

Gymnasts vie for NCAA title

By Rich Cooper
Staff Reporter

Nebraska men's gymnastics coach Francis Allen said he thinks he has the best men's team in the country. But there is one problem, he said: The Cornhuskers have to prove it this weekend at the NCAA Gymnastics Championships in Los Angeles.

Nebraska will enter the meet seeded third. 1987 Big Eight Conference Champion Oklahoma is seeded first.

Allen said he believes the Huskers can win the national title if they perform well.

"Man for man, I can't see another team matching up with us," Allen said. "We beat Oklahoma earlier in the season by a good two points, and UCLA has had a lot of problems late in the season."

Nebraska's practices the last two weeks have been the best all season, Allen said. Everybody on the team is "pumped up" and ready to go out and give it their best shot, he said.

Allen said that after losing to Arizona State last year, Nebraska is more determined to win the championship this year. The Huskers have won the NCAA Championship five times under Allen, most recently in 1983. In 1984, the last time the NCAA Championships were in Los Angeles, Nebraska finished fifth.

In 1985, the championships returned to Lincoln and the Huskers finished second behind Ohio State. In that meet, the championship was decided in the final rotation.

In 1986 the Huskers also finished second, but this time the meet was not decided on the floor. A judging decision awarded Arizona State the championship.

Allen questioned the judges on the difficulty of his gymnasts' routines four times. Because he was only allowed to

appeal three times, Nebraska was penalized three-tenths of a point and Arizona State won the title.

This year is a different story, Allen said, because Nebraska has the two best all-arounders in the nation: Tom Schlesinger and Kevin Davis. Until the Big Eight Championships April 3-4, Schlesinger had won six consecutive all-around titles. At the Big Eight meet, Schlesinger scored a career-high 58.05 in the optional all-around.

Allen said Davis is a consistent 57-point all-arounder along with senior Neil Palmer, who is quite capable of scoring over 57. Palmer has gone over the 57 mark twice this season.

"Davis has been playing catch-up to Schlesinger all season, but he is probably one of the best No. 2 all-arounders in the nation. He's the quarterback of the team," Allen said. "Neil has been in a little bit of a slump because of a sore ankle, but I know he will be up for the championships."

Allen said the hardest part of the meet is the qualifying round on Friday night, when all 10 teams will compete on the same floor.

But if the Huskers can overcome the "three-ring circus atmosphere" Friday night, Allen said, they'll reach the team finals on Saturday afternoon. He said it will be a whole new ball game.

Nebraska's women's team will make its first trip to the NCAA Championships in three years when it competes in Salt Lake City this weekend.

The Huskers are seeded No. 11 in the meet and are led by sophomores Crystal Savage and Jeaneane Smith. Nebraska coach Rick Walton said he hopes the team can finish in the top 10.

"I think it's great that we made it to the NCAA's because at the beginning of the season we weren't even ranked in the top 20," Walton said. "We came back and were ranked as high as No. 5, plus we went undefeated in the Big

Eight Conference and won conference championship.

"We've done everything we've wanted to do this season."

The Huskers will have an advantage Friday night because they will be competing in Olympic order, Walton said. They will start on vault, then move on to the uneven bars. In the next rotation, Nebraska will have a bye and then will finish on balance beam and floor exercise.

Walton said the Huskers are used to the Olympic order and it will help them to do the best they can. The top six teams in Friday night's rotation will compete Saturday afternoon in the team finals. Utah, the No. 1-seeded team, has won the NCAA Championship six consecutive times.

Walton said that if Nebraska can sneak into the top six Friday night, anything can happen in the finals. He said it will take 188 points to win. Nebraska's highest score this season was a 187.40, scored against Oklahoma on Feb. 20 in Tulsa.

Walton said the scores will be tighter and his team must have its best meet of the season.

In other gymnastic news, two former Nebraska gymnasts — Scott Johnson and Wes Suter — will compete in the McDonald's Gymnastics Challenge meet between the U.S. and the Soviet Union this Sunday at 11:30 a.m. in Denver.

Johnson, a member of the Nebraska gymnastics team from 1980 to 1983, was a three-time NCAA Champion and a gold medalist on the 1984 U.S. Olympic team.

Suter competed at Nebraska from 1983 to 1986 and is a five-time All-American. As a senior he won the highest honor in men's gymnastics, the Nassen Award. Suter also won the NCAA all-around title in 1985.

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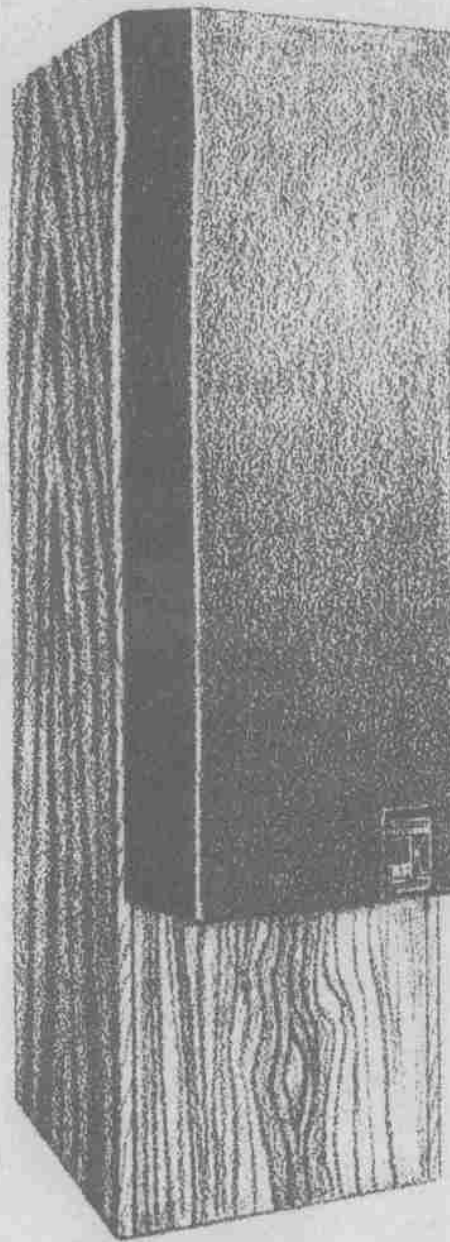
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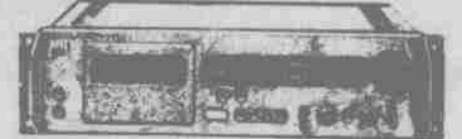
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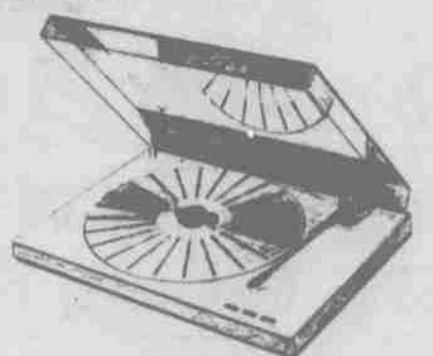
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