

# W. sport

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preview

## scenario strapped

NU wrestling picks up the pieces after a painful offseason  
by david diehl

The scattered remnants of the 1999-2000 Nebraska wrestling season tell the saga. Strwn about the state and the country, coaches and players have left the program, moved into new ones and into new lives. The effects of it all can be seen today.

All inside the Nebraska wrestling program - the three dozen wrestlers, the handful of coaches and assistants, the boosters - were taken on a ride they had no control of once it got going.

Starting with a sub-par regular season last year, Nebraska ended on a roll by mid-March. A 6-5-1 regular-season dual record didn't seem as bad once the NCAA Championships ended.

With just five wrestlers at nationals, the Huskers wrestled their hearts out for an eighth-place finish, NU's highest since 1996.

NU captured four All-American honors and one huge national championship with its homegrown Husker stud, Brad Vering at 197 pounds.

The outlooks were blinding. Nebraska would return nine of 10 starters, a national champion, a seasoned corps of veterans and a seasoned coach in Tim Neumann. A man who could sell iceboxes to Eskimos and parkas to Caribbean surfers, Neumann could drive a team like no one else.

The Huskers were moving on up, George and Wheezy style.

### Developing a New Status Quo

But Neumann isn't back for his 16<sup>th</sup> season. His 199-76-6 mark at NU will stand for now, and probably much longer, as the best record by a Husker wrestling coach.

Former Northern Iowa coach Mark Manning is in, back to the school where he started his college wrestling career before moving on to two national championships at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Neumann, in a whirlwind of allegations and scrutiny, resigned April 18 of this year after being suspended for half a month. Allegations of under-the-table payments and scholarship cutting emerged, and Neumann's career fell, just one win shy of the 200-win benchmark.

Neumann has never flat out denied he did anything wrong. During the proceedings of mid-April he admitted to making "mistakes" but has never specified what those mistakes were.

There will be no complete denials, no absolute admissions of guilt.

"I never got mad if what they said was true," Neumann said, speaking about the media scrutiny surrounding the affair.

While Neumann was facing the sharp bites of the media and the loss of his job, Athletic Director Bill Byrne was faced with replacing the long-time coach.

### The New Status Quo

Instead of replacing him with

team-favorite and then-top assistant Mark Cody, Byrne chose Manning. Byrne said the former Northern Iowa coach had the Midwestern values he was searching for.

"He fit into our team here," Byrne said. "He's from the area and has all the right values. He graduates his student athletes, complies with NCAA rules, and his reputation is very high among people in wrestling."

However, players said, Cody would have continued the flow of unity and chemistry the team had going after its booming show at NCAA's. He would have continued driving the bulldog that is Nebraska wrestling to its national-title hopes.

But Cody is out and has since taken the top assistant position at Oklahoma State University. Cody, 38, said it was his 12 years experience at Nebraska that made him so attractive to OSU. Cody also said that he was told those same 12 years weren't enough to land him as Nebraska's coach.

"I wanted it bad, and I thought I was the right guy for the job," Cody said. "I thought I was more than capable."

But one would be naïve to assume that the allegations had nothing to do with Cody's non-hire. Ask Neumann. He offers one simple, short reply on why Cody is an Oklahoma State Cowboy and not still a Husker.

"Because he was on my staff for 12 years," Neumann said.

The players' choice is out. New guy is in. Nothing to be done about it now.

Or is there even a need to have anything done? Old dogs don't learn new tricks, but they can adapt to new owners. With Manning's intense, in-your-face wrestling style, he has made his new team buy into his methods and gotten that bulldog's bite as bad as its bark.

The foggy status of how this team would react to a new coaching staff has been cleared up. It's all positive, they say.

"He's been real personable and worked with me," Vering said. "He came in and made changes that needed to be made."

After the negative aspects of the spring and summer, the new status quo of Nebraska wrestling isn't a bad family to be a part of.

"It was a real good situation that we ended up with," senior All-American Todd Beckerman said. "They didn't just bring in someone that wasn't going to help the program."

They brought in Manning. And he, in turn, brought in more winners. Terry Brands, who won a bronze medal at the 2000 Olympics in freestyle wrestling, was named to Manning's staff.

Brands was an assistant at his alma mater, Iowa, before coming to NU. He helped coach and train T.J. Williams and Eric Jurgens, two impressive foes who stand in the paths of Bryan Snyder and

Beckerman's national-championship hopes.

Now after training the enemy, Brands brings their secrets and his outright jaw-dropping ability and knowledge to Lincoln.

"The Brands are gods in the wrestling world," Snyder said. "I'd grow up asking my parents for the new Brands wrestling video for Christmas. I looked up to him my whole life, and now he's my coach."

All Brands had to do to reach god-like status was capture two national titles, three Big Ten championships and a career 137-7-0 record at Iowa.

