

From *The Oklahoman* newspaper

## Letters to Austin: Austin Box's family looks back on correspondence

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Published: September 1, 2011

ENID — When he sat down to write the first letter 11 years ago, he didn't know. How could he have known?

Craig Box was unaware that this would become a weekly tradition for the next decade, sustained initially by superstition but ultimately entrenched because it was his chance to provide encouragement and impart wisdom before each one of his son Austin's football games.

The first letter found its way to his only son's room before a middle school game, when Austin was in seventh grade. The last one was extended in January in the Arizona desert, just before Oklahoma's Fiesta Bowl win against Connecticut.

There were dozens and dozens along the way from Craig, who had his own playing experience at Northwestern Oklahoma State. Some letters were a few lines, others a few pages. They covered all the twists and turns of a high school career at Enid and four injury-stained years at OU. Each one included a gift of some kind. Maybe a football card, sometimes a book, but there was always something with the note.

Austin liked the gifts, kept them all. But he cherished the letters. The recent ones were in the drawer of his bedside table.

The head of a household moving through mourning, Craig has been recently forcing himself to reread some of his own words.

"It was important to me to write them," he said, "because of how important he was to me."

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Craig Box was unaware the last letter was the last letter. How could he have known?

Austin's life ended abruptly in May, after he ingested a lethal dose of prescription medications. The how and the why are still unsolved mysteries. They'll likely remain that way for the most part, although there was the revelation in a report this week that someone was supplying him with pain pills.

This much is known: Oklahoma's football season begins Saturday. It was to be Austin's fifth and final year as a Sooner.

And, for Craig, there is no letter to write this week.

"There's a lot of emptiness right now," he said Wednesday, standing next to the family's formal dining room table, dotted with the old letters and gifts. "This is the first year we haven't had football, with him, since he was 6.

"It didn't define Austin, but it was just such a big part of the family. I just kind of feel lost right now."

Sitting in their Enid home, it's three days before the No. 1-ranked Sooners' opener against Tulsa — and the Boxes honestly cannot tell you whether they are going.

Sure, they've received all sorts of invites.

They could sit in a plush suite. But would it provide true comfort?

They could go back to the parents' section they inhabited the past four seasons. But would that be awkward and painful, for the Boxes and the other families trying to enjoy the game?

There's their own plot of season tickets they've had since 1999. But they're easily recognizable there, too.

No, there's no secret cave from which the Boxes can watch the Sooners in anonymity.

In addition to all of Austin's away games, the family has been to 74 consecutive games at Gaylord Family - Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. It began when their oldest daughter, Courtney, enrolled as an undergrad. Now the Boxes are at least considering an end to something that coincided with Bob Stoops' arrival. It would have been unthinkable a year ago, a few months ago. But, well, things have changed.

"I don't know," Craig says, his expression going blank with each syllable. "I probably won't know until Saturday."

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That's the way this has gone for the Boxes. They wake up that day and figure out what sort of day it's going to be.

"Sometimes you'll think you're going to have a good day and then it'll hit you," said Whitney Box, the middle child and one of Austin's best friends in part because their times at OU overlapped. "Then you don't have a good day."

It could be a photo. It could be a song. It could be almost anything. So that's why going to a football game where he'll be repeatedly remembered in front of 85,000 - and the family will be reminded and reminded - is a daunting proposition.

It's this swirl of difficulty, having your son or brother honored in such a public manner. It is hard. It is flattering. It is meaningful. It's all of those things, with the emotions shifting and shaking from second to second.

Even when it's tough to take, the family makes it very clear it deeply appreciates the outpouring from everyone, and in particular OU's football team.

Soon after Austin died, Stoops called the Boxes and let them know Austin's locker would be kept intact. They wept when they saw on ESPN's All-Access program that, during pre-practice stretching, his teammates leave his spot open and place his helmet in the void.

Words from the Sooners about Austin have been touching to them. They received a photo book this summer from the team, with several messages from players and coaches inside the front cover. Stoops talked about how much he appreciated the time with Austin, on and off the field. Teammates wrote about the lessons he taught them, battling back time and again from injury, and how they've applied his toughness to their own adversity.

