



# Buffalo Tales



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e-mail: [bchs@bchs.us](mailto:bchs@bchs.us) website: [www.bchs.us](http://www.bchs.us)

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## **“It’s Fun to Run with the Champions” Track and Field at the University of Nebraska at Kearney By Jordan Kuck**

While researching and writing my upcoming book, *A Century of Sports at the University of Nebraska at Kearney*, (which I co-authored with Professor Mark Ellis) and will be available for purchase in September, many things have come to fruition. For example, I have come to realize just how dominant the Loper volleyball team has been since its inaugural season in 1968 and how powerful the Loper wrestlers have been since the late 1980s. And it was not until recently that I realized how talented Bart Kofoed was as a basketball player or how dominating Beth Stuart was in the shot and discus. But perhaps my most cogent discovery has been the success of the UNK track program. Whether as the Nebraska State Teacher’s College, Kearney State College, or the University of Nebraska at Kearney, track has always had a winning tradition.

The founding of the UNK track program can be traced back to 1911, when Coach George Van Buren organized the first team. Also implemented by Van Buren that year was the annual high school track invitational, a tradition that, impressively enough, is approaching its centennial anniversary. Due to the lack of a strong coaching personality and the financial shortcomings that resulted from the constraints of WWI, for a number of years the school had to suspend its track program. But with the arrival of Coach Fred Fulmer in 1922, track returned to campus and, truth be told, became the most successful of the Kearney sports programs. Racking up eight championships in a span of twelve years, the track team dominated the N.I.A.A. conference in the years before World War II. Originally strongest in the distance races – thanks to Frank Lydic and Orlie Watts – both of whom just missed qualifying for the Olympic Games in 1932 – the program later developed a dependence on their sprinters and field event stars. The 1932 and 1933 championship teams were led by sprinters Richard Lambert, a star hurdler and sprinter, and Harold Gall, anchor relay man and champion quarter-miler who broke the school record by running a 50.9. Big man Barney Fuller regularly placed in the shot put and discus.

The 1936 championship squad, as another example, was led by a trio of weight men. Leon Swiatoviak, who was sometimes called a “one man track team,” Barney Fuller, and John Marrow (who later played professional football) finished first, second, and third in the shot put at the conference meet. Byron Whipple continued his strong performance in the quarter mile, taking home his third straight conference title, and freshman Don Shue won the high hurdles in record time.

However, the strongest team of this period was the 1939 installment. The team was led by Melvin Rutan, an outstanding sprinter from Wilsonville, Nebraska. Rutan, who still holds some of the fastest times in school history, won

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## Director's Report

### Greetings!!

**Current Board Members:** The first bit of exciting news I want to fill you in on is a list of the current board member: President Dan Speirs of Kearney, Vice President Barb Riege of Kearney, treasurer John Shafer of Kearney, secretary Jan McGregor of Gibbon, Jim Cudaback of Riverdale, Gary Day of Odessa, Mark Ellis of Kearney, Janice Martin of Gibbon, Sharon Mason of Kearney, Lee Sanks of Kearney, Bob Stubblefield of Shelton, and Jolene Ward of Kearney.

The **22nd Annual Wagons West** was a hit. There was lots of music, demonstrations, old-fashioned games, and food. Everyone that attended had a wonderful time!!! The clothing display (NEW!!!) and quilt display will be up throughout July.

**Trivia Contest:** The first annual trivia contest will be held on Thursday, August 2nd, 2007 at 6 pm. All proceeds will go towards our building fund. **SIGN YOUR TEAM UP NOW!!!** You can choose up to 10 people to be on your team. In lieu of an entry fee, we are asking for a \$10 donation per person. There will be concessions and prizes. The top prize is \$200!!!! There is only enough room for 15 teams, so hurry and register today!! You absolutely do not want to miss out on this extremely fun event. To sign up, call Seth or Jennifer at 234-3041.

**20th Annual Christmas Tree Walk:** Is it too hot to be thinking about Christmas time?

We are already making arrangements for this year's 20th Annual Christmas Tree Walk. The theme will be "Nature's Wonderland." If there is a family or organization that would like to adopt the gazebo or train to decorate this year, just let me know!

I hope to see you all soon!

Sincerely, Jennifer

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the 100 yard dash at the very competitive Colorado Relays. Competing against runners from large universities, the relay team of Melvin Rutan, Carl Meyer, Dick Marrow, and Glen Bartunek placed only behind Kansas State in the 440 and 880 relays. With the efforts of Rutan and others, Kearney finished a respectable fourth place at the nationally renowned meet. But when it came to conference competition, Kearney was untouchable. Racking up a record 83 team points at the conference championship meet, the Antelopes more than doubled the 33.5 points earned by second place Peru. Rutan won conference championships in the 100 and 220 yard races, and ran the anchor leg for the 880 relay championship. Other notable stars on that team were champion half-miler, Barney Rapp, Ben Taylor, a standout in the high jump, and Don Patterson, who dominated the hurdle races.

World War II decimated the Kearney track program but with the hiring of Coach Charlie Foster in 1945, the Antelope winning tradition was reestablished. At the time perhaps no one would have guessed that Foster, who was known



more for his coaching efforts in football and basketball, would go on to build the Antelope track program into a national powerhouse. During his twenty plus years as the men's track coach, Foster won twenty conference track titles, including a record seventeen straight between 1954 and 1970. Coach Foster also produced a number of national champions during the 1950s and 1960s. Clayton Scott, a Grand Island native won the 2-mile national championship in 1954 and 1955; Merlin "Beanie" Lawrence, captured a national championship in the pole vault in 1960; Hylke Van der Wal, who transferred to Kearney to run for Coach Foster won the 1961 steeplechase national championship; Dennis "The Duke" Dukesherer, was a four-time All-American and the 1967 national champion in the pole vault; Jim Sobieszczyk, a two-time national champion in the high jump (1970 and 1971), was the first Nebraskan to clear seven feet; and the 1970 and 1971 two mile relay teams took home two indoor national championships.

