

Focused on **FIVE**

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Coach Mark Williams comes full circle from his early days in Illinois to leading OU men's gymnastics to its fourth consecutive national title.

A 20-minute drive will take you straight from the suburb of La Grange, Ill., to the UCI Pavilion, located on the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. If you add a couple of stops along the way, say Lincoln, Neb., and Norman, Okla., like Mark Williams did, it might take a bit longer to complete the trip.

Forty-seven years, to be exact.

Little did Williams know that when he first signed up for gymnastics lessons at the La Grange YMCA in 1971 that he would still be involved in the sport almost five decades later. Even harder to imagine, according to Williams, is the fact that his return home to Chicago and the UCI Pavilion was highlighted by the University of Oklahoma men's gymnastics team capturing its fourth consecutive national championship.

In the history of NCAA gymnastics, only one other men's program has topped that feat. The University of Nebraska won five straight national titles from 1979 to 1983.

Incredibly, Williams has been right in the middle of both dynasties – first as an All-America gymnast and graduate assistant coach for the Cornhuskers (1977-81), and since 2000, as head coach of the Sooners.

Under Williams' direction, Oklahoma has gone undefeated over the past four seasons en route to winning those four national titles, and the program has collected a total of nine NCAA championships



Steve Woltmann

Oklahoma men's gymnastics coach Mark Williams celebrates the Sooners' fourth straight national championship at Chicago's UCI Pavilion in April. Williams took his first gymnastics lessons in La Grange, Ill., just 20 miles from the arena.



Steve Woltmann

Yul Moldauer led the Sooners to victory at the 2018 NCAA Championship. The Arvada, Colo., junior won his second American Cup in a row and tied an NCAA record with four individual national championships after winning titles in the all-around, floor, vault and parallel bars.

during his 19 seasons. Overall, the OU men have won 12 national titles, which is tied with Penn State for the most all time.

The latest crown may be the sweetest for Williams, who grew up just a few miles from the UCI Pavilion, host site of the 2018 NCAA Championships in April. He attended Lyons Township High School in La Grange and initially learned the sport of gymnastics at the nearby YMCA.

“I had not been back to Chicago for a gymnastics meet since I was in college, so it was pretty cool to have that opportunity play out like it did,” says Williams. “Then to have my high school coach there and my college coach there, and friends and family there to see our team win a national championship – that was really special.”

The Sooners won the 2018 team title in dramatic fashion, rallying from almost five points down with impressive performances on their final three rotations: vault, parallel bars and high bar. With a score of 414.858, Williams’ team topped runner-up Minnesota by just under three points (411.923).

Yul Moldauer led the comeback effort by becoming the first OU gymnast to earn four individual national titles in a single season. The junior from Arvada, Colo., finished first on the floor, parallel bars, vault and all-around competition, giving him a school-record seven career titles.

The Sooners garnered 11 All-America honors in all, including six from Moldauer and two from junior Levi Anderson.

Genki Suzuki and brothers Hunter and Tanner Justus also earned All-America status.

“To be down by five points halfway through the meet, we knew it was going to take a great effort to get ourselves back in a position to win as a team,” says Williams. “The turning point came on the vault where our guys were just unbelievable. We took the momentum and confidence from that performance and finished strong to close it out.”

“I was extremely proud of the way this team competed and never lost its composure or sight of what we needed to do to win.”

Moldauer finished first on the vault (14.900), followed by Tanner and Hunter Justus, who wound up second (14.800) and fourth (14.766), respectively. Anderson and Eric Holley rounded out the rotation with two more solid routines that helped turn the momentum squarely in Oklahoma’s favor.

Leading by a fraction of a point, the Sooners got another big effort out of Moldauer, who was first on the parallel bars (14.733). Suzuki, Peter Daggett and Hunter Justus followed with quality routines that helped push the OU advantage to almost five points in the team race.

