



# REPEAT!

Victory is twice as sweet  
as the OU Men's Gymnastics Team  
sweeps to a second straight  
NCAA crown.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

ABOVE: Jubilation was the order of the day for Daniel Furney and his fellow Sooner gymnasts as they cap a record-setting season by fighting off Ohio State for the second time in two years to take the national championship.

**F**or a moment during the college recruiting process, Daniel Furney wondered if Ohio State might not be the right fit for his talents as a gymnast. The Buckeyes had a tradition matched by only a handful of programs in the country and were poised on the doorstep of dynasty status. His decision conceivably could alter the balance of power enough to make Ohio State the perennial NCAA favorite well into the new millennium.

That was 1998. Furney's moment of truth, in some ways, seems like a lifetime ago. For Ohio State, it must seem even longer, especially as the Buckeyes again were relegated to the background as the University of Oklahoma celebrated a second straight national championship title and fifth in the program's illustrious history.

The top-ranked Sooners had just completed a record-setting season, and in the middle of the ongoing, post-tournament revelry stood Furney, beaming from ear-to-ear. The senior from New Braunfels, Texas, was the all-around title winner; moreover, his performance on the high bar had slammed the door on any hope the runner-up Buckeyes had for the team crown.

"The biggest difference (in recruiting) between Oklahoma and Ohio State was the fact OU wanted me more," explains Furney, who capped his collegiate career by earning the Nissen Emery Award, given to the nation's top male gymnast.

"OU talked about how important I could be to their program and all of the different ways I could contribute. Ohio State was more like, 'If you want to come here, that's great.' But I wanted a college program to want me like I wanted them. OU gave me that."

And in return, Furney gave everything he had, along with a stellar supporting cast that included fellow seniors Josh Landis, Brett Covey and Shannon Carrion. Two seasons removed from finishing a heartbreaking second to Ohio State on the Buckeyes' home floor for the 2001 NCAA title, Furney and the Sooners added the exclamation point to their 2002 championship by becoming the 13th team to repeat.

"This one is even sweeter than the first," says Furney. "To go out there with everyone expecting you to win and everyone gunning for you, and to be able to handle that kind of pressure says a lot about this team's character. It's a pretty amazing feeling."





Athletics Director Joe Castiglione, center, and Coach Mark Williams, right, take possession of the NCAA trophy.

Fourth-year coach Mark Williams points to the day Furney walked into his office during his recruiting visit, held out his right hand and showed exactly where he had room for four national championship rings.

“Daniel was a bit naive thinking that might really happen, but the attitude he possessed was exactly what we were looking for,” says Williams, who took over as head coach for Greg Buwick later that summer. “I knew then and there that he was the kind of kid I wanted in this program.”

A few weeks later, Furney signed with Oklahoma, and over the next four years, he helped Williams’ squad finish fourth, second and first twice at the NCAA Championships. The 2002 title, won as event host at Lloyd Noble Center, was OU’s first since 1991.

Going into this year’s NCAA finale, Williams joked with Ohio State coach Miles Avery that this was the rubber match between the two programs—the crowning of the real champions. This time the teams would meet on a neutral floor at Temple University—and as it turned out, the difference between finishing first and second in 2003 was Furney.

“There is no doubt that Daniel will go down in OU history as one of the best. He is one of the top three gymnasts ever at OU, if not the very best,” says Williams. “The things he has accomplished during his career put him in the same category as



Senior All-American Daniel Furney performs on the rings on his way to the NCAA gymnastics all-around title.

guys like Bart Conner, Dan Fink and Jarrod Hanks. His dedication and leadership have made him one of the driving forces on this team.”

Furney and the Sooners handled the pressures of being defending champs by becoming only the second team in NCAA history to record an undefeated season, a perfect 26-0. Twice they set NCAA team scoring records and finished with a school-record 11 All-America honors at nationals.

“We actually had a better team than we had in 2002, but there are a lot of factors that go into winning a national title,” says Williams, who earned his second consecutive NCAA Coach of the Year award. “It became evident we were the team to beat during the final few weeks of the season, mainly because these guys responded to every single challenge.”

The Sooners’ final hurdle loomed after a lackluster opening rotation on the floor exercise at nationals, leaving them trailing for only the third time all season. There was little margin for error as they moved to the pommel horse; three of OU’s six competitors answered with career-best performances, including a meet-best 9.650 from Landis.

“We jumped from fifth to first after the pommels, and we were able to build a big lead from there,” adds Williams.

Junior Jock Stevens set a school record with a 9.70 effort on the vault, combining with his fellow Sooners for a new team vault record of 37.425.

“That was when we knew the meet was ours to win,” said Furney. “It played out the same way as last season. We were just on fire on vault and knew that no one could touch us after that rotation.”

The following day during event finals, Furney captured the individual title on parallel bars, while Landis won titles on the floor exercise and pommel horse. Covey, Stevens, Jamie Henderson and Heath Mueller all earned All-America honors, as well.

“I told Mark I was coming to OU with the expectations of being in contention for winning four national championships. To actually win two titles in my four years here isn’t too bad,” adds Furney. “I’d have to say coming here was one of the best decisions of my life.”