

Although the limelight no longer falls on their path, four former Nebraska athletes have maintained their contact with the sports that first put them there.

Take former Nebraska football player Harry Grimminger, for example.

In the summer of 1986, Grimminger tried out for the Seattle Seahawks. Before the first preseason game, the former All-America selection was released.

At first, it was hard for him to accept, but then he realized that maybe he wasn't talented enough to play professional football.

Grimminger said in the National Football League athletes compete against the best football players in the world.

"It doesn't matter if you were an All-American when you were in college because the coaches that pick the players to play on their teams don't care about that," Grimminger said. "What they want are the best players because professional football is a business."

He wishes things would have worked out differently in 1986. He didn't allow himself a chance.

"When I think back to that summer, I now realize that I wasn't prepared to make the team," Grimminger said.

"I knew coming into camp that I stood a good chance of getting cut because the Seahawks really didn't need that many people on the offensive line.

"I don't feel good about getting cut because I really didn't give myself the chance to make the team. But maybe it was all for the better," he said.

After that summer, he went back to school to get his degree in secondary education.

Because the academic program at UNL has strong ties with the athletic department, he said it was easy for him to study.

"For the five years I played at Nebraska, I was required to study in study hall," Grimminger said. "The program they have set up to help athletes here at UNL is great."

Grimminger said he had some incentive for getting his degree.

Fear.

He was afraid he wouldn't be able to get a job especially if he didn't have a college degree, he said.

But even as he held his degree in hand in December 1986, Grimminger's heart was set on coaching.

"When you play college football for six years in one of the best programs in the nation, you really learn a lot about the sport," Grimminger said. "I chose coaching because I knew that once I felt comfortable it would come natural to me."

Despite the number of years Grimminger had put into his sport, few high schools were interested in his coaching talents. He just didn't have the experience.

But opportunity knocked at his door the day he received a call from DeCater High School in Oberlin, Kan.

The job offer was too good to be true, he said. They wanted him to be the head football coach. Head coaching would give him a chance to teach the same things he had learned at Nebraska, Grimminger said.

"I had other offers from schools to coach football, but they were only as an assistant, I didn't even think about saying no to DeCater," Grimminger said. "If you look at my team right now our offense runs basically the same plays as Nebraska does."

Along with coaching the football team at DeCater, Grimminger teaches history. Grimminger quickly found out that teaching is not the easiest thing to do.

Grimminger fought to control his temper when students didn't pay attention.

In his last year of college, Grimminger learned teaching methods like playing games or showing movies that would help him keep students' attention. But none of those methods worked.

"At first I would come home at night really frustrated because it seemed like the kids really didn't care about history,"

Grimminger said. "But then I realized that's the way high school kids are. They don't really want to be in class and they don't know how important school is.

"When I was in high school I was pretty much the same way and until you come to a big university most people don't know how important an education is."

Instead Grimminger tells jokes or allows open discussions on a variety of historical topics.

Another thing that helps Grimminger is his size. Kids are intimidated by his towering frame. His occasional loss of temper adds to that.

"If it seemed like the kids didn't do their homework assignment," Grimminger said. "I would walk around the classroom with a ruler which would really get their attention."

His six-foot-three appearance has the same effect on the football field. But that didn't make his first season as head coach any easier.

His first season his team finished 1-8.

"It's hard to come into a program where the football team has been at the bottom of the conference for the last five years," Grimminger said. "When the kids at the school heard that Harry Grimminger was going to be the head coach a lot of them came out.

"But after the first few games when things didn't go too well people started to quit."

Grimminger said he learned several things about being head coach during that losing season.

Now he understands the pressures involved with coaching. With Oberlin's population being 2,500, he said, everybody knows what's going on in practice and on the sidelines during games.

"A lot of people weren't too happy with my profanity on the sidelines during games," Grimminger said. "Plus, because I played at Nebraska everybody expected us to win and it just doesn't happen like that."

Grimminger said the things he learned at Nebraska he implements in his program at DeCater. One of the first things he implemented was a weight training program. Next season his team will be bigger and stronger, he said.

Most all of his team is returning, he said, so he expects the players to have the system down. They'll know what is expected of them.

As for professional football, Grimminger said he doesn't miss it.

"I really don't miss it that much because I'm still involved with football," Grimminger said. "I don't miss waking up the morning after a game and hardly being able to move because I'm so sore.

"Sure I'm not making a lot of money but that really doesn't bother me because maybe some day I'll move up to college or the pros."

Sometimes on football Saturdays Grimminger thinks back to those days he walked into Memorial Stadium and saw 76,000 Nebraska fans decked out in red.

When he attended the Nebraska-UCLA game earlier this season, it gave him chills to stand on the sidelines.

"Maybe some day I'll be able to come back to Nebraska, except as a coach," Grimminger said. "It sure would be nice."

But former Nebraska gymnast Jim Hartung has already returned to Nebraska.

Hartung, who was a Gold Medalist as a member of the 1984 United States Olympic team, now works for the Nebraska Athletic department in fund raising and promotions for minor sports.

The emotional high of being on the gold medal team at the 1984 Olympics was detained by frequent appearances and exhibitions, Hartung said.

"We did a lot of things because of our popularity," Hartung said. "We did exhibitions, television shows, appearances, if you can think of something weird, we did it.

"There wasn't any kind of emotional letdown until about a year and a half later, and that's pretty much when I decided that I needed to set some new goals and try something new besides gymnastics."

Even though he retired from competition, he is still involved with gymnastics. On weekends, Hartung coaches clinics for the United States Gymnastics Federation.

Hartung is probably the most famous gymnast to ever come out of college gymnastics, Nebraska gymnastics coach Francis Allen said.

"Jim Hartung put Nebraska gymnastics on the map," Allen said. "And because he is so good, he is a good coach because gymnastics comes naturally to him."

When he first started his job in the spring of 1986, Hartung said it took some time to get used to working behind a desk. But the job allows him to continue his involvement in athletics.

After Hartung came to Nebraska in 1984 he led the Cornhuskers to four consecutive NCAA gymnastics championships while earning 22 All-American