



Gene Wettstone built the Penn State men's gymnastics program into a powerhouse.

Wettstone

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University of Iowa, where his uncle was the gymnastics coach, and where he could live for free in the sunroom of his house. But he still had to get there, and his parents had just \$25 to give their son for travel.

So Wettstone hitchhiked the nearly 1,000-mile trip from Hitch City, N.J., to Iowa City, Iowa. He studied the maps and stayed at YMCAs along the way. Eventually, he wound up on Iowa's campus.

"I don't know what I ate or if I ate at all, but I still had the \$25 when I got there," he said. "So it was an amazing thing."

Wettstone hitchhiked to and from school several more times. He once wound up stuck at a T intersection along Water Street in Lewisburg. Wettstone saw a sign that said "26 miles to Penn State College."

"I thought to myself, 'Oh, to live here and to teach here, that would be tremendous,'" Wettstone said.

Though he eventually got a lift with a junk dealer from Iyrone, Wettstone had been exposed to the area. To pay his tuition, Wettstone worked at a local hospital while competing on his uncle's gymnastics team. His senior season, the Hawkeyes won the Big Ten championship, and Wettstone won the all-around, pommel horse and horizontal bar titles. When he graduated in 1937 with bachelor's and master's degrees in physical education, two job openings popped up: one at Ohio State and one at Penn State. But the decision was easy.

"I applied to Penn State College primarily because of its location," Wettstone said. "I loved the streams and the mountains and so forth, being able to hitchhike through that country so many times."

The project

Wettstone was hired as the new men's gymnastics coach and as a physical education instructor. But as a physically fit, recent collegiate gymnast, Wettstone was assigned an additional task by the dean of

the physical education college. Wettstone was to help revive the Nittany Lion mascot tradition that had fallen by the wayside in recent years. Thinking that Penn State athletics "needed a little lift," Wettstone brought back the Nittany Lion mascot and wore the suit in 1939 — the first time anyone had worn it in 12 years. He wore the suit for one year and passed it on to a student, and from then helped choose who would wear it each year. The Nittany Lion costume has been worn every Nittany since.

As a physical education instructor, Wettstone taught students curriculum ranging from handball and badminton to cross country and obstacle courses.

"I had to teach lots of classes, especially Saturday classes, 8 a.m. classes," Wettstone said. "But I kept going. I took three showers a day, and the last thing I did was the gymnastics team."

Before Wettstone arrived, the gymnastics program at Penn State had not been representative of international gymnastics. It was considered a student circus, and meets would include high wire acts, juggling, unicycles and trapeze performances. Wettstone's mission was to phase out the student circus and get Penn State involved in the real sport of gymnastics.

As a part of that transition, Wettstone began using concert music and detail as focal points in his gymnastics instruction. "I worked on the basics, and they worked with me," Wettstone said. "And with the right music and the right coaching and looking at it intelligently, we were able to outsmart all the other teams."

Wettstone incorporated a full concert band that played as the gymnasts marched into Rec Hall, during warmups, during any dead time throughout the meet and during the ending ceremony at the end of the evening. Wettstone spent months choosing themes and picking exactly the right music for each aspect of the meet. He chose concerts and operettas from Franz Lehar's "City of My Dreams" to Sigmund Romberg's "The Student Prince."

"We'd go to Army or Navy or University of Michigan, and there was often equipment just set up in the middle of the floor, and everything looked OK, but it was just laid out," said William Murphy, a gymnast for Wettstone from 1971 to '74.

"Whereas Wettstone would come in the gym literally hours before the meet and work with the guys setting up the equipment and make sure everything was perfect and the music was right and the chairs and stands were in the right place and the guys had the right places to walk."

World War II had just begun by the time Wettstone arrived at Penn State, and the NCAA championships were not held from 1943 to 1947 while many collegiate gymnasts served in the war. But by the time the war was over and the NCAA was functioning again, Wettstone had revolutionized the program, which won its first national championship in 1948.

International success

While cementing Penn State as a force in

collegiate gymnastics, Wettstone was also busy helping increase the United States' status internationally in gymnastics and to help promote the sport domestically. He contacted other countries to get their national teams to compete in the U.S.

Penn State hosted more than 15 international matches while Wettstone was coaching, including meets against the U.S.S.R., Germany, Sweden and Japan.

"I brought the Russians over here and nobody had ever seen them in any sport. I brought them over without even talking to the [U.S.] state department," Wettstone said. "People laid on mattresses the night before outside Rec Hall to get those tickets. I even brought teams over and paid their way over until they were able to repay me."

Another meet against China required negotiations through dozens of letters back and forth. The country finally agreed to send its national team to compete against Penn State, and the meet was held at Madison Square Garden. The music, as well as treating the other countries honorably, was key to the success, Wettstone said.

"They were big extravaganza competitions, and he would pack Rec Hall. We drew a lot more than basketball did," said Tom Dunn, a two-time team captain from 1970 to '71 and the current coach of Iowa's men's gymnastics team. "He sold gymnastics like nobody else has before or since, really. He was just a phenomenal promoter. He convinced everybody in the area that gymnastics was the thing you wanna go see."

