

Soccer team on the rise thanks to veteran leader

THE SOPHOMORE striker helps lead NU's leap to No. 12 ranking.

By VINCE D'ADAMO
Staff Reporter

Sophomore striker Kristen Gay has been a vital cog in the Nebraska soccer team's rise to a No. 12 ranking in the latest USA Today/Coaches Poll.

The Cornhuskers biggest victory was a 3-1 win over sixth-ranked Duke Sunday in Raleigh, N.C.

Gay scored eight goals in 18 games last season. She has already scored four in 3-0 Nebraska's first three games this season.

Known as Cricket by her by teammates and coaches, Gay has improved her quickness to compliment her instincts and intelligence, NU Coach John Walker said.

"She's done really well," Walker said. "She's more experienced and very skilled. Also, she's very versatile because we can play her as a striker and as a midfielder."

Walker has raved about his team this season, saying the Huskers can play as many as 15 players without a drop off in talent.

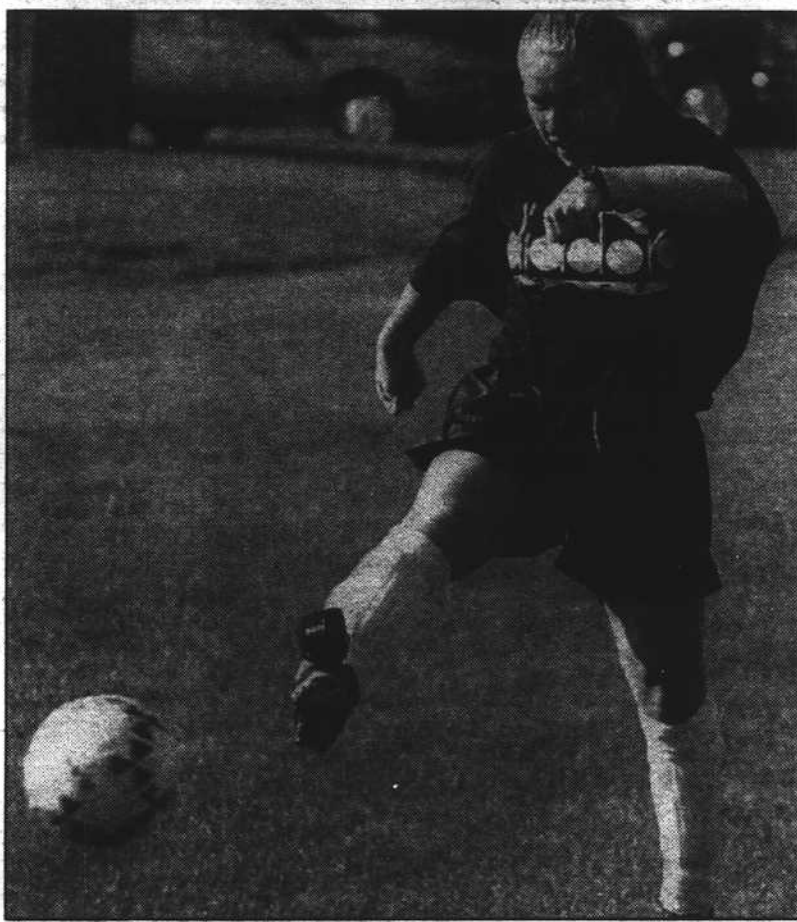
Being surrounded by quality players helps Gay perform at a high level, she said.

"It's a team thing, not just me individually," Gay said. "It's been mostly my team that's been helping me out."

Walker agreed. "It helps a lot, because if you've only got a couple good players, you're going to struggle," Walker said.

Gay, a 5-6 sophomore from Garland, Texas, is no stranger to winning. She served as a co-captain of the Dallas Sting, one of the nation's top club programