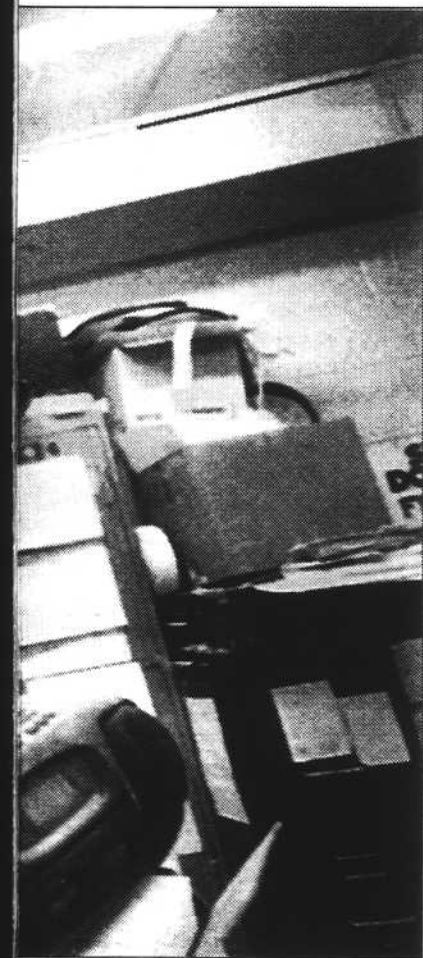


- 1981 Allen wins the last of three straight national coach-of-the-year awards.
- 1987 Husker Tom Schlesinger wins the Nissen Award, joining Hartung and Wes Suter as NU recipients of the honor given annually to the nation's top senior gymnast.
- 1985
- 1990
- 1992 Behind the direction of four seniors, including NCAA all-around champion Dennis Harrison, Nebraska wins its eighth national title in 14 years.
- 1996 Allen and NU's Jason Christie travel to China, where Allen becomes the first white man ever to set foot in the renowned Chinese training gym.
- 1997 Decimated by Title IX legislation, men's gymnastics earns a reprieve under Proposition 137, which prevents the NCAA from eliminating sports featured in the Olympic Games.
- 1995
- 1980 The United States boycotts the Moscow Olympics, depriving Allen a chance to coach in his first Olympic games.
- 1992 Coaching the U.S. team at the Barcelona Olympics, Allen directs former Husker Trent Dimas to a gold medal in the high bar.

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MATT MILLER/DN

the Devaney Center in 1976.

Title IX requires every university to offer an equal number of scholarships to men and women. Because football — which is allocated 85 scholarships — has no female equivalent, other men's sports suffer. Many die.

"I fought hard not just for Francis," Byrne says, "but for our student-athletes. Our gymnasts are terrific people. Pound for pound, they are our best athletes. They're just amazing. And still the sport suffers."

Despite the rapid decrease in the number of men's gymnastics programs, Allen says, the talent level remains high. In fact, he says, most of the schools that have dropped men's gymnastics since the mid-'80s wouldn't have a chance to compete with the upper-echelon programs like Nebraska, Ohio State and Stanford.

"We only need about 10 schools to hold a national championship meet," Allen says. "All the rest of them are just wasting their time."

Howard remembers the glory days of men's gymnastics. He left NU in 1966 to coach at Wisconsin-LaCrosse before returning to Allen's staff 10 years later. Since coming back, he has twice been named the United States Gymnastics Federation Coach of the Year, and he has served as a U.S. coach at several international events, including the 1991 Pan American Games.

While in Wisconsin, Howard sniffed trouble.

"This Title IX thing came in and impacted the little schools immediately," he says. "The earliest interpretations of the law were really, really strict and resulted in wholesale dropping of men's sports. That was really upsetting to me."

Allen refuses to blast the NCAA or Title IX supporters, but Howard isn't so kind.

"All of a sudden, it got to the bigger schools," he says. "So they picked out of a few men's sports and said Title IX is making us do this. The sports disappeared. That was the rationale (the schools) gave the press."

But under the surface, Howard says, other solutions existed.

"It was never meant to eliminate," he says. "It was meant to create. But then you get these schools that can't financially create, so the only way they can be in compliance is to drop sports like gymnastics."

"The gender-equity thing wields such a hammer."

The lack of support discourages veteran coaches like Allen and Howard, who have nurtured the sport's growth for three decades. With the advent of the Big 12 Conference last August, Howard says, he was optimistic that the league could become a national power.

