years: Kevin Durant, Michael Beasley, and Blake Griffin. You could make a case that of those three players Griffin put together the best season.

True, the erstwhile Sooner has an advantage in this comparison, in that he was in his second year as a college player. Who knows what Durant or Beasley might have done if, for some insane reason, they got it into their heads to stick around? Be that as it may, Griffin was the lone sophomore here and the havoc he wreaked in 2008-09 was nothing less than a throwback to the Bill Walton/Lew Alcindor days of total domination by a post player—on offense. (Those other guys blocked shots. Duly noted.)

When your featured scorer makes 66 percent of his twos and takes reasonably good care of the ball while drawing eight fouls for every 40 minutes he plays, a couple of impolitic but nevertheless insistent truths arise. Your team is going to be really good, no matter how bad they are on defense. And your offense is going to be outstanding, no matter how bad the other four players are at offense.

Fortunately for Jeff Capel, Oklahoma was in fact OK (har!) at defense, in large part because Griffin was the best defensive rebounder in major-conference basketball. And the Sooners were, of course, excellent on offense because Griffin had an incredibly talented sidekick named Willie Warren (see below).

Yes, Griffin misses two out of every five free throws, and that is no minor detail when you attempt 324 of them over the course of a season. Still, in basketball's curiously punitive world fouls are both an incentive for the offense and a disincentive for the defense. (When I'm made hoops czar they will just be the former. I hate seeing foul trouble intrude on great collisions of like talent.) Griffin failed to gather all the points available to him, but the fouls he drew still depleted the personnel available to the opponent.

So while a Griffin who was merely adequate at the line would indeed have summed to something even more spectacular, we shouldn't lose sight of what actually took place in Norman last year. After all, it took the best team in the country to end Blake Griffin's superb season.

**What we learned in 2009:** *It's possible for coaches to speak in something other than coachspeak.*

Going into the 2008-09 season, Capel was quoted as saying his team would be able to play at a faster tempo now that his roster had some depth. Coaches pretty much always promise to go up-tempo, of course, but this was one instance where the man behind the microphone was actually telling the truth. While the Sooners didn't suddenly become North Carolina or anything, the difference was still clear.

<b>Capel Delivers More Possessions: Oklahoma Tempo, 2008 Vs. 2009</b>		
	<b>Pace</b>	<b>Big 12 rank</b>
2008	63.6	10th
<b>2009</b>	<b>68.8</b>	<b>5th</b>
<i>Conference games only Pace: possessions per 40 minutes</i>		

Oklahoma's turnover rate increased at the higher pace (while that of their opponents actually went down), but Capel was right to step on the gas. In 2008 his team was outscored in Big 12 play; the Sooners' chances of winning decreased the more possessions they played. Last year, by contrast, Capel had the benefit of one of the most dominant offensive players of recent years. It was the coach's job to see that said player got as many chances to score as possible. And Capel didn't allow mere stylistic inertia to get in the way of accomplishing that task. Well done, Coach.

By the way, Capel's saying much the same thing this year, that his sassy new-look no-Griffin team will play faster. My advice is to be skeptical this time. Two consecutive accelerations of the magnitude that we saw with this team last year would be highly unusual. More likely the Sooners will pretty much stay where they are, give or take a couple possessions.

**What's in store for 2010:** Willie Warren will take a lot more shots. And he should.

**Prospectus says:** The Sooners should be fun to watch this year. I don't foresee a lot of defense in Norman this season, but then again with Warren and a precociously talented freshman class, OU should score a lot of points in 2010. Opponents might find it difficult to keep up.

### **Meet the Sooners**

**Willie Warren (6-4, 205, So.).** One website is telling me that Warren needs "to become smarter with

his shot selection," but I confess I have no idea what this means or which player the website could possibly have been watching last year. As a freshman Warren was virtually the Platonic ideal of a true dual-threat shooting guard, making 37 percent of his threes and 57 percent of his twos while attempting equal numbers of both. Yes, he compiled those glittering numbers against defenses that had to account for a certain Blake Griffin, but that's the only context in which we can judge Warren right now and his performance was magnificent. He needs to become smarter with his shot selection about like John Calipari needs to become a better recruiter. The sophomore that Bill Self has called the best offensive player he's ever recruited (alas, Self didn't get him) is projected as a high-lottery pick next summer. In this instance the NBA and I are in perfect perceptual accord.

