

SPORTS

NCAA title possible, gymnastics coach says

By Tim Pearson
Staff Reporter

After a second-place finish behind Stanford last year at the NCAA Championships, the Nebraska men's gymnastics team wants to win first place more than ever this year.

Men's gymnastics coach Francis Allen said the Huskers had the best chance to win the NCAA Championships, set for Thursday through Saturday in Albuquerque, N.M.

"Our regional performances should scare the other teams," Allen said. "We won by a whole three points."

The Huskers won the West Regional by defeating Stanford by a score of 285.325 to 282.80.

Allen said Nebraska was the clear favorite in the NCAA Championships, but Ohio State, Minnesota and Stanford would have a chance if the Huskers didn't perform well.

"Ohio State, Minnesota and Stanford are pretty much off the pace judging by their regional performances," Allen said. "But you can't count them out. We still need to perform."

Stanford will be hurt by the absence of Mark Booth, who tore an Achilles' tendon during his floor exercise at the West Regional, Allen said.

Husker juniors Dennis Harrison and Sumner Darling, who will both compete in the all-around, must perform well, Allen said.

Harrison, a three-time All-American, placed fifth last year in the all-around and Darling scored a 57.00 in the all-around at the West Regional.

"Assuming Darling and Harrison are our leadoff men in the all-around, if they both get 57 or more, we're home free," Allen said. "If they don't do that, hopefully the rest of the team can suck it up."

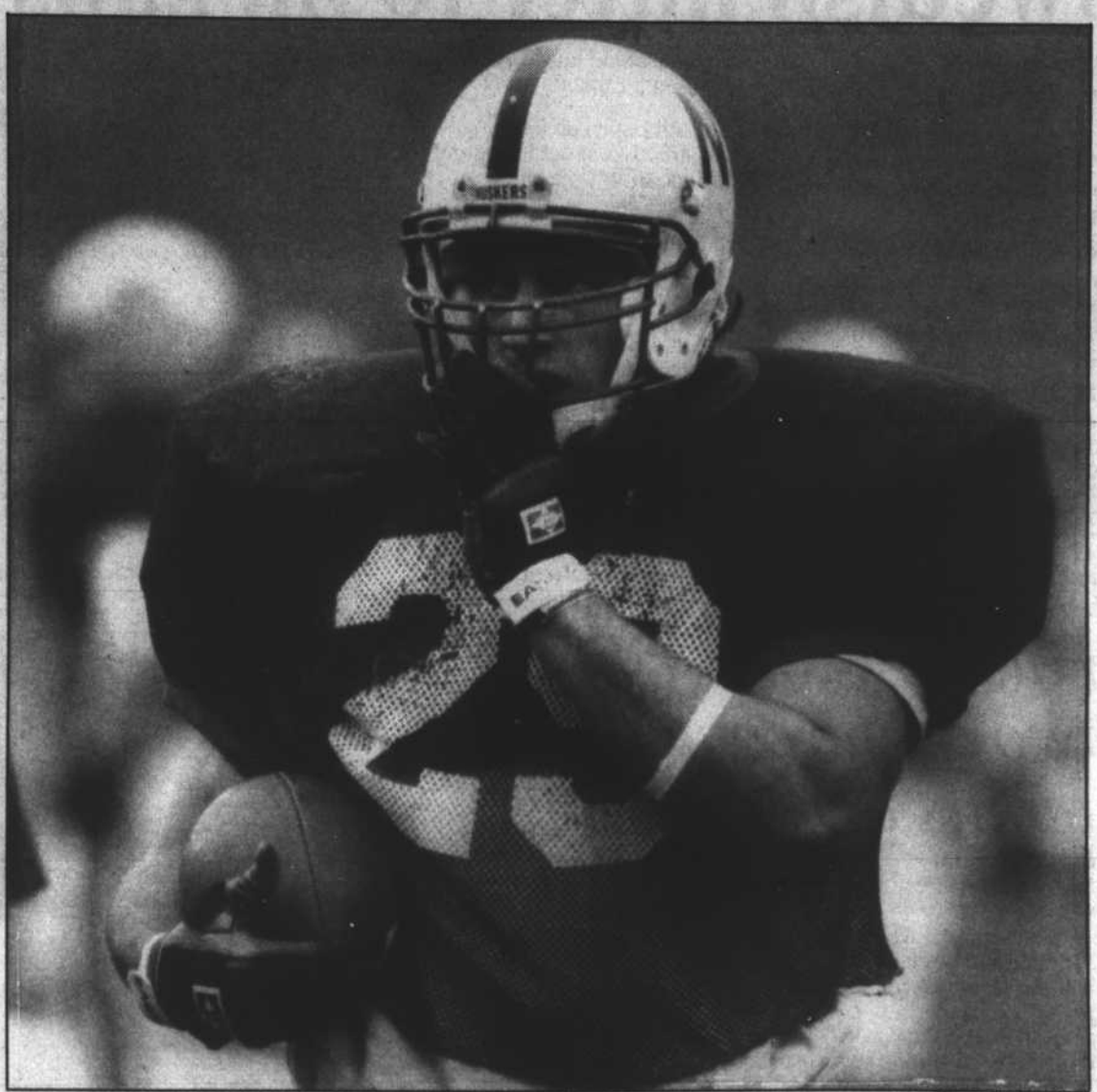
Allen said an eighth national title would help the Nebraska gymnastics program immensely.

