

BSB Interview Issue: Karen Dennis Blazed Trails In Track And Field Career



This is an excerpt of a story from the July print edition of the Interview Issue at Buckeye Sports Bulletin. For four free issues of the print edition, no card required, sign up at the link here: <http://www.buckeyesports.com/subscribe-4issue-trial/>

For someone who originally didn't want to coach at the conclusion of her playing career, former Ohio State track and field and cross country program director Karen Dennis left an incredible legacy when she retired in 2022.

She coached international and Olympic teams, won 12 Big Ten Indoor and Outdoor team championships in her 20 seasons with the Buckeyes and developed eight Olympians and eight individual national champions.

Dennis started her career at her alma mater, Michigan State, where she served as an assistant for four seasons before becoming head coach of the Spartans from 1981-1992. After another 10 seasons as head coach at UNLV, Dennis took an assistant coaching job in Columbus in 2003, was promoted to be women's head coach in 2006 and then program director in 2014.

Following what she feels was one of her crowning achievements in 2022 - winning both the men's and women's Big Ten Outdoor Championship - she decided to call it a career. It was the first time Ohio State had won both, and the first time a Big Ten team had done it in 25 years.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin spoke with Dennis about her expansive coaching career, touching on her time at several different programs and how she has seen the sport develop over the year. Here is a sampling of those questions:

BSB: How is coaching a sport like track and field, where people participate in different events, different from a sport like football or basketball where everyone is competing

together?

Dennis: "Track is an individual sport. So, what happens with track - I have a personal philosophy and I probably acquired it from Dr. (Nell) Jackson - it's important to me that every person, and at the time more so women because that's who I was coaching, women had the opportunity to pursue the degree of their choice. When you have a team sport like basketball, everybody has to practice at the same time in order to learn the plays, build chemistry with everyone you're playing with.

"With track and field, the good news is that, let's say you have students - and I have had students that wanted to go into nursing or wanted to go into science or architecture, and their rotations or projects were during my practice time. All of my coaches have always known that we will change the practice time for an individual who has to be at a lab or has to be at something associated with their academic degree program. I'm not going to tell this kid you can't be a nurse or you can't be an architect or you can't be an engineer because you've got to come to track practice. That's a philosophy I could never subscribe to."

BSB: What attracted you to Ohio State when you were first offered an assistant coaching position in 2002?

Dennis: "I had been at UNLV, and it was time for my contract to be renewed. The athletic director at UNLV told me that they weren't renewing my contract. I couldn't understand, because I'd just come off the Olympics and I'd had my best recruiting class. We did well. I've got (kids) academically that are doing well.

"But what I've learned is that new athletic directors come in, they come in wanting to bring their own people. And that's what happened. And I knew the person that succeeded me, I knew who the person was going to be. I just knew.

"So it's funny, when that door closed, (Ohio State track and field coach) Russ Rogers called within a week. I was at home and he called and said that his longtime assistant had left and was going somewhere else, and asked if I would come to Ohio State to help him with his program. I thought it was perfect. I said sure.

"First of all, it gave me the opportunity to coach men as well as women. Previously, I had only coached women. So it was just timing. The universe, the stars all aligned in the right place. So I came to Ohio State as an assistant coach for men and women. And I could see that the landscape of track and field was changing to where men's and women's programs were becoming combined, and if I was ever going to have a shot in a leadership position at a combined program, I needed to have some experience coaching men."

The full interview with Dennis can be seen in the July print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, available to subscribers. Subscribe at this link to receive immediate online access, or call 614-486-2202 to subscribe and receive online access, and ask about receiving our July interview issue.