Other All-Americans and Honorable Mention All-Americans under Coach Foster included, amongst others: Don Straney (440), Doyle Fyfe (discuss), Dale Falter (pole vault), LeRoy Sprague (discuss), Jim Jacobs (shot), Martin Mason (half mile and mile relay), Larry Snell (mile), Gary Schubert and Ray Mars (steeplechase), Phil Dean (mile), Gary Mason (javelin), Ron Wise (mile), Clarence Wiedel (steeplechase and mile relay), Bob Whitehouse and Jerry Stuckert (long jump), Fred Williams (pole vault), John Curtis (440 hurdles), Terry Reike (javelin), Dennis McGraw (high jump), Charlie Hircock (discuss), Randy Rasmussen (shot), and Jack Ehler and Steve Welch (pole vault).

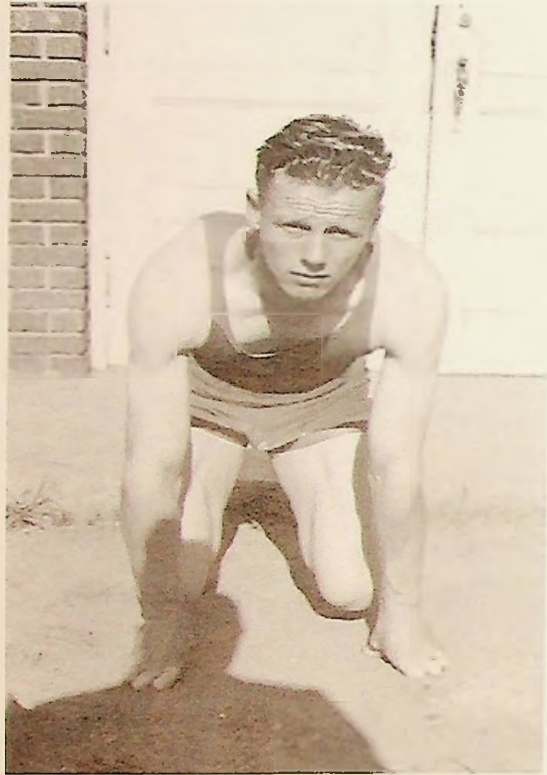
Without a doubt, Coach Foster's list of successes at Kearney is astounding. But he was more than just Kearney's coach; he was an ambassador of the sport. As an example, in 1964 he was honored with the responsibility of coaching seven



*Pictured here is one of Coach Fred Fulmer's track teams from the early 1930s. Frank Lydic (5th from left in first row) and Orlie Waits (2nd from left in second row) dominated the distance events. Both Lydic and Waits competed in the 1932 Olympic trials.*

Olympic athletes who competed on a seven meet tour through Norway, Sweden, and Britain. Also noteworthy was his innovative work in the area of jumping, as he was arguably the most influential person in lobbying for the introduction of triple jump in Nebraska, an event that he had instituted at the Kearney invitational years before it was in practice elsewhere. Coach Foster also served as a member of the NAIA track and field national rules committee. For his dedication to the sport, Foster was inducted into a number of halls of fame, including the NAIA Hall of Fame, Helms Foundation Hall of Fame in Track and Field, and the UNK Athletic Hall of Fame.

During Foster's time in Kearney, he "fostered" an innovative and winning attitude in regards to the sports programs, but most especially in terms of track. Just one example of this was his oft-quoted motto: "It's Fun to Run with the Champions." During Foster's era this phrase was plastered everywhere: on t-shirts, on track suits, on programs, it really became the mantra to which his men competed. Yet today, UNK track athletes must surely run to a different slogan. You see, despite the impressive history described above, despite the fact that the campus has been the host to nearly one hundred years of memorable high school invitationals, despite the fact that Kearney has produced so many national champions and All-Americans, and despite the fact that Coach Foster was almost certainly the most adored individual in the history of our storied athletic program, despite all this, UNK no longer has an outdoor track. The track that circled Foster Field since the early 1930s, the track where so many school records were established, the track where Coach Foster won so many conference championships, succumbed to campus improvements several years ago. Though I am not attuned with future plans (and I have heard musings that a plan is in the works), I had hoped that with the completion of Cope Stadium there would be a beautiful new track surrounding the much-improved Foster Field. It would indeed be fitting to esteem Coach Foster by encompassing the field named in his honor with a track, a development that would more astutely credit his career achievements as a coach. Thus, in closing, it is my sincere hope that this essay has highlighted the winning tradition of the Loper track team. Moreover, I hope this glance back at



*Melvin Rutan of Wilsonville, Nebraska was one of the fastest sprinters in school history. He led the 1939 track team to a conference championship.*



Loper track and field success might begin the efforts of raising the requisite public support and funding needed to build a proper outdoor track facility for such a storied program.



Pictured here is Coach Charlie Foster as he looks towards the finish line of the now defunct track that circled Foster Field for almost seventy years.

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Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

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**\*\*We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'**

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Buffalo County Historical Society  
Box 523 • Kearney, NE 68848-0523

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