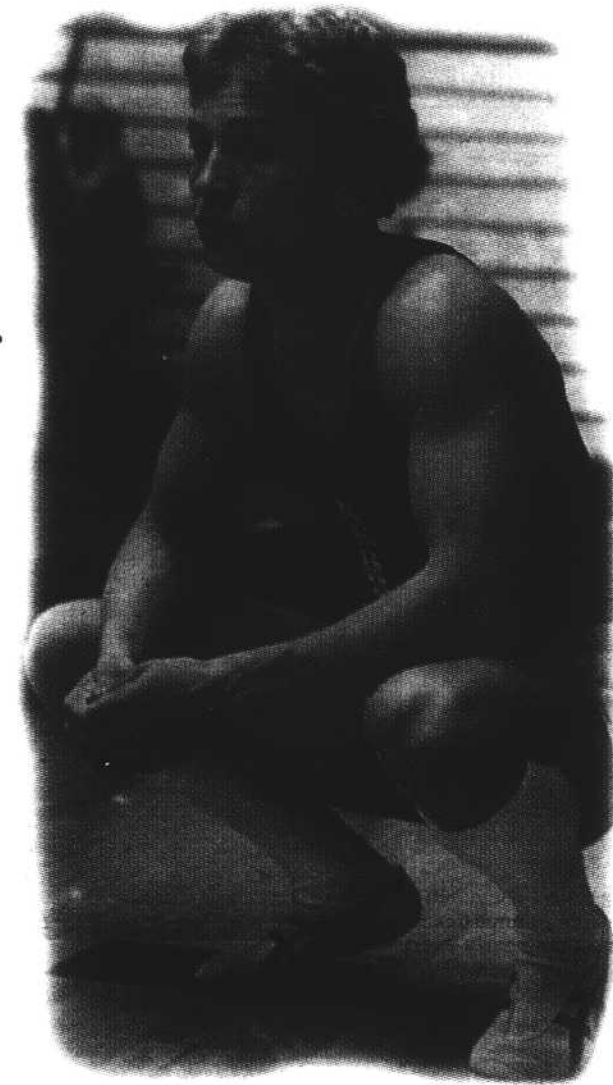
He now realizes that will not happen. Despite Texas' enormous recruiting base, Nebraska and Oklahoma remain the only Big 12 schools participating in men's gymnastics. NU and OU compete in the Mountain Pacific Sports Federation, a loosely-tied conglomeration of universities without a true conference.

Despite cutback after cutback, Howard says he sees potential for change as attitudes toward Title IX begin to sway.

"I'm kind of seeing the pendulum swing the other way," Howard says. "I hope it hasn't gone so far that it won't give schools a chance to recreate."

"But the basic rule has been that once it's eliminated, it's gone forever."

Howard shakes his head, eyes fixed on the chalky floor of Allen's office.



DN FILE PHOTO

JIM HARTUNG, shown here at the 1981 NCAA Championships, is perhaps the greatest NU gymnast ever. Hartung participated in the 1984 Olympic Games and won the NCAA all-around title in 1980 and 1981.

"He absolutely studies gymnastics. That's his whole life, and it has been for many, many years."

JIM HOWARD
NU assistant coach

"It's very, very, very difficult to bring it back. All these sports can only provide opportunities for students. Isn't that what athletics is all about?"

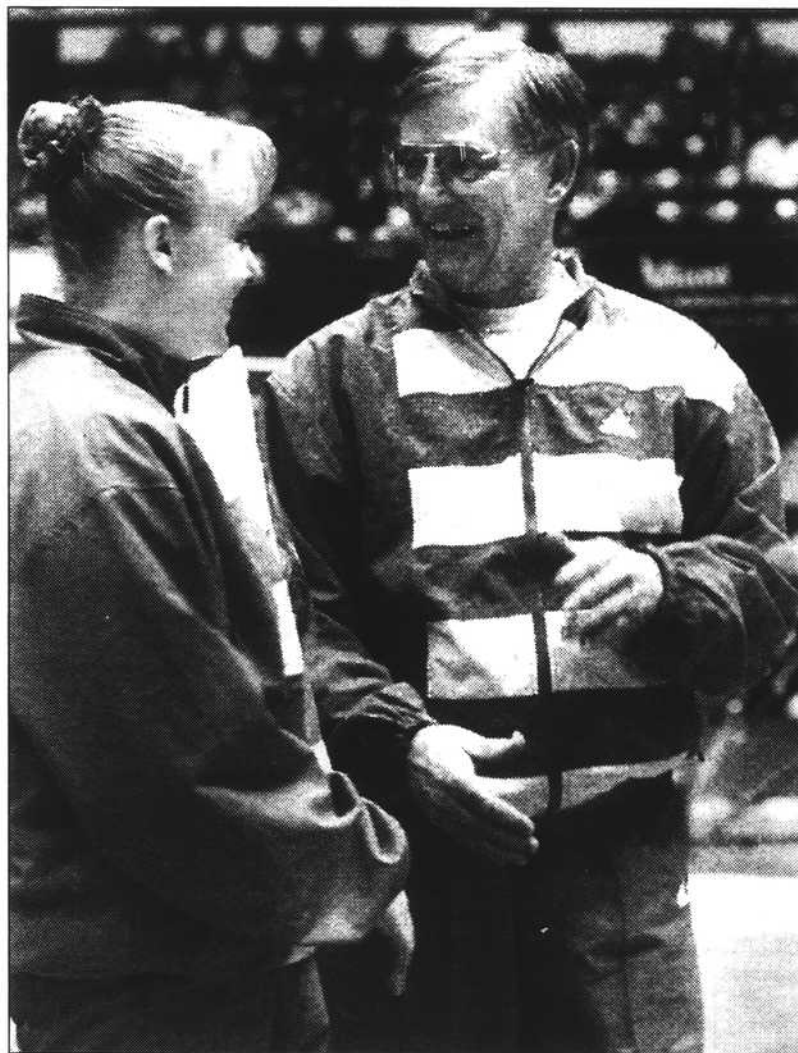
Howard sits silently. Allen walks past the always-open door, looks at his partner of more than 30 years and reaches for a cookie and the steaming coffee pot.

The NCAA can take away scholarships, Allen says, but it can't wipe out his love for the sport, and it can't eliminate coaches. Allen remains confident that men's gymnastics will prosper in the future.

"I'm an optimist," he says.

With optimism comes winning, and after beginning his 28th season last month, Allen says he's not tired of winning. When asked how much longer he plans to coach, Allen looks puzzled, as if the thought of retirement — leading a normal life — has never crossed his mind.

"Forever," he says. "I don't want to do anything else."



MATT MILLER/DN

FRANCIS ALLEN presents Nebraska's Heather Brink with a bouquet of flowers last Saturday following her winning performance in the Huskers' dual victory over Oklahoma.