

Oklahoma and its much-mocked defense prep for Alabama, toughened by the ridicule

[Chuck Culpepper](#)



Criticized as weak throughout the season, the Sooners defenders are tuning out the noise. (Nick Wagner/Austin Statesman via AP Photo)

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MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — The human beings who have played defense for Oklahoma this past summer and autumn have undergone a whopping privilege. They've gotten to hear their unit described with extravagant amounts of disparagement and ridicule across multiple media and social-

media platforms. What optimal preparation for post-collegiate life.

“What would it be if you were getting praise all the time?” offered sophomore cornerback Tre Brown. “Right? It wouldn’t be any fun.”

Luckily, they’ve been getting praise well shy of all of the time. At times, it seemed no one from coast to coast and then Hawaii could speak about college football in 2018 without remarking about the Oklahoma defense and its unfathomable terribleness, which has offended so many American sensibilities.

As No. 4 Oklahoma prepares to play No. 1 Alabama in the Orange Bowl semifinal on Saturday night, while No. 2 Clemson and No. 3 Notre Dame prep over in Texas in the Cotton Bowl semifinal on Saturday afternoon, the Oklahoma defense sticks out like a sore set of all thumbs.

[\[Tua Tagovailoa says ankle is 80-85 percent for Oklahoma game\]](#)

Observe some numbers: Here are the four College Football Playoff offensive units, in yards per play, among the 130 universities who enter this lunacy: Oklahoma No. 1, Alabama No. 2, Clemson No. 3, Notre Dame No. 34. Now, here are the four defensive units, in yards per play: Clemson No. 1, Alabama No. 7, Notre Dame No. 8 . . .

. . . and Oklahoma No. 101.

It’s better than in total defense, where Oklahoma ranks No. 108.

Opponents have scrounged for 178 points against Clemson, for 193 against Alabama and for 207 against Notre Dame, while opponents have all but dug into the attic for the streamers and confetti in getting their 421 points on Oklahoma. Even Kansas got 40, widely considered football heresy. After the 48-45 loss to Texas on Oct. 6, the Sooners switched coordinators, from Mike Stoops to Ruffin McNeill. Later, they treated their too-knowlegeable fans to that stretch of giving up 46 to Texas Tech, 47 to Oklahoma State, 40

to Kansas and 56 to West Virginia, which helped itself to 704 total yards.

When in the Big 12 championship game of Dec. 1, Texas got only 27 points and 437 yards on Oklahoma, that constituted improvement.

Of course, given Oklahoma's offense, 27 and 437 from the defense will do beautifully, even as the world has seen days when it might have made Bob Stoops weep.

Those days have faded, and the Big 12 has become America's home for runaway offense, and Oklahoma 2018 might epitomize the forging of excellence in the era of slot-machine scoreboards. Still, it's instructive to relearn that those who do attempt to play defense in Sooner uniforms are, as ever, people, just as it's good to learn that those people might find getting lambasted to be instructive.

"To be honest with you, the way I grew up, you get made fun of, and you get clowned on, and you know, you kind of just learn to — it is what it is," said linebacker Curtis Bolton. "I'm not worried about what everybody's got to say. If I don't have love for them in my heart. If they're not a part of my circle, your opinion doesn't matter to me. And that's kind of how what I take into it. It is what it is. When I see stuff like that, it kind of just goes over my head, as disrespectful as it may be. And some of it has grounds, yeah, but that's just something that I try not to pay attention."

He then reminded of a further element, one of the grand traditions of college football: "Especially in college football, if you have a bad game, your fan base will attack you. And that's just how it goes from school to school."

This setting incubates a fine learning process, according to linebacker Caleb Kelly, who gained supporting-actor notice for his crucial scoop-and-score in Oklahoma's 59-56 win at West Virginia on Nov. 23. At the start, he said, "Coaches always tell us, 'Don't listen to the noise. Don't listen to the noise. Don't listen to the good all the time, and don't listen to the bad all the

time.'" Then players learn this steadily as, what, an art? "Yeah," he said. "I think it takes time. It's harder for a lot of young guys."

Over time, he said, "I think you kind of just get used to it. You say, 'Okay, if I react to all these [negative] things, one, it's going to be draining for me, and then, two, I'll get bad publicity as well.'"

Yet there are days, he said: "A couple times when I've been with my family, I just wish — it's been, like, dang, like it's crazy how we're always on TV. I wish sometimes we just wouldn't be on TV when I'm with my family just hanging out at a restaurant even, I think it was a restaurant, where I was like, 'We're on TV. They're always talking about us.' And so I think sometimes I do wish they could just turn it off a little bit and just get to focus on my family more than just football all day, every day."

Huddled against this nation of noise and its dens of derision, the Sooners' starting 11 features four Texans, two Californians, one Canadian, one Kansan, one Arkansan, one Missourian and one Oklahoman (Brown). Those 11 include two guys who got five stars from at least one recruiting analyst, then a hodgepodge of four- and three-star sorts. There's a guy who ranked 26th among strong-side defensive ends, a guy who ranked fourth among all Arkansans, players who gained overall nods of No. 83 or 122 or 128 on rivals.com, that kind of thing.

Some, such as Brown, relish the ridicule: "For me, I feel like I love to hear it. I want you to speak, you know, criticize us, do whatever you do, do whatever you do best because that gives us a chance of, 'Oh, wow, I was wrong.' I don't like to get praised. I like being the underdog, and people talking bad about you."

All have learned the distinctive value of continuing while getting pilloried. "Oh yes!" said their assistant coordinator, Kerry Cooks, the 44-year-old former captain at Iowa. "You know what, I think some year in this business, you know, you're going to get criticized. But the amount of scrutiny, I think

these guys, players and coaches, have been under this year, it just makes you stronger." It "definitely translates into life," he said.

Further: "I think you come in as a freshman, a lot of these guys come in with four and five stars, and all of a sudden, they're getting criticized, 'Oh, you're not that good,' and, 'You're not this and that,' it's gonna hurt the pride a little bit. But I think that as you go through the process, you understand, you're at Oklahoma, man."

Oklahoma, among other subjects, teaches how "the focus is on the process and the details of it," Cooks said. "It's not what people are saying that you can and can't do. And if you can understand that, you know, then it's a lot easier."

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