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# NU gymnastics faces mortality

## GYMNASTICS from page 1

including Nebraska's, remain. "And I'd say realistically there is only 10 teams year in and year out that have a chance to win anything," Allen said. "There just isn't enough resources and support anymore in college athletics for men's gymnastics."

For proof of the sport's potential death, one needs only to consider the fate of Brigham Young University, one of the top six programs in the country.

The team is one of six contending for the national title this weekend, and is having what BYU 13-year Coach Mako Sakamoto calls arguably its finest season. It is a program on the rise.

On April Fool's Day this year, the team was practicing in the middle of the day, gearing up for the NCAA West Regional, which they would be hosting in Provo, Utah, in nine days.

Into the gym walked BYU Athletic Director Rondo Fehlberg, along with his assistants and the vice president of the university.

"We got really excited," said BYU All-American Guard Young, one of the nation's top gymnasts.

"We thought they were coming to congratulate us on our season and wish us luck for the regional.

"They told us they were dropping the program after next season. They didn't give us any solid answers."

"It was just a shock," Sakamoto said. "We had a strong program going. Financially, the school isn't suffering. We just couldn't figure out why. We still can't."

Unfortunately, it was no April Fool's joke.

"You look at the whole scope of things, and they were right in the thick of it," Allen said. "They were moving up from the sixth best team in the country to the fifth best to fourth, and so on. It's a crime what happened to them."

### Somebody has to go

It is a trend that doesn't seem to stop, and the answers why aren't hard to find.

"I think Title IX has a lot to do with (the decline)," Allen said.

Title IX is a piece of federal legislation enacted in 1972 requiring gender equity within athletic depart-

ments. Essentially, it demands more scholarships for female athletic programs and more female sports, meaning some male scholarships, and inevitably teams, must be dropped.

As a result, many of the 100 men's gymnastic programs that existed in the late 1970s have been cut.

Somebody has to go on the chopping blocks for athletic departments to make ends meet financially, because most can't support the 24 men's and women's sports teams like NU can. That "somebody" has primarily been wrestling and men's gymnastics.

Penn State has been a powerhouse, winning nine national championships in the sport. Head Coach Randy Jepson knows all about being at the short end of the stick.

Before he came to Penn State, he coached at the University of Oregon's program. It was discontinued in 1981 because of Title IX.

"What was intended and what we have seen is more parity in college athletics at the expense of men's programs," Jepson said.

"We have a lot of dedicated athletes in the sport who deserve the same opportunities as the bigger sports do," said Stanford Head Coach Sado Hamara, who has seen it all in his 27 years of coaching.

"A 5-foot-1 gymnast should get just as much opportunity to perform as a 7-foot-1 basketball player. I felt kind of sad when I heard about (BYU). When you read the NCAA manual, one of the first things it talks about is the equal opportunity it gives all athletes of both genders in all sports to compete. I'm not sure if it's doing that for everybody. The minor sports are hurting."

Nebraska Athletic Director Bill Byrne finds this situation to be a tragedy. Much like his predecessor Bob Devaney, Byrne has been a staunch supporter of gymnastics, as evidenced by his commitment to bringing the NCAAAs back to Lincoln.

"The reason why this is such a great sport and great event is that pound for pound, gymnasts are the best athletes we have," Byrne said.

"Gymnasts best exemplify what the word student-athlete is all about.

They always have the best academic record and always work just as hard as the other programs. We need to support gymnastics and hold the meet here because we're not going to let the sport die."

### Not letting go

United States Olympic Committee Executive Director Dick Schultz, who was the keynote speaker at Wednesday's NCAA Nissen Awards banquet, which honored the top gymnasts and coaches in the nation, remembered when the sport almost hit rock bottom.

It was 1997. The sport was about to take a fatal blow because of a 1994 NCAA rule that required a sport to have a minimum of 40 member institutions in order to hold an NCAA Championship.

"Men's gymnastics was well below that number. It was at about 27," said Schultz. "The USOC created an \$8 million fund that would go to the athletic conferences over a four-year period. It was a lever to lobby college presidents to pass legislation to guarantee that college gymnastics would be saved."

It worked. The NCAA adopted at its 1997 convention an "Olympic exception," which exempted Olympic sports, such as gymnastics, from meeting the minimum institutional requirement.

But although the sport was saved, not all of its programs were. BYU is evidence of that. So is the University of New Mexico, which recently announced it will drop its program after this season.

Allen believes only the "biggies," whose athletic department's pockets are deep enough to fund the sport, will ever get a chance to compete in the event that has converged in Lincoln.

"We've gone around and talked to some of the more powerful schools about what they're going to do," Allen said. "Schools like NU, Oklahoma and Ohio State are going to fight to the bitter end to save this sport."

### Survival of the fittest

So what keeps the schools that are still going strong, the lucky few, from falling off the deep end? Byrne,

who knows very well the economics of college athletic departments, had a very direct answer.

"They fill football stadiums," Byrne said. "Look at the six teams here: Nebraska, Michigan, Penn State, Ohio State, Stanford, BYU. All top football teams. They're able to benefit from their football teams' profits. It's all they can do."

One of those schools, Ohio State, has remained strong, ranking No. 2 in the nation this season and winning the title in 1996.

It's hard to imagine that athletes in a "minor" sport could "amaze" someone like Archie Griffin, the only man ever to win college football's Heisman Trophy twice — in 1974 and 1975.

But that's exactly what OSU's gymnasts have always done for Griffin — since he played football there, himself, and especially when he became the Associate Athletic Director for marketing and fundraising in 1987.

Griffin is now the associate athletic director at OSU, overlooking 17 sports — including men's gymnastics — and serves as a member of the NCAA Men's Gymnastics Committee.

"We are not in the mode of dropping sports at Ohio State," Griffin said. "We think adding these minor sports is healthy. It's a big university. We feel we should have big programs."

"(Gymnastics) is a sport that we're proud of. Gymnasts are prototype student-athletes. They do things I'd never attempt to do out there. You're watching outstanding, well-tuned athletes."

And in the end, if programs such as Ohio State and Nebraska fail to fight off extinction, it's those athletes, the ones who dedicate their lives to their sport, who will lose the most.

"You look at what happened in Colorado the last couple days and wonder where those kids would be if they had opportunities that being a student-athlete can provide," Jepson said.

"These gymnasts are future husbands, fathers, leaders of this nation. The more opportunities we lose for people like them, the more things like that will happen in this country."

**"The reason why this is such a great sport and great event is that pound for pound, gymnasts are the best athletes we have."**

**BILL BYRNE**  
 NU athletic director

**"Schools like NU, Oklahoma and Ohio State are going to fight to the bitter end to save this sport."**

**FRANCIS ALLEN**  
 NU gymnastics

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