The international matches helped educate the general public and the national media in gymnastics, Wettstone's son, Jerry, said. ABC began to discover the importance of Olympic gymnastics coverage in 1948, the first Olympic games Wettstone coached the United States team in. The United States finished fifth in gymnastics, with one medal that year. Wettstone went on to coach the team again in 1956 and serve as team manager in the 1976 games. He served as an Olympic judge in the 1952 and 1968 games.

Wettstone was also one of the founding fathers of the United States Gymnastics Federation (USGF) that in 1970 gained membership into the Federation of International Gymnastics, the governing body for gymnastics in the world.

"He was the person, as far as I'm concerned, that really brought gymnastics to the point where we were recognized as an international power," said 1957 team captain Dion Weissend.

The award

After Wettstone retired in 1976, new coach Karl Schier thought it'd be important to continue to incorporate Wettstone in the meets. Beginning in the 1977 season, Schier established the Gene Wettstone Award.

"He's considered a legend in our sport, and I just felt he should be honored in that way," Schier said.

More than 35 years later, Wettstone still chooses the award winner after every meet. After losing the ability to drive seven years ago, Wettstone now gets picked up by

his son Jerry at his Foxdale Village retirement home. They enter through the back of Rec Hall, and Wettstone sits on a folding chair near Penn State's bench.

"I love to do it," Wettstone said. "I want to pass it around so every boy gets at least one in his four years. And I give it for various reasons, sometimes I give it to the opposing coach because he did a better job than we did or sometimes I give it to another gymnast."

This season, after a loss against Illinois on Feb. 20, Wettstone did just that, as he chose Illini gymnast Daniel Ribeiro -- who won two events -- as the award winner. In the final home meet of the season, a loss to Oklahoma on March 20, Penn State senior Nick Virbitsky won his first career Gene Wettstone Award after finishing third on the high bar and fourth on the floor exercise.

"It's a great honor seeing him and knowing that he saw something special in you," Virbitsky said. "We usually only see him at the competitions and at the banquet at the end of the year, but it's nice getting to talk to him. I mean, JoePa talks about him being one of the greatest coaches alive, and I think that says enough right there."

Senior captain Allen Harris has never had the honor of winning the award, but believes it is something every Penn State gymnast should aspire to win.

"One of the reasons that I wanted to come here is because I knew the history here was so rich with all the national championships," Harris said. "And the fact that he still comes to our meets to watch, it means a lot to me, and I hope that the young guys understand what that means."

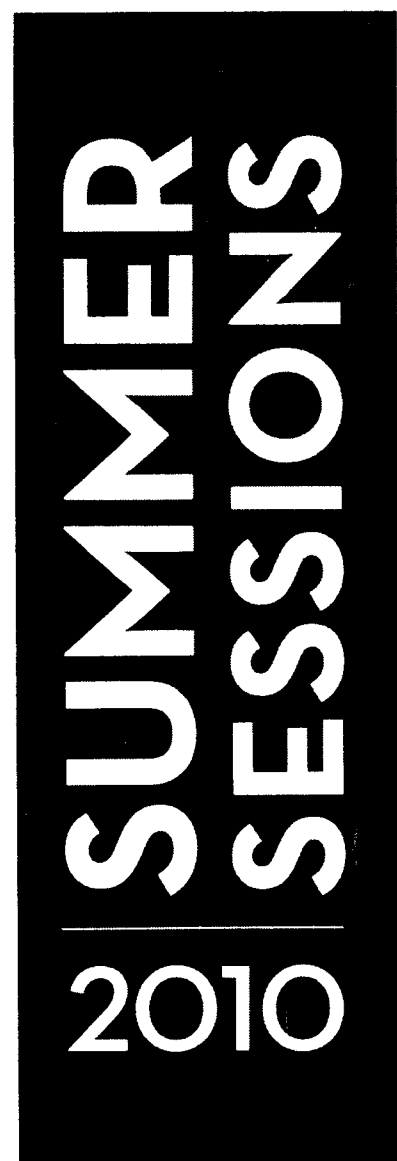
The legacy

Wettstone won his ninth and final national championship as a coach in 1976 and thought it'd be wise to retire on top. But more than that, he had many hobbies he had always wanted to do but could never find the time for: like learning to sail, bee keeping, making cider and collecting antiques. Recently, he purchased dance instructional videos and finally learned how to dance. Soon after he was teaching his fellow Foxdale residents how to dance, too.

But for Wettstone, it's always been about gymnastics. It was about having the right entrance march, the right music, the right closing ceremony and getting the audience to leave Rec Hall whistling the songs. It was about putting on a show and promoting the beauty of gymnastics, as well as educating the masses. And it was about making Penn State a national collegiate power and turning the United States into a factor in international gymnastics.

"I think that without the determination I never could have made it," Wettstone said. "But within me I had something that even myself I can't understand. I worked every day of the week, even Sundays. I never saw the Sunday afternoon sun in 39 years. I just wanted to give every ounce of effort to help these guys become student princes, just like Romberg's music."

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