

Charting a Legend

1980 Standout Jim Hartu perhaps the best-ever NU gymnast, wins first of two straight NC all-around championships under Allen's coaching.

1967 Allen earns a master's degree in physical education at UNL, teaching fencing, weight lifting, swimming and gymnastics.

1976 The Bob Devaney Sports Center is built, and wins its first Big Eight title under Allen, placed at the NCAA Championships.

1965 As a college senior, Allen serves as a co-captain, along with Jim Howard, on Nebraska's gymnastics team.

1969 After gaining a deferment from service in the Vietnam War, Allen takes over as the head coach of the NU men's gymnastics team.

1979 The Huskers win every dual in the season, claiming the first straight national championship.

Husker coach Allen builds NU tradition

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people." Nebraska Athletic Director Bill Byrne says, "both professionally and personally. What he brings to this Athletic Department is a great sense of balance. All he does is win, and he cares about everyone else."

Twice Allen coached the U.S. Olympic Team, and his NU gymnasts own 146 All-America honors. Allen's list of accomplishments is unmatched by any coach in Husker history, yet his recognition pales in comparison to many of his NU peers.

But Allen doesn't mind.

"I'm a gym bum," he says. "I love gymnastics. Some nights I'll wake up and throw in a tape, and I'll know immediately what a kid is doing wrong. We can fix it, and that's the greatest thing about coaching."

Building a dynasty

Francis Allen grew up in Nebraska and attended Lincoln High School. After performing as an NU gymnast for four years on a mediocre team, he entered graduate school to pursue a master's degree in physical education.

As an undergraduate, Allen and NU Coach Jake Geier rarely saw eye-to-eye.

"But soon," Allen says, "I realized what he was trying to do, and our relationship grew to the point that he trusted me to run the program when he retired."

In 1969, Allen took over.

"He absolutely studies gymnastics," says Jim Howard, who competed at Nebraska with Allen and returned as an assistant coach in 1976. "He knows gymnastics inside and out. That's his whole life, and it has been for many, many years."

Allen often takes his expertise overseas, traveling five times to China, seven times to Japan and 10 times to Germany.

"He has seen it all," says Dennis Harrison, an all-around national champion under Allen in 1994, the season of NU's most recent national title. "He's confident in his teams, and that definitely shows on the floor."

"Judges and other coaches tend to pick up on that. When the University of Nebraska walks on the floor, other people stop and recognize that."

Allen's demeanor and attitude give NU an edge in competition, Harrison says, both psychologically and with the judges.

"When he's feeling good," Harrison says, "the whole team is feeling good."

The attitude, the swagger and the confidence come naturally to Allen.

"He's got the personality," Nebraska Women's Gymnastics Coach Dan Kendig says. "I know he has had opportunities to move into administration, but he loves what he's doing so much that he continues to do it. He's like a friend to everybody."

"I'll be out recruiting, and I'll say I'm from Nebraska, and people all over the country will say, 'Oh, Francis Allen.' So then I'll use it sometimes. That's my foot in the door."

Through Allen's door, pieces of his legacy are strewn throughout his office. Trophies and medals sit forgot-

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DENNIS HARRISON
former NU gymnast

ten on the shelves, but Allen's presence at Nebraska will always be remembered.

Allen created tradition. When he came to Nebraska, nothing existed.

When he leaves, his footsteps will be nearly impossible to fill, in part because few coaches can match Allen's success with such limited resources.

Pummelled by Title IX legislation in recent years, men's gymnastics receives less funding than nearly every Cornhusker program. But if Nebraska's model of consistency is jealous of the "revenue" sports, it's not apparent.

"He always shows up everywhere," Byrne says. "He's an absolute team player. It doesn't matter if it's Francis at a basketball game or a volleyball match, he's always there. I really value that."

Allen says he shows up because he values Nebraska, and he appreciates the university's support.

"We have an allegiance with our people," he says, "and our people have an allegiance with us, too."

'Teacher at heart'

Francis Allen builds that kind of allegiance wherever he goes, and each year he walks into dozens of gyms. But in nearly 40 years, he says, nothing compares to the Chinese gymnastics headquarters, which he visited in late October 1996.

It was a nondescript building, he says, void of the sensationalism and pageantry one would expect to see in the center that houses the world's best athletes.

"I was the first white man ever in their training gym," Allen says. "(Director of Chinese Gymnastics Gao Jian) was beaming when he took me in. He took me up to their junior gymnasium, and he made them do a whole bunch of stuff for me. Then he asked my opinion."

