

With Rigor and Mystique, Nebraska Builds a Bowling Dynasty

Coach Bill Straub's focus on fundamentals has helped the Lady Cornhuskers achieve an unparalleled dominance in N.C.A.A. women's bowling.

By BEN SHPIGEL APRIL 11, 2017

LINCOLN, Neb. — Every recruit who visits the women's bowling offices at the University of Nebraska is shown a two-page spread from the July 2000 edition of Golf Digest. It depicts 50 golfers, from Bobby Jones to Babe Didrikson Zaharias to Tiger Woods, each at a different stage in their swing. The sequence was hardly intended as an instructional tool for bowling, but Bill Straub tends to divine inspiration from unusual sources.

Here in the cornfields of eastern Nebraska, where on football game days Cornhusker devotees turn Memorial Stadium into the state's third-most populous city, Straub has assembled a bowling dynasty.

Straub, 66, has shepherded the Lady Cornhuskers to 10 national titles across the club and N.C.A.A. levels, including two in the last four years. They are the only program to earn a berth in the N.C.A.A. championship in all 14 seasons it has been held, and are the top seed in the eight-team competition that begins Thursday in Baton Rouge, La.

One of his early teams featured a woman named Kim Berke, who became a four-time All-American — and, two years after graduating, his wife. She took a

weekend off from the women's professional tour to get married, then headed off to an event in Hammond, Ind. The Straubs have one child, Meghan, who now bowls for Nebraska, upholding the tradition.

The Huskers' practice facility — on the first floor of the student union on East Campus, about a 10-minute drive from the university's downtown nexus — heaves with trophies and plaques. Its walls are lined with the head shots of the women selected as all-Americans (22) and honored as national collegiate bowler of the year (seven). Nebraska's dominance, unparalleled in the sport, belies what Straub considers unassailable.

"I can't sell a space heater to an Eskimo," he said.

Straub does not sign every prospect he covets, but despite being a terrible salesman, he still lures plenty here. They come from Australia and Arizona, Indonesia and Indiana, England and New England. One, from the Netherlands, arrived unannounced to express her interest.

Instead of telling recruits how awesome they are, how they will help Nebraska win, Straub entices them with a promise: He will make them better, if they allow him.

Some are unwilling to subject themselves to Straub's approach to player development, with an emphasis on fundamentals so rigorous that its detractors call it Clonehusking.

The term does not bother him, and in fairness, not much seems to. Three years ago, while sitting at his desk, Straub felt the room start to spin. He called over to his trusted longtime assistant Paul Klempa, who mustered some emergency medical personnel who happened to be eating lunch in the building.

Straub endured a tear in the inner wall of the aorta, the body's main blood vessel. The condition killed the actors John Ritter and Alan Thicke — but not Straub, who has the cleareyed perspective of someone who can talk about being given last rites twice.

Since he believes in his system, and since he has been told that other schools try to sway recruits by telling them that Straub mandates they bowl a certain way,

he is often stirred to defend it. So he takes out that spread from Golf Digest and asks a skeptical parent or their daughter to examine it.

These may be the 50 best golfers, he might say, but together they look like one — with a perfect swing.

“There is a way to play,” Straub said in an interview here last month. “If you can believe that bowling is golf with a bigger, heavier ball, then you’re on the same page as I am. I’m trying to make it as simple as possible.”

Rarely does a conversation pass without his relating bowling to another sport — baseball, football, golf. Like many bowlers of his era, Straub taught himself, learning at first in his boyhood home here. He figured out how to make a plastic ball hook on the carpet. Later at local bowling centers, he practiced the form used by the professionals he saw on television.

At 6-foot-5 and 215 pounds, with a white goatee and raspy baritone, Straub cuts an imposing figure. But he balances a deeply pragmatic nature with a goofy side: After a tornado ripped through Houston during the 2004 championship match there, he took his leadoff bowler by the hand and skipped with her as they waited for the power to fully return. Sufficiently loose, the Huskers rolled.

That was the first of five titles Nebraska won after the N.C.A.A. sanctioned women’s bowling for the 2003-4 season. The women had celebrated five previous national championships as a robust club program whose ascension dovetailed with the two championships won by the men’s team. That success established Straub’s bona fides, which in turn attracted gifted women, some of whom went on to thrive on the professional tour. That exposure bolstered Nebraska’s reputation as a bowling hub.

“We took it very seriously,” Jennifer Murphy, a four-time all-American in the late 1990s, said in a telephone interview. “It was our job.”

Murphy became the first collegiate bowler to receive a full scholarship, in 1997, the same year women’s bowling at Nebraska was elevated from an emerging sport to varsity status. The Huskers benefited from an athletic department

powered by the football team, which in the 2014-15 fiscal year accounted for more than 58 percent of roughly \$103.7 million that the department raked in .

The money trickles down to the bowlers, who are afforded the same perks and privileges, including the training table in Memorial Stadium and sport-specific workouts prescribed by the strength and conditioning staff.

Their season lasts from October through April and features one home match, the three-day Big Red Invitational, which hosted nine programs from across the Midwest and Southeast last month at nearby Sun Valley Lanes. A black curtain separated the competition from lanes allocated for locals. Young fans clutched red foam fingers and posed for photos with the mascot, Herbie Husker. Parents rigged iPads and iPhones atop tripods and selfie sticks, setting them on counters, to record the action.

