



Jim Gehrdes (left) was part of a rich track era at Altoona High School and then Penn State.

Gehrdes was always on right track

By Michael V. Emery

Although he's a mere civilian, and has been for the 38 years he's been at the United States Naval Academy, there's something about military life that agrees with Jim Gehrdes.

Why else would he call it "the greatest life in the world?"

"Maybe it's just that I've got the Academy in my blood," Gehrdes said recently. "I've been here so long that I just consider it home. I never saw a reason to leave."

Holding the rank of Deputy Physical Education Officer, along with being the Navy's head track coach for over 30 years, also played a part in Gehrdes' view of the Academy.

"I was in the ideal situation," Gehrdes said. "My job allowed me to remain involved in athletics, and to remain particularly close to track and field, which is something I've always loved."

Gehrdes left Altoona for Annapolis in the fall of 1951 to become an assistant track coach and assistant professor of physical education after an outstanding track

career, in which he earned world class recognition.

The move to the Naval Academy was a permanent one.

Even in retirement — he stepped down from his post in the physical education department two years ago — Gehrdes and Delora, his wife of 37 years, plan to continue residing in their Annapolis home and stay close to the Naval life.

"I've always felt comfortable at the Academy," Gehrdes said. "The people here are the greatest people in the world. They're quality people."

The homey atmosphere the Academy offers Gehrdes and his desire to stay close to that environment is similar to a situation he knew earlier in his life.

"There are similarities, I guess. I went to Drake University and ran track there for one year, but it was just too far from home," Gehrdes explained. "I transferred to Penn State to get back closer to home and to be around the people I knew and grew up with and loved. I liked that comfortable setting."

Gehrdes' oldest son, David (36), is a well-known wrestling and soccer coach at the local high school in Annapolis, which adds to Jim's enjoyment of the area.

"I've pretty much settled into this life," said the 63-year-old Gehrdes. "My wife and I are happy, my oldest boy is close by..."

And it seems all hurdles of any sort are just a part of Gehrdes' past.

In his heyday at Altoona High School and on the collegiate level at Penn State, Gehrdes was one of the premier hurdlers in the country.

Gehrdes earned All-American status in the 200-yard hurdles his final year of high school in 1943. He was also the PIAA state champion in both the high and low hurdles, setting a record in the highs.

"High school track at Altoona was very big back then, which made the recognition (I received) all the more exciting," Gehrdes said. "Being a high school All-American was very good for the ego I can tell you."

After a stint in the Army interrupted his track career, Gehrdes entered Drake Uni-

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versity in Des Moines, Iowa. He remained there for one year before homesickness brought him to Penn State.

At Penn State, Gehrdes continued his timber-topping exploits, setting school records in the 120-yard high hurdles (14.2) and the low hurdles (22.7). He also held the intercollegiate AAAA mark of 7.2 seconds in the 60-yard highs.

Included among his many tournament and invitational victories was a first-place finish and record-setting time of 14.3 seconds in the 120-yard high hurdles at the prestigious Penn Relays in Philadelphia.

Gehrdes was also a second-place finisher in the NCAA championships and National AAU championships.

Gehrdes calls his first victory over Harrison Dillard of Baldwin Wallace College, who was the No. 1 hurdler in the world at the time, as one of the greatest thrills in his athletic career.

Gehrdes was the first and only collegian hurdler to ever beat Dillard and came back on another occasion to defeat him a second time.

"Of course that was a real thrill, because nobody ever beat Dillard," Gehrdes said. "It was a big topic in the track world when Dillard lost."

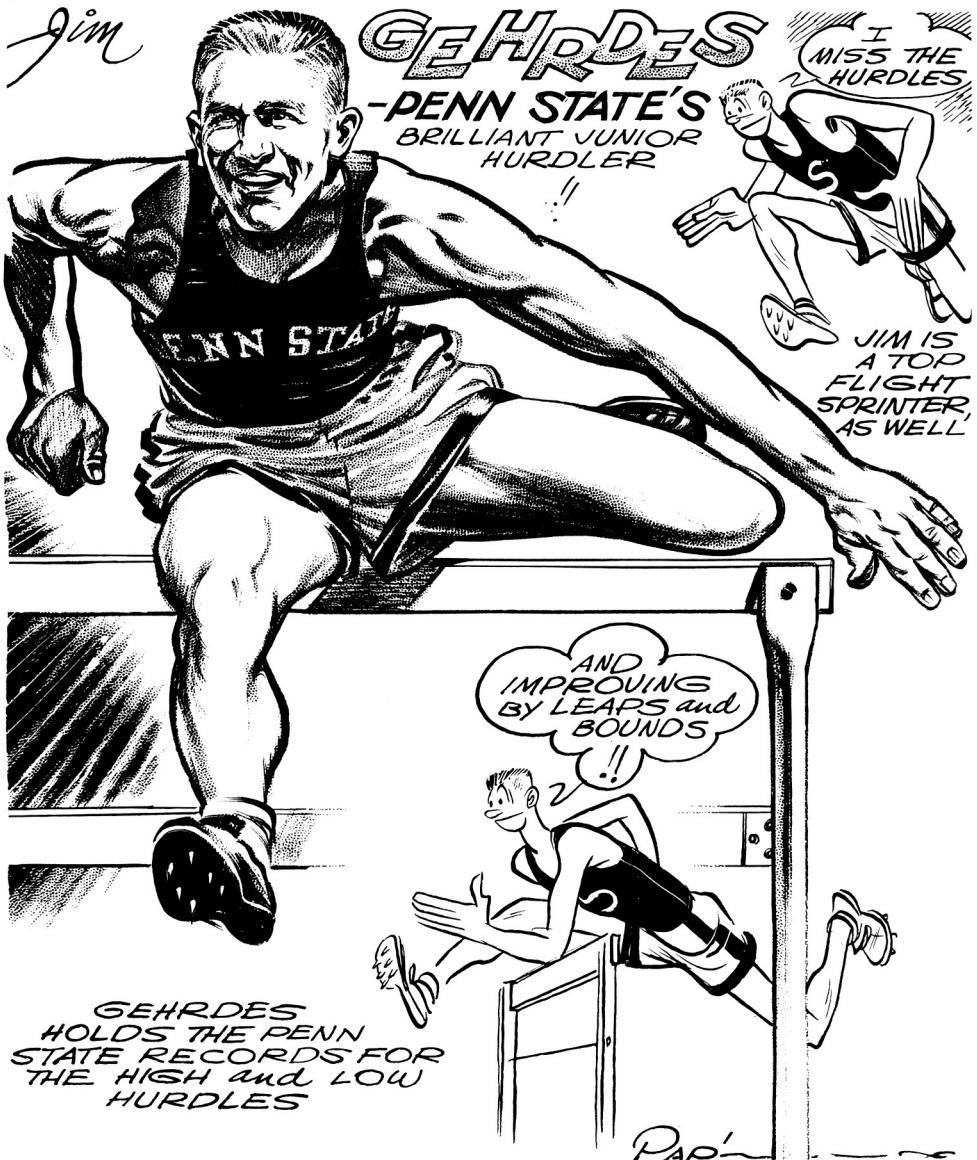
Gehrdes continued his track career after graduating from Penn State, when he started a teaching career at Roosevelt Junior High School.

In fact, Gehrdes was granted a leave of absence from Roosevelt to accept an invitation to compete in several international track meets overseas, including in New Zealand, Cuba, Norway, and England.

"Traveling abroad like that was a wonderful experience and it was quite an honor because of the distinguished meets we participated in," Gehrdes said. "It's funny how far track took me and all the doors it opened up."

Upon returning to Altoona and his teaching position at Roosevelt, Gehrdes was notified of the opening for an assistant track coach at Navy.

"I jumped at the chance," Gehrdes said. "My running career was over and the Navy job was the perfect opportunity."



Thirty-eight years later, Gehrdes is more convinced than ever that it was, indeed, "the right choice."

Gehrdes called being elected to the Hall of Fame "a great honor."

"I was amazed because it's been a long, long time since I graduated from Altoona High," he said. "I guess some of the things

that I've done to that point also contributed. Being honored by your hometown is certainly one of the best things that can happen to a person.

"I'm looking forward to it. I haven't been back to Altoona in quite a number of years, and it will be very interesting to see some old friends."