**Tiny Gallon (6-9, 295, Fr.).** One suspects that in this case "295" is a polite euphemism, because in truth Gallon is a movable beast. A McDonald's All-American from Vallejo, California, by way of Oak Hill Academy, Gallon is reputed to be a skilled post scorer. However the fact that this fall Capel's been glimpsed fretting in print about his team's rebounding even though he's just signed a "295"-pound McDonald's All-American might suggest Gallon needs to improve that part of his game. Or it might suggest simply that coaches like to fret, which they certainly do. More importantly from my chair, you can blame Gallon for at least part of the never-ending Renardo Sidney saga at Mississippi State. A year ago at this time Gallon had narrowed his list of schools down to a final two: Oklahoma and MSU. He visited both campuses and then chose to sign with Capel. Had Gallon ended up instead in Starkville, I doubt Jarvis Varnado would be paying his own way right now to free up a scholarship for Sidney.

**Tommy Mason-Griffin (5-11, 205, Fr.).** Still another McDonald's All-American, Mason-Griffin is a point guard from Houston praised for both his perimeter range and his ability to penetrate.

**Tony Crocker (6-6, 210, Sr.).** Crocker went nuts against Syracuse in the Sweet 16, hitting 6-of-11 threes and scoring 28 points. Up to that point he'd been a solid third option behind Griffin and Warren, making 35 percent of his threes.

**Cade Davis (6-5, 200, Jr.).** Averaging 15 minutes a game on a roster where the starting five monopolized the playing time to an unusual extent, Davis functioned almost entirely as a three-point specialist and, like Crocker, made 35 percent of his attempts from beyond the arc.

**Andrew Fitzgerald (6-8, 260, Fr.).** Fitzgerald is a highly-rated big man from Baltimore by way of Brewster Academy in New Hampshire.

**Steven Pledger (6-4, 215, Fr.).** If Capel is correct and

the Sooners do speed up, it could mean more minutes right away for the likes of Pledger, a shooting guard from Chesapeake, Virginia, who's reputed to be an excellent perimeter shooter.

**Ryan Wright (6-9, 240, Sr.).** Wright arrived last year as a transfer from UCLA who'd fled the logjam in Ben Howland's frontcourt (Alfred Aboya, Luc Richard Mbah a Moute, Lorenzo Mata, et al.). Unfortunately he didn't fare much better securing playing time in Norman, averaging just eight minutes a game in support of the Griffin brothers.

## Oklahoma State

**2009:** 23-12 (9-7 Big 12), lost to Pitt 84-76, NCAA Second Round

**In-conference offense:** 1.09 points per possession (3rd)

**In-conference defense:** 1.07 points allowed per possession (9th)

**What Oklahoma State did well:** *Finish.*

You likely remember the 2008-09 Oklahoma State team as a fast-paced three-point-shooting bunch that gave DeJuan Blair and Pitt everything they could handle before falling to the Panthers in the second round of the NCAA tournament. With first-year coach Travis Ford at the helm, the Cowboys made their first appearance in the dance since 2005. That kind of respectable denouement looked a very long way away for this team in mid-February, however.

The Pokes started Big 12 play 3-6, a record that in part reflected a schedule front-loaded with games against the league's four best teams (home losses to Missouri and Oklahoma, road losses at Kansas and Texas). Still, schedule-skewed records have been known to sap a team's confidence to the point where they start losing the games they should win. To Ford's credit, that didn't happen with the Cowboys.

OSU played its best basketball in February and March, improving markedly on defense (there was room to) and avenging an 0-2 showing against archrival Oklahoma during the regular season with a thrilling 71-70 win in the Big 12 tournament quarterfinals.

**What we learned in 2009:** *Taking over a team that returns most of its minutes is a sweet gig.*

Oklahoma State showed clear improvement last year and to me the really interesting question is how much of that was specifically Ford's doing and how

much would have happened anyway. Keep in mind it's an open question whether Sean Sutton would have been retained as head coach had officials in Stillwater known in April 2008 that OSU alum Bill Self wasn't going to go anywhere, no matter how much money the Cowboys put on the table.

Sutton was sent packing after Oklahoma State endured three consecutive below-.500 seasons in the Big 12, the first of which included a mid-season passing of the torch from Eddie Sutton to his son. In last year's book I noted that the similarity in records over those three years (6-10, 6-10, and 7-9) masked the fact that the Cowboys actually improved markedly in what proved to be Sutton's final season. Indeed, viewing the two full seasons of Sutton's tenure alongside year one of the Ford era suggests that the upward trend displayed by the program as a whole spans the two coaching regimes rather seamlessly.

Cowboys Up : Oklahoma State Improvement, 2007-09			
Year	Returning minutes (%)	EM	Improvement over previous year
2007		-0.09	
2008	48	-0.01	+0.08
<b>2009</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>+0.02</b>	<b>+0.03</b>
<i>Conference games only</i>			
<i>EM: efficiency margin (points per possession – opponent PPP)</i>			