A No. 12 Box jersey, signed by the whole team, arrived a few weeks ago. His degree in sociology came Aug. 15, five days after what would have been his 23rd birthday. That one got to Whitney, who knew how fiercely Austin had worked to obtain it.

Four years older than Austin, she was his guide to OU's campus. She was a senior when he arrived in 2007. Since his death, Whitney has been adopted as a "team sister" by his former teammates. She exchanges texts with them. They check on her. They joke with her. They include her.

Linebackers Travis Lewis and Tom Wort have invited her to practices. She's been back to Norman, but she hasn't been able to muster the strength for a visit.

Maybe Saturday. She has tentatively planned to attend the Tulsa game with one of Austin's best friends.

"That's the plan, anyway," she said. "We'll see."

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If the Boxes make it to Owen Field, this or any Saturday this fall, they will see a number of tributes to Austin.

The helmet decal with his name and number is a nice gesture, they said. They also gave quarterback Landry Jones the thumbs up to continue wearing his No. 12. That was an easy call.

"That's his number," Craig said. "Landry's a great kid. That's his number, too. There's no reason for him to change his number, at all."

For Jones, a Heisman Trophy contender as a junior, the jersey now means something entirely different from when he selected it years ago.

"It's more than just playing for yourself; you're representing someone else," said Jones, who learned of Box's death while on a mission trip to Haiti. "Whenever I feel weak or tired, I can kind of call on him and remember the way he played the game."

The Boxes are particularly moved, too, by what's happening with OU's other No. 12. It will be given to a deserving defensive player each week, in honor of Austin.

"This is a terrific opportunity for us to help them as they continue to try to grieve and remember Austin the right way," Sooners defensive coordinator Brent Venables said. "I know we feel honored to have that opportunity to do so."

If the recipient is anyone other than Wort for the opener, it would be a stunner. The sophomore, a "different guy" this year according to Stoops, was extremely close to Box and he'll take his place at middle linebacker.

"I'm playing for him," Wort said. "The only reason I'm able to play this game is I play with heart. He's heavy on my heart, giving me even more reason to play with heart. That's the way I'm going to honor him."

Box's death has clearly affected his former coaches and teammates. And Gail Box, Austin's mom and a high school guidance counselor, said she has appreciated the guys' ability to be open about their feelings.

"Society tells us men have to be tough and not show how they're feeling," Gail said. "I'm so happy these young men have the courage to talk about Austin the way they do. It lets us know they knew him for who he was."

Even though he was a big, burly linebacker, Austin was unafraid to tell people how he felt about them. He was particularly gushy when it came to his family.

"He would call us Mommy and Daddy – in front of people," Gail said.

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Doesn't seem to be any secret where that trait originated. Not when his dad was telling him every Friday how he felt about him.

Each note, written with neat, flowing cursive letters, was so positive. So unique. So specific.

One from Austin's junior year in high school starts, "There is nothing better than watching you play football."

Another says, "Great 7's," referring to Austin's high school number, "Mickey Mantle, John Elway ... Austin Box."

"He was my hero," Craig said.

The letters always started with "my little boy" or Austin's name. Craig's beaming pride was often a theme. Sometimes, he'd give him a little nudge. Other times, when Austin was dealing with injuries, Craig would lift up his son.

One of the last letters implores Austin to play for his university and himself, among other things. It concludes by reminding him to play for the love of the game, like he did when he was a kid. Included is a picture of Austin as a fifth-grader, kneeling in his football uniform. His dad, a coach for the pee wee team, is standing behind him.

Craig, an attorney, thought a lot during the week – every week – about what he would write Austin.

What about writing to Austin this week, anyway? Craig says it has crossed his mind, but he gets to express his thoughts to him each day when he visits Austin's grave site on his way home from the office. Whitney, who works for the City of Enid, does the same thing on her lunch hour. Gail isn't up for that yet, but she does talk to his picture in the foyer each morning.

Those letters meant something all along. They have now become a conversation. It might seem one-sided on the surface, but not to the Boxes.

This fall, perhaps they will be talking with Austin about a run to the national title, what would be OU's eighth – and the first since the year the letters started from father to son.

"Pretty glad I did it," Craig said, his jaw clenching as he surveyed the notes spread out in front of him on the table.