"We're looking at holding the NCAA Championships next year," Allen said. "Winning will be a significant help."

"Also there's nothing like the feeling of being defending national champions."

The Huskers have five returning All-Americans from last year's meet, and Allen said his team was as healthy as they had been all year.

"Yesterday we had our best practice of the whole year," he said. "We're ready to go. It's tournament time, so we'll have no problem getting ready."



Nebraska's Lance Gray takes a break during spring practice Tuesday. Gray, an outside linebacker, was converted to fullback this spring.

Travis Heying/DN

Still the same Gray's style unchanged by move to offense

By Susie Arth
Senior Reporter

“The way it's run here, I have plenty of opportunities to hit people as hard as I can.”

—Gray
NU fullback

Once an attacker, now a protector, but still the same aggressor.

Lance Gray, a former outside linebacker who used to pride himself on being one of the hardest hitters on the Cornhusker defense and special teams, doesn't see any need to change his ways just because he's moved to fullback.

"I'm going to try to carry over my same style of play to the offensive side," he said. "I'll have the same mentality and a different job." Gray said he enjoys playing fullback because it involves a lot of contact.

"The way it's run here, I have plenty of opportunities to hit people as hard as I can."

Gray said his defensive experience has made him appreciate a fullback's job.

"I used to thrive on hitting full-

backs and getting around them," he said. "Now I say there is no way anyone is going to get around me."

Gray, who was a four-year letterman as a fullback and linebacker at Free Academy High School in Owego, N.Y., said he was shocked when the coaches asked him to move to fullback at the end of February.

And at first, he was a little disappointed.

"But in less than a day I thought

of all the positive things about playing fullback," he said. "I realized there was plenty of room to make noise at that position."

Now, he loves it.

"It's a great change of pace and a good move," he said. "I'm having a ball and that's the most important thing."

And the transition is going smoother than he expected.

Fullbacks Cory Schlesinger and Dave Fiala have helped him get the hang of the position, he said.

Already in spring practice, Gray has moved up to the second position on the depth chart.

But Gray said he still needs to work on his pass defense and blocking before fall.

He credits his aggressive nature for his success.

"Right now, my aggressiveness has been carrying me, but I still need to get the mental aspect down and get more confidence," he said.

Fab Four to make Allen's dreams come true

The Fab Four has a chance to redeem themselves this weekend.

Hold up. Time out, Chris Webber fans.

Not Michigan. Nebraska.

The Cornhusker gymnastics team's Fab Four recruiting class of two years ago—Dennis Harrison, Sumner Darling, Che Bowers and Burkett Powell—will be tumbling toward vengeance Thursday through Saturday at the NCAA Championships in Albuquerque, N.M.

The Fab Four and Co. are back, one year after losing to Stanford in one of the closest NCAA championships ever.

It was then that they came one step on the landing, one tumble on the floor exercise, one hair on the high bar away from beating Stanford.

Final score: Stanford 289.575, Nebraska 288.95.

Now, it's payback time.

Nebraska beat Stanford by 2.5 points—a pummeling in gymnastics



Todd Cooper

— to win the West Regional two weeks ago.

And Stanford is generally considered Nebraska's only competition this weekend.

So pack it up, pack it in. Nebraska's going to win.

Right?

Here's the slip: Nebraska beat Stanford in the West Regional last year before losing to the Cardinal in the NCAA finals.

To paraphrase Yogi Berra, Nebraska's situation this weekend unfortunately looks like *deja vu* all over again.

Right?

Wrong.

"I think everything is going our

way," Allen said. "Nebraska is the team to beat."

Why?

"You have to look at the fact that we have four of the top juniors in the country," Allen said. "I said that their freshman year. When we recruited them, I said they were the best recruiting class ever in modern gymnastics."

"They're performing at their best right now and when you get a good class like that and they stay healthy, you better win."

And you thought Webber and Co. had pressure.

Like Michigan's Fab Five, Coach Francis Allen's recruiting class of two years ago was the most heralded in history.

Harrison, Darling, Bowers, Powell and Scott Barnes, who quit the team in 1990, made up Allen's version of the Fab Five.

And they had all the expectations and pressures of Michigan's Fab Five.

Before the 1991 national champi-

onships, Allen was warning everyone of what would come.

"This is the team of the future, if it's not already here," he said.

The team of the future is here now.

At least it should be.

As Allen said, with seniors Josh Saegert and Louis Ball, freshman Jason Christie, sophomores Richard Grace and Rick Kieffer combining with the Fab Four, this team should produce against a veteran Stanford club.

But is that too much pressure to put on 20-year-olds' shoulders?

Never fear. Unlike Michigan's Fab Five, Nebraska's gymnasts are used to the expectations.

Put simply, frankness is Francis's forte.

The year before the Fab Four set foot on campus, Allen predicted that Nebraska would beat Minnesota in the NCAA championships. They did, but by only one-tenth of a point.

See COOPER on 8

LOW PRICES

MCA

including:
THE WHEEL
SEVENTH AVENUE
CHANGE PARTNERS

ROSANNE CASH

TASMIN ARCHER
GREAT EXPECTATIONS
featuring:
Sleeping Satellite
In Your Care • Steeltown

TASMIN ARCHER

MURRAY ATTAWAY
In Thrall
Featuring: Under Jets • Allegory

MURRAY ATTAWAY

titles are guaranteed!