The OSU football team didn’t just turn the corner in the year 2000, it simply exploded out of the curve. The Beavers finished the season as Pac-10 Conference co-champions. They had the state’s first 11-win season by a Division I university. They clobbered Notre Dame 41-9 in the Fiesta Bowl. And they wound up ranked No. 4 in the country in the Associated Press poll.

But all of those benchmarks fail to adequately describe what may be the single most impressive part of Oregon State University’s athletic success.

The fans.

When the Beavers ran onto the field to face storied Notre Dame in the Fiesta Bowl on New Year’s Day, an estimated 40,000 fans—more than half the capacity of the 75,000-seat Tempe, Arizona stadium—were wearing orange.

At every road game, from New Mexico to Seattle, the Beaver Nation showed up in droves to support their university.

“All of the fan support made it seem like the Beavers were playing in Reser Stadium,” said Larry Brown, a 1952 graduate of Oregon State College.

“The Fiesta Bowl was just like a home game. I think the players really were full of all that support.”

OSU President Paul Risser says the excitement surrounding the Beavers’ meteoric rise to the top of the college football world has a spillover effect well beyond the athletic department.

“The spotlight that was shining on the football team this year also illuminated other areas of the university, and will have an effect on student recruitment, alumni relations, fund raising and the overall image of the institution,” he said.

“The national visibility has given us a wonderful platform from which to share our other successes.”

Risser, in fact, has been a news media fixture this year, using the Beavers’ football success as an opportunity to talk about excellence throughout the university.

“Alums and friends of the university are naturally excited about football because OSU went through a long period with little success,” Risser said.

“They also have a growing sense of pride when they learn more about our other achievements.”

When speaking with out-of-state alums or friends, Risser points out that OSU’s enrollment has risen 22 percent in just five years; the College of Engineering is poised to become one of the top 25 such programs nationally and the university has raised $45 million in private money toward that goal; the University Honors College is attracting top students and now has 10 applicants for every opening; and that the faculty continue to produce research and scholarship that is making a national and international impact.

The message seems to be working. Contributions to the OSU Foundation are up 20 percent, Alumni Association memberships also are up almost 20 percent, and applications for admission are up 17 percent.

Mitch Barnhart, director of Intercollegiate Athletics at OSU, says those kind of results are heartening—and what major college athletics is all about.

“An investment in the athletic department really is an investment in the entire university,” Barnhart said. “For many people—especially those living outside the region—athletics is the portal into the university. Once they resume that connection to the campus, everybody wins.”
When the Beavers ran onto the field to face storied Notre Dame in the Fiesta Bowl on New Year’s Day, an estimated 40,000 fans—more than half the capacity of the 75,000-seat Tempe, Arizona stadium—were wearing orange.
New Facility Takes Shape

The $9 million project is just a start as athletic department eyes Gill annex, possible expansion of Reser Stadium

For the past two years, the OSU football team has found itself in an uncomfortable position—practicing for bowl games in December. But practicing in December in Oregon can give the most sure-handed wide receivers a case of butter-fingers. Cold, often-wet weather and short hours of daylight don’t lend themselves to quality practice.

While the need for December practices will continue, the hardships are about to end. A new $9 million indoor facility should be completed this fall—giving OSU Coach Dennis Erickson and his team not only a great place to practice, but a selling point for future recruits.

“The football team will greatly benefit from the facility, and so will many of our other programs,” said Mitch Barnhart, director of intercollegiate athletics. “Teams may use it at certain times of the year for conditioning drills, and the facility will be used for game-day functions and other campus-related activities.”

Funding for the practice facility was provided entirely by private gifts. In fact, a small group of donors provided the entire $9 million for the project, Barnhart said. “The support has just been tremendous,” he said.

A plan to build an annex to Gill Coliseum includes an arena that would seat about 2,000 spectators and provide critical practice space for Oregon State’s basketball, wrestling and volleyball teams. Options to include new office space, training facilities and an OSU Hall of Fame will depend on fund-raising efforts, Barnhart said.

The annex also would serve as the home court for the OSU volleyball and wrestling teams. “A more intimate arena will provide more of a home court advantage for our teams and help them grow and achieve success,” Barnhart said.

Once the annex project is finalized, Barnhart said, the university can look at expanding Reser Stadium. OSU officials are looking at a variety of options that would expand the seating capacity, and may include additional skyboxes and renovations to the existing facilities, including concessions and restrooms. Such work may take place in stages, depending upon fund-raising success.

“We have a goal of selling 25,000 seasons tickets in 2001,” Barnhart said. “If the program continues to grow, obviously something will have to be done. But we have to go about it in a strategic way.”

Last year, OSU saw the completion of Goss Stadium for baseball. The athletic department’s newest facility is the softball complex, located just off Western Boulevard near campus. The sand-base field will allow year-round play for the OSU softball team, which has been nationally ranked during the past couple of years. It also will increase seating capacity to 730 in the bleachers, with an additional 300 seats around the outfield fence.

Kirk Walker, head coach of women’s softball is enthusiastic about the improvements, adding “This facility enables our players and fans to have a lot of pride in the program, and it finally gives the team a home-field advantage.”
Christian Greene is the first to admit that she’s not the greatest rower in the world. Put her in a roomful of kids, however, and the likeable senior is Olympic caliber. Greene almost single-handedly has resurrected one of the oldest student volunteer programs on campus—the Big Brother/Big Sister program. The program had dwindled over the years and, in 1999, it finally folded.

“Mostly, we just hang out with them—talking and playing games,” said Greene, who is a Big Sister in the program to 6-year-old twins Dani and Jonny. “It’s important for the kids, and rewarding for the students. One of the (OSU) students in the program wrote in the Barometer that ‘you know you’ve made a difference in their lives, because they’ve made a difference in yours.’ That’s so true.”

Greene says she will miss crew, where she’s rowed in the Women’s 8 second and first boats, despite never having competed in athletics growing up. And she will miss her interaction with kids in the program.

“They remind you of your innocence,” Greene said. “Everyone should do it.”