Williams’ No. 1-ranked squad finished off its historic campaign with a clutch effort on the high bar, which was highlighted by an All-America performance from Anderson (13.933).

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“You have to trust the process and trust the program,” says Anderson, who also earned All-America honors in the all-around. “You don’t win four straight national titles without having a strong foundation that sets you up for success. The knowledge and experience that Coach Williams brings to the team makes him our biggest asset. He sees and understands the potential that each of us has and he knows how to bring out the very best in us.

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Williams praises the efforts of assistant coaches Taqiy Abdullah-Simmons and Steven Legendre for their hands-on work with the student-athletes. Both men are former OU gymnasts who earned All-America honors under Williams.

Moldauer is quick to concur.

“This is a special program that has a lot of key parts,” says Moldauer. “The reason we win is because we work so well as a team, starting with Mark and Taqiy and Steve. They help prepare us mentally and physically, and all of the guys in this gym push each other and challenge each other to be the best we can be.

“From where this team started the season to where we finished was an amazing journey. And to cap it off by winning another national championship is incredible.”

It was a journey that brought Williams back to his hometown and rekindled some memories that have stayed with him throughout his gymnastics career.

“I was 14 when my sister took me to watch the high school gymnastics team compete for the first time, and I saw what I wanted to do,” says Williams. “I was athletic but small, and gymnastics matched my abilities.”

Not long after that, Williams signed up for classes at the YMCA, and the following school year, he joined the Lyons Township High School gymnastics program as a freshman. Coach Paul Omi was not overly impressed with his newest gymnast’s physical abilities, but saw something in Williams that helped make up for any shortcomings.

“Mark was tenacious. He was driven and that will take you a long way as an athlete,” says Omi. “He wasn’t our best gymnast but he was determined to succeed. Whatever hurdles he faced, he was always up to the challenge.”

For Omi, it has been a fun experience watching one of his former pupils excel on so many levels, both as an athlete and coach. And the fact that the two have remained connected for almost 50 years is something for which the longtime coach is thankful.

“Mark called me when he found he was going to be head

coach for the U.S. Olympic team a couple of years ago. It’s pretty humbling to know someone in his position has kept me in his thoughts after all of this time,” says Omi. “He’s a very gracious person, and obviously a great coach. To see what his Oklahoma teams have accomplished during his time there is truly impressive.”

When Omi found out the NCAA championships were going to be in Chicago this spring, he was excited for the opportunity to see Williams and the Sooners in person.

“I have kept up with Mark’s career through the years but it was great fun to watch his team defend its title again this time around.”

Williams caught up with Omi and his former college coach at Nebraska, Francis Allen, who was also at the UCI Pavilion to watch the Sooners.

“It was a very memorable performance by our team because of the way we fought and battled every step of the way,” says Williams, who is now tied with former Penn State coach Gene Wettstone for the most NCAA titles by a head coach (nine). “And to do it in Chicago with Coach Omi and Coach Allen in attendance – two men who have had a positive influence on me, not only in gymnastics but in life – that was pretty cool.”

Williams’ life has been filled with plenty of positives since he took over as OU head coach in 2000.

During his time at the helm, Oklahoma has been the most successful men’s gymnastics program in the country, posting an incredible 470-36 record. On top of the nine national titles, the Sooners have also collected seven NCAA runner-up trophies while producing 39 individual national champions and 217 All-Americans.

The list of awards and accolades is seemingly endless, and according to Williams, is the result of hard work, effort and key support from a number of sources.

“It’s a combination of a lot of things,” says Williams, who has earned national coach of the year honors nine times. “We pay attention to details. We have a great training plan. We create a mental toughness in our guys that has really paid off for us. We have a tremendous coaching staff. We have great facilities. We have a great medical staff that helps take tremendous care of our guys. And we have the support of an administration, including Athletics Director Joe Castiglione and former President Boren, that truly wants us to succeed at the highest level.

“When your program has all those things working in your favor, it definitely helps put you in a position to be successful.”

Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and lives in Norman.