The university's athletic director, Shawn Eichorst, oversees 24 programs but has a special interest in bowling, which he added at his alma mater, Division III Wisconsin-Whitewater, nearly 20 years ago. The team's expectations and standards, Eichorst said, inspire the entire department.

"You truly feel like you're treated like every athlete," said Julia Bond, a junior from Aurora, Ill. "It's nice to have that respect."

To maintain that respect, the indoctrination begins on the first day of practice. Everyone, from three-year starters to freshmen, performs a series of drills, captured on video, that assesses competency in the 10 areas Straub deems paramount.

When he started at Nebraska in 1983, taking time off from the professional tour to volunteer with the men's team, Straub did not know how to spell coach, he said jokingly, let alone how to be one.

Acknowledging his limitations, he researched other sports over the years for guidance. He found it in the teachings of the legendary basketball coaches John Wooden and Bob Knight as well as in a video made by Dalton McCrary, a golf

coach who espouses the notion of an ideal swing speed . Applying that idea to bowling, Straub developed mechanics that he perceived as easily repeatable.

For proprietary reasons, he asked that his philosophy for each of those 10 bullet points, typed in a paragraph or two, remain private. But those within the sport can recognize a Lady Husker — with her exaggerated push away of the ball, her controlled body movement and her straight walk, arm swing and follow-through — from the opposite end of a bowling center.

The training can be taxing, both physically and mentally. After those early practices, coaches meet with each bowler and let her evaluate herself before charting a pathway to improvement. Allison Morris, a redshirt freshman from Ann Arbor, Mich., said she spent a full month of practices last season doing the same drill, in which she took only one step before releasing the ball, to streamline her delivery.

“You might be the best, or among the best, but you come here, with so many accomplished bowlers, it’s a real ego check,” Morris said.

Gazmine Mason, a senior from Cranston, R.I., said she rebelled as a freshman. “Coach isn’t going to change for one person,” she said. “You come here and don’t like it, you find a way to like it or you leave.”

Those who stay work on their aggressiveness by flinging balls from five or six feet away into a contraption called Brad, named for Kim Straub’s brother, with a hole in the middle at about stomach height. To refine their release, they spin cue balls on a pool table or toss footballs in the air.

Opposing coaches also stress fundamentals, just not the way Nebraska does.

“It’s very old school,” said Shannon O’Keefe, who coaches the women’s team at Division II McKendree University, in western Illinois. “It’s what has worked for them, what works for them, so it’s hard to argue with.”

Yet, some still do. Justin Kostick, the coach at Arkansas State, speculated that some voters in February displaced Nebraska from the No. 1 ranking out of

jealousy. Or, Kostick said, they disapprove of Straub's methods, finding them too rigid.

Early in his coaching career, Straub said, he heard a rival coach disparage the Huskers by saying that they weren't that good — they just don't miss spares. One of the best compliments he ever received, he said.

“If you spare a lot, it's like parring all the holes,” said Straub, summoning another golf analogy. “It's difficult to be out of a golf match if you're parring all the holes.”

That consistency can unnerve opponents. It also enhances Nebraska's mystique.

“One of the reasons why they've been so successful at winning the national championship, I believe, is that people get scared of the N on their chest,” said Kostick, a former Husker who got a call back from Arkansas State because of his Nebraska background. “They try too hard, and if you get amped up and squeeze too hard, the ball goes everywhere.”

Those who can compartmentalize, who can focus only on the lane and the pins during a tense match, merit attention from Nebraska during recruiting. Straub and Klempa attend tournaments, scour YouTube videos and network with friends and alumni in search of the next great prospect.

About 200 applicants contend each year for two or three roster spots, and anyone who counts bowling as a hobby and not a commitment is immediately discounted. The list is later winnowed to 10 or 15 candidates who are considered for official visits and a chunk of the five scholarships permitted by the N.C.A.A.

In N.C.A.A. women's bowling, 78 colleges from all divisions compete against one another. Nebraska often vies with the same schools — among them Arkansas State, McKendree, Sam Houston State and Vanderbilt, the only other school from a so-called Power 5 football conference that has a women's varsity team — for the best junior bowlers. Where the Huskers aim to distinguish themselves is in their ability to identify, appraise and cultivate talent from the next level down.

“Ideally, you won’t know who the best recruits were,” Klempa said, “because everyone else looks really good, too.”

Beyond the academic standards and bowling metrics they prioritize — does your ball revolve 15 times and zoom down the lane in 2.5 seconds or fewer? — they tend to seek out a certain kind of bowler, in pedigree and personality. They highlight women with multisport backgrounds, believing that they have both the athleticism to take quickly to suggested changes and a keen understanding of group dynamics.

“You have to be willing to give up parts of yourself that you didn’t realize you had to before,” said Briana Zabierek, a senior from Lockport, Ill. “It takes a certain level of maturity and openness to let yourself be vulnerable.”

The prototype of a Nebraska bowler, then, in many ways resembles Meghan Straub. She grew up with the sport — “they didn’t want me embarrassing them,” she said of her parents — but wanted to play volleyball in college, at Pepperdine. After tearing her Achilles’ tendon before her senior year of high school, she concentrated on bowling. Now, as a sophomore, she is “twice as good as she was last year,” Kostick said.

That is precisely what Bill Straub hopes has happened, and will continue to happen. And with a little Clonehusking, year after year, championship after championship, it does.

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