Upon returning to Nebraska, Allen shared his new knowledge of the Chinese with the brass of the U.S. National Team, among other coaches and friends.

"He comes back and he makes a million copies of takes he took over there," Kendig says. "He sends them to everybody to help them as a good-will thing."

Allen's extensive international experience contributes heavily to his teaching techniques. In many ways, he is simultaneously a coach ahead of his time and behind his time. He has been for three decades.

"I'm a teacher at heart," Allen says. "My life's profession is teaching.



FRANCIS ALLEN'S office at the Bob Devaney Sports Center is like a time capsule. Allen and his gymnasts moved into

Coaching is teaching, but you're just in an elite group."

The Chinese asked Allen to return to Asia for a month in November. Allen says he will eventually accept the invitation, reuniting the coach of the 1980 and 1992 U.S. Olympians with Gao, a fixture in the Chinese gyms for decades.

Allen and Gao met in the late 1970s while coaching against each other internationally. In 1979, the year before the United States boycotted the Olympic Games in Moscow, Gao traveled to Fort Worth, Texas, to work as a judge at an international meet.

"The judges all wore blue blazers," Allen says. "Gao didn't have one. He had some weird Chinese blazer. You could tell he didn't want to wear that coat."

So Allen bought Gao a blue blazer at a local department store.

"It was 18 bucks," Allen says. "Ever since then, I've been his buddy."

Allen's buddy invited the NU coach and Jason Christie — a former Husker whom Gao originally mistook for Allen's son — to visit China in 1993. Allen didn't go. But in October, he and Christie, the lone Husker senior last season, made the journey across the Pacific Ocean.

Allen spent three days observing the Chinese, whose men won the Olympic gold medal in Atlanta last summer. Christie, who is studying the Chinese language, enrolled at a university in Beijing.

"They are the best," Allen says of the Chinese gymnasts. "They have all the right social attitudes for gymnastics. They're poor. They're dirt poor, and the only way they can get ahead is through sports. Seeing them was the highlight of my coaching career."

Allen's career is checkered with highlights. When he came to NU, the gymnasts practiced in the field house north of Memorial Stadium. They soon outgrew that area and moved to Mabel Lee Hall, where the NU women's team now practices. In 1976, the Athletic

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FRANCIS ALLEN
NU men's gymnastics coach

Department built the Devaney Center. Allen and company got a closet.

"I came in when the building was done," Allen says, "and I told (Athletic Director) Bob Devaney that he had better go look at his gym. When you walked into it, it looked like a hallway."

Contractors inadvertently built a wall 14 feet from its designated position, adding to the size of the swimming pool's north deck and eliminating 20 percent of the gymnasts' space. Allen threatened to quit, but he later learned to cope with his limited space, thanks in part to Devaney's sweet talking.

"Bob and Francis sort of thought on a similar wavelength," says Howard, NU's assistant coach of 21 years. "Bob admired Francis' efforts and his personality. Without Devaney's support, the program probably would not have lasted."

"The bottom line was that Francis Allen's endeavors and Bob Devaney's support really was the mix that made the whole thing work."

Three years later, Allen's team won its first national title. For each of the next 17 years, NU qualified for the NCAA Championships, a streak that ended last season when an injury-riddled squad barely missed the cut.

In addition to providing the support for Allen's program, Devaney saved Allen from Vietnam in 1969.

"I went to the pre-induction physical," he says. "But then Devaney wrote

them a letter and said they really couldn't find anyone of my caliber to take over the coaching job. So they gave me a deferment from Vietnam."

Shortly before taking over the top spot, Allen served as a graduate assistant in the physical education department, teaching fencing, weight lifting, swimming and, of course, gymnastics.

"I was the new generation of gymnastics coaches," he says. "I trained myself to coach, and that's all I wanted to do. The physical education department was really pissed off at me, because all I did was coach."

And coach he did.

"The thing I keep hearing from Francis' athletes is how much fun it is to have him coach them," Byrne says. "He's demanding, but he doesn't expect more from them than they can reasonably give."

In 1991, one year before former Husker Trent Dimas won an Olympic gold medal on the high bar at the Barcelona Olympics, Harrison completed his first season in the NU program. He was one of four freshmen enticed by Allen's cool recruiting style.

As seniors, that group led the Huskers to a national title before a home crowd at the Devaney Center.

"You don't win a national championship because you're the best coach in the world," Allen says. "You have the best people around you. There's some damn good coaches in this country who will never win a national title because they can't work with people."