With Manning and his staff there is a new atmosphere in the Husker wrestling room. It stinks of toughness borne of a deep intensity that Manning requires of each person who wrestles on his mats.

It's not what they had before, but where the Nebraska wrestlers are right now isn't a bad place to be under the direction of the fiery Manning.

"Some things I liked, and some things I didn't," Vering said. "But that's the way it will be with any new situation. We're just trying to stay real positive and run with it because we like the stuff they're doing."

Manning has instilled a badass attitude into this team and the team has proven talent in Beckerman, Snyder, Vering and others who adorn national top-20 rankings: Beware, wrestling world.

### Backside of the hill

But go back to the pre-Manning days. Return to the days of a jubilant March and Nebraska's showing at the NCAA's that anybody who followed Husker red singlets could be damn proud of.

Not long after that exciting weekend at the NCAA Championships the wheels on the rollercoaster started to turn. NU wrestling fans barely had time to wipe the celebratory smiles from their faces. The joy they got from watching their team claw, fight and drive its ass off to its best finish in five tries silently took its first of many jarring hits.

The seasoned coach, Neumann, who had just completed his 15<sup>th</sup> year at NU, was quietly suspended with pay the first week

of April, three weeks after NCAA's finished.

The news would get no better.

Word got out to the press about the suspension, and questions and accusations flew. The snowball grew.

On April 18, Neumann resigned the post he held at his alma mater, opening the floodgates for speculation and bewilderment.

Former wrestlers alleged Neumann paid them under the table after cutting scholarships. People involved with the program staunchly denied such accusations.

Who would be the new coach? Would Bill Byrne dare go outside the NU system, outside Mark Cody, who had the strong backing of the entire program?

"It was real tough," said Beckerman, one of the four All Americans from last year's squad. "A lot of guys didn't know what they wanted to do. Some wanted to leave, some wanted to stay."

Joe Henson and his twin brother Josh knew. Both transferred to Pennsylvania after Neumann's resignation. Joe was Nebraska's starter at 149 pounds last year and was an NCAA qualifier. He would have provided a quietly successful year behind NU's big three - Vering, Snyder, and Beckerman. Now he's ninth-ranked as Penn's 149-pound starter.

Joe said the sole factor in his leaving was that Cody didn't get the job.

"When something like that happens," Henson said, "you have to look at what's best for yourself."

After the resignation, Bryan Snyder was unsure. Especially after Cody was named just as the interim coach.

Snyder was quoted in the Omaha World-Herald as saying if Cody didn't get the job full-time, "the chances of me staying are about as good as me not staying."

Cody was part of the Nebraska wrestling family. The whole group had won, lost and evolved together in a sport, on a team, where individuals are augmented by the bond they share for each other.



Steven Bender/DN

NU senior and defending national champion Brad Vering goes after a second national title this season under new Coach Mark Manning.

ble ground as to just how far up it would be moving.

### A change of direction

Tim Neumann doesn't watch daily practices in the winter anymore. He isn't propped up against a wall with a sweat-soaked T-shirt plastered over a heaving, deeply-breathing chest.

Brad Vering will be his last national-championship embrace. And the 1999-2000 Cornhuskers were his last wrestling team at Nebraska.

He has accepted all of that.

The crescendo of the 2000 wrestling season was followed by a hard, steep nose dive for Neumann. A suspension, an investigation and eventually a resignation have led Neumann to today.

He sits in a leather chair in an intimidating conference room buzzing with electronic gadgets.

Neumann, 41, now is an insurance professional, working with individuals and businesses, helping them with estate planning and insurance in business.

He's using the skills that made him a successful mentor in the wrestling room to be successful in the boardroom. Instead of leading and directing 20-year-olds in a wrestling room, he leads and directs business people to financial security.

"Life hasn't slowed down," said Neumann, who earned his degree at Nebraska in education. "It's taken a brand new direction.

"The reason I coached was because I enjoyed helping people, working with people and seeing them reach their goals. That's exactly what I'm doing now."

On the mat. In the classroom. In a plush office. Neumann uses the same confidence and leadership that made him a highly respected coach to become a successful businessman in mainstream America.

He doesn't solicit his business. He doesn't need to. Young entrepreneurs seek him for his direction, ambition and confidence in leading them to a financial safety net.

Now the Peshtigo, Wis., native doesn't look after 40 wrestlers and have worried parents calling him at odd hours.

His priorities are clearer. One: Family. Two: Work. As much as he told himself in the past 15 years that it was always that way, it's a lot easier to believe it now, Neumann said.

Now he doesn't tell his kids they're No. 1 over the phone while on a weeklong recruiting trip. He does it when he walks in the front door each night.

"I love it," Neumann said. "I absolutely love it."

It's a different situation for Neumann but not a bad one. After a tumultuous offseason, the same is true for the Nebraska wrestling squad.

Sometimes on the way up, the elevator stops on a different floor.