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Retirement seems to suit Switzer fine

Former Oklahoma coach finds himself singing a happy tune in the 'fourth quarter' of life.

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NORMAN, Okla. | It's Wednesday of Nebraska week, the weather has turned cold, and for every crimson-blooded man, woman and child, Saturday can't get here fast enough.

Well, with one notable exception.

You can find him inside the massive Swiss-style home at the corner of Chautauqua Avenue and Timberdell Road, sitting behind his desk, talking about show tunes.

"Let me tell you something," Barry Switzer says. "This is the best Broadway show I've ever seen. These guys are unbelievable."

These guys are Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, recently brought back to life in a Broadway musical, "Jersey Boys." Switzer saw the show last week in New York, and he didn't waste any time loading the soundtrack onto his new iMac. He's got iTunes open on his giant flat screen.

"I'll play you some songs," Switzer offers. First up is "Sherry."

She-e-e-e-erry bay-ay-by.

"Listen to that falsetto," Switzer says. "That's Frankie."

Switzer's knee bounces to the doo-woppin' beats from the group's first mega-hit. The year was 1962, Switzer's first as an assistant coach at Arkansas. Having grown up as the son of a bootlegger in the little town of Crossett, Ark., Switzer could identify with the Four Seasons. They were four blue-collar kids from the Jersey streets, and they were quickly becoming a pop sensation.

Jigging to the music in his big leather chair, Switzer changes the track to "Big Girls Don't Cry," then "Walk Like a Man," then "Oh, What a Night," a tune that elicits a boyish smirk from Switzer's lined face.

"This one's about getting laid for the first time," Switzer says. "What a night!"

The 69-year-old Switzer shows his softer side by selecting "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You." This time, he can't help singing along.

"You're just too good to be true," Switzer hums to himself. "Can't take my eyes off of

you. ...”

What his former players would pay to see this. Three days before Oklahoma and Nebraska play for the Big 12 title in Kansas City, Barry Switzer is the portrait of a man who’s happy to be retired, content to let Bob Stoops watch film all day. As Switzer puts it, he’s in the fourth quarter of his life.

“I’m not near the 2-minute warning,” Switzer says, “and I’m playing for overtime.”

He is Grandpa Barry, learning to maneuver around his week-old iMac. His wife, Becky, made him get a new desktop. Switzer clicks the mouse nervously with his right hand as if he’s worried he might break the darn thing.

“This is one hell of a machine,” Switzer says, almost in awe.

Switzer used to have his hand on the trigger of what might have been an even more powerful machine. His Sooners teams during 1973-88 ran his wishbone attack and broke almost every NCAA rushing record. It was unstoppable, annoying in its precision. Switzer was behind it all, and if there was one rule, it was that you never pass the ball on second and 5.

“That’s the only chance the defense has to stop you!” Switzer says. “If you throw an incompletion and it’s third and 5, they have a chance to win now!”

Make no mistake, Switzer didn’t relinquish all his power when he stepped down as Oklahoma’s coach. Today, you can see his influence everywhere in Norman and across the state.

For instance, the governor’s seat in Oklahoma City would be filled by NFL Hall of Fame wide receiver Steve Largent if it weren’t for Switzer. In the 2002 gubernatorial election, Switzer backed Democratic candidate Brad Henry instead of Largent. Switzer toured the state with Henry, grabbing the mike at Wal-Marts, fast-food joints and high school football games.

“The next governor of Oklahoma is in the house!” he’d say.

Henry won the election by 6,000 votes. Switzer says an independent study showed his support was worth 75,000 votes.

“Steve Largent had the name recognition,” Switzer says. “But no one knew who Brad Henry was. He had 2-percent name recognition.”

Here’s a little secret: Switzer only started campaigning for Henry because he wanted to help the Oklahoma marching band purchase new uniforms. The cost was \$1.5 million. Switzer was told by a voter with interest in the Henry campaign that if Switzer campaigned for Henry, he’d give \$300,000 toward those uniforms. Switzer didn’t blink.

Switzer has helped to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for the university. On Wednesday, he had lunch with Oklahoma athletic director Joe Castiglione and an architect to discuss the building of statues honoring the school's four Heisman Trophy winners outside Memorial Stadium.

Switzer may have left Oklahoma in a swirl of controversy — his program had become racked by scandal and was placed on NCAA probation — but he never stopped loving the university. That's why he built his home five years ago only blocks from the southwest edge of campus. Switzer's neighbors are the brothers of the Pi Kappa Phi house.

"It's neat to be this close to the university," Switzer says. "There's so much going on."

Switzer is a fixture in Norman. He has his haunts, such as Starbucks for coffee, Gourmet Deli for lunch and Patsy's Place for dinner. When patrons ask him for autographs, he happily signs. And people are often shocked when he remembers who they are.

"He has the most unbelievable photographic mind I've ever witnessed," Castiglione says. "It's uncanny. Uncanny."

Switzer gets a kick out of celebrities who become famous and suddenly think they're different than everybody else. Inside, Switzer is still that bootlegger's boy.

"It cracks me up," Switzer says. "We're all the same."

Castiglione says there's a side of Switzer that only very few people get to see. Often, Switzer is asked to sign an autograph for someone who is sick.

"You got their phone number?" Switzer will ask.

Shocked, they give it to him, and Barry dials the number. The person answers.

"This is coach Barry Switzer," he'll say, and the person won't believe it.

"They can not believe how unselfish he is with his time," Castiglione says.

Switzer enjoys making the rounds around town, but he spends most of his time either traveling with his wife or relaxing at home with his six grandkids and his German Shepherd, "Blitz."

It's the life he chose when he turned down an opportunity to do color commentary for ESPN college football three years ago.

"I said, 'Where were you guys 15 years ago?' " Switzer says. "I'd rather be here for my grandchildren, my ex-players, and stay here at home in the fourth quarter of my life. Call

my own plays.”

Surely Switzer didn't call this play. The front of the house is decorated with Christmas garlands and various ornaments. You could call the presents nestled in the flower pot cheesy, but then you'd be insulting a grandfather.

Before he heads off to lunch with Castiglione, Switzer wants to show you the backyard, where there's a trampoline and a playground built for his grandkids, all under 7 years old.

“It's their park,” Switzer says proudly.

He walks you to the door, where one of those presents is lying on the ground.

“Oh,” Switzer says, “one of my ornaments fell down.”

He bends over, picks it up and puts it back in place. The fourth quarter is here, and Grandpa Barry feels right at home.