

Daily Nebraskan

Cornhusker all-rounder Wes Suter performs on the pommel horse in a meet earlier this season. Coach Francis Allen called Suter the second best sophomore gymnast he has ever coached. Allen said Jim Hartung was the best.

Gymnastics outlook optimistic

By Patty Pryor

Nebraska's men's gymnastics team boasts a record five consecutive national championships, but it's a string that has to be broken sometime, says Coach Francis Allen.

"I think anyone in sports realizes you can't win all the time," he said. "If you think you can, that's a real unhealthy attitude."

The Huskers' chances at nationals, to be held April 12 to 14 at UCLA's Pauley Pavillion, are not as bright this year, Allen said, but they're not out of the picture by any means.

"We can still win, but it ain't gonna' be easy," he said. "We're not in the driver's seat this year. If we win, we're going to come from behind."

The Huskers are ranked second behind the UCLA Bruins, 281 to 278.5. Following are Southern Illinois at 277, Penn State and Ohio State at 276.5 and Oklahoma and Illinois-Urbana at 276.

Top-ranked the past several years, Nebraska has suffered through one of their shakier seasons this year. They've lost four times — at home against Iowa State Jan. 22, in the UCLA Invitational Feb. 10, at Iowa State against the Cyclones and Oklahoma Feb. 18 and at Southern Illinois last weekend.

Allen said some of the defeats could be considered flukes, particularly the third place finish at ISU, where Oklahoma was first with a 280.

"(Oklahoma) hit unbelievably well," Allen said, "but I saw them last weekend and they only did 273. I think they peaked too early."

"I don't like to have my teams be that hot so soon," he added. "It's nice to knock on the door, but you don't want to blow it open."

Even so, the Huskers haven't progressed as well this season as they have in the past.

"We haven't been able to hit 100 percent yet, we haven't had a total team," Allen said. "We've always had more to play with, but now we're down to the old skeleton system. We've got to get this team pieced back together."

Allen said the biggest setback was the departure of junior all-rounder Mike Bowers, who was put in a body cast over semester break.

He sees the setback as only temporary, although he doesn't plan on Bowers rejoining the team.

"He's been nothing but problems since he's been here," Allen said, "and I don't see any future for him at all. I'm not going to go out of my way to get him back."

Still, Bowers' sudden absence left a void, particularly on high bar, which Allen has had to fill with inexperienced freshmen performers.

He said he would rather have had time to develop these freshmen further before putting them under

competitive pressure, but they've all responded well.

"Eric Lambert has picked up the slack for us in the floor that we really needed and John Chmelka's doing the best he can on high bar," he said.

Nebraska also has national all-around contenders in Allen's "bona fide" stars, senior Jim Mikus and sophomores Chris Riegel and Wes Suter.

"Suter is one of the best sophomore gymnasts we've had here in a long time," Allen said. "He's better than Scott (Johnson) was as a sophomore."

Overall, the task of rebuilding a national championship team is good for Nebraska gymnastics, Allen said.

"It's a lot more exciting, and more fun for me," he said. "I'm a coach at heart, and I feel like I'm coaching again."

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