



NU ATHLETIC DIRECTOR BILL BYRNE has added three varsity women's sports since his term began six years ago. All of the varsity women's sports except bowling are represented in the photo. MATT MILLER/DN

Their No. 1 Fan

Title IX athletics prospering under guidance, council, support of Byrne

By SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
Senior Reporter

Small drops of rain dripped onto Bill Byrne's shoulders. One by one they fell, barely dampening his suit jacket as he concentrated on the scene unfolding before him at the Abbott Sports Complex.

Rebecca Hornbacher, the goalkeeper of the nationally ranked Nebraska soccer team, lunged to her right, protecting the Cornhuskers' lead as the ball bounced off her outstretched arms.

Byrne clapped his hands and smiled. NU's athletic director of six years created the soccer program in 1994. It represented an important step in Nebraska's plan to provide equal opportunities for women in an age when Title IX often rules athletic departments.

Four years after its birth, the baby of Byrne's 24-sport athletic department has grown into one its most successful members, emerging in just three years as a national power.

A gust of wind swept across the field and dark clouds scattered through the sky. One rain drop became two, and two became three until hundreds of drops poured onto the field and drenched spectators. Soon a rain storm sent the fans fleeing for their cars.

But Byrne stayed. He always stays.

Nebraska basketball player Kate Benson, who, like Byrne, sat soaked in the stands during that soccer game, remembers another example of Byrne's commitment to his women's athletic programs.

"At the beginning of the (1997-98) season we were playing Connecticut in the NIT finals (in Storrs, Conn.)," Benson said. "It was a huge game for our program. There were about 15,000 screaming UConn fans there. It was the biggest crowd we had ever played in front of."

"And there was our No. 1 fan, Mr. Byrne, sitting behind our bench and cheering."

Nebraska's No. 1 fan is also the No. 1 reason its women's athletic teams have enjoyed an increased amount of success in recent years.

When Byrne arrived at Nebraska six years ago, the female side of a football-dominated department suffered from a lack of funds and resources and failed to meet the requirements of Title IX.

So on June 26, 1992, Byrne dedicated himself to improving the state of women's athletics at Nebraska.

He promised to bring a family atmosphere to the Huskers and to kill resentment among the sexes with internal support to all sports.

He preached equality to athletes and

coaches. He worked with the NU marketing staff to promote Husker women's sports.

He committed \$4.15 million to the cause during the 1992-93 school year. During his tenure, spending on women's athletics has skyrocketed to \$8.58 million, a 106 percent increase.

As a result, Nebraska women's athletics have vaulted past their national peers — thanks in part to Byrne, a 52-year-old Idaho native who made a good on a promise few thought he could keep.

In the beginning

When Byrne arrived at Nebraska in 1992 after a 10-year stint at the University of Oregon, the challenges of managing a \$30 million athletic department awaited.

"It was the biggest crowd we had ever played in front of. And there was our No. 1 fan, Mr. Byrne, sitting behind our bench and cheering."

KATE BENSON
NU basketball player

But after his first trip to NU's Hewitt Center, Byrne knew his first order of business.

He dismantled the walls that existed between men and women at the facility by simply removing a transparent screen. The screen separated the two at the training table.

"The custom and practice between men and women athletes was more separated, and I wanted it to be inclusive," Byrne said. "I wanted the athletes to care about each other."

But off-the-field events threatened to destroy Byrne's efforts.

On Dec. 5, 1995, Lawrence Phillips, the football team's starting I-back, was found guilty of trespassing and third-degree misdemeanor assault for the Sept. 10 attack of Kate McEwen, a junior on the basketball team.

"We really had to look into our souls because that was a male athlete causing harm to a female athlete," Byrne said. "We had a lot of discussion internally that no one ever heard about. We've made a lot of effort to grow as a department by educating our athletes about violence, and I think it's been well received."

After the incident, Byrne worked harder to create his "family atmosphere."

He reached the goal, he said, by providing an environment in which it could grow.

He started coed picnics and karaoke nights. Byrne also volunteered his face as a target in pie-throwing contests, because he "just wanted the athletes to have fun together."

Byrne asked Brown University vice president and legal counsel Beverly Ledbetter to study the climate for women athletes at UNL. In April 1997, after conducting 30 confidential interviews with female student-athletes, she delivered a positive evaluation.

Former pitcher and current NU Softball Coach Rhonda Revelle said the social changes implemented by Byrne have had a dramatic impact.

"It is absolutely better than when I was an athlete here," said Revelle, who played from 1981 through '83. "There is so much inclusiveness. The women eat at the training table. They get the academic counseling and the same support, and the budget increase has been tremendous."

"When I was an athlete, I don't think we even knew that there was a training table."

Jenny Smith, the catcher on the NU Softball team, agreed.

"The relationship between us and him is not an athlete vs. athletic director thing," Smith said. "The relationship is very good. He's really open-minded. He comes to our games and our Student-Athlete Advisory Board meetings, and he makes himself really visible."

Budget breakdown

But any discussion of equality in an athletic department reaches far beyond a training table or a pie-throwing contest. Budgets are the bottom line in the success of women's athletics.

Title IX redefines budgets, and the bottom line has grown hazy.

All universities strive to comply with the three defined sections of the gender-equity legislation: discrimination in interests and abilities; discrimination in opportunities; and proportionality.

Nebraska, one of few schools to comply with the first two categories, cannot meet the proportionality guidelines because of the large number of male walk-on athletes.

"If 45 percent of our students at the university are female, then 45 percent of the athletes must be female," Byrne said. "So what do you do after that? Tell everyone else who wants to try out for a team

Please see **BYRNE** on 17