

Sooners begin new era as season opens

A new era in Oklahoma football begins on Saturday, and even Sooner coach Gary Gibbs is excited.

Gibbs admitted Thursday that he was looking forward to Oklahoma's season-opening contest against New Mexico State. The reasons for his anxiety are many -- he wants to show the world that Oklahoma football can survive without Switzer, he wants to show everyone that the Sooners' off-field problems are behind them and he wants to beat Nebraska.

Gibbs is approaching his first season as Oklahoma's coach with a win-at-all-costs attitude. He said he will not be satisfied if the Sooners lose three to four games like they are projected to.

"I have been asked whether I

would be happy with an 8-3 or 7-4 season in light of all the turmoil that has surrounded our program. My answer has been 'absolutely not,'"



Jeff Apel

Gibbs said. "We plan to win every game. Losses are a fact of life and we may lose some, but I guarantee we will never take the field with any other attitude than planning to win."

Several Sooner players echoed Gibbs' thoughts. They said they are ready to prove Oklahoma is not a bunch of crazed rebels who are

known as much for their brushes with the law as they are for their football talents.

Last winter, the entire Oklahoma football program came under close scrutiny when five Sooners were arrested for a variety of offenses. The NCAA then slapped the Sooners with a two-year probation that will keep them out of the bowls and off national television this season.

But despite all their problems, Oklahoma offensive tackle Mark VanKeirsbilck said the Sooners are ready to put their woes behind them.

"Hopefully, with the beginning of a new season, we can put all of that adversity behind us," VanKeirsbilck said. "I know the players and the fans are ready for that to happen."

Oklahoma defensive tackle Scott Evans said the Sooners also are ready

to show that they are still the same dominant team that defeated Nebraska four out of the last five years.

"All of us are anxious to prove that Oklahoma will be the same Oklahoma we have always been," Evans said. "It seems everyone is saying Oklahoma is down and not a very good team. We are eager to prove that is not the case."

Oklahoma's success this season will depend largely on quarterback Steve Collins, a redshirt freshman who is being asked to direct the Sooners' new I-formation attack. Collins' supporting cast is strong -- tailback Mike Gaddis and fullback Leon Perry comprise a backfield that is the Big Eight's best -- but Oklahoma must receive production from its quarterback in order to win.

Gibbs said he has confidence in

Collins and the entire Oklahoma squad. He said the Sooners are in a position to control their own destiny.

"If we can stay healthy, we can be a very good team," Gibbs said. "I think our defense will be better than a year ago and I feel our offense will respond to the changes we have made."

Oklahoma defensive back Kevin Thompson said defense -- plus a non-conference schedule that includes Baylor, Arizona and Texas in addition to New Mexico State -- could put the Sooners in position for a national championship.

"Our schedule will allow not only us, but everyone, a chance to see how good we are," Thompson said, "and determine if we will play for the Big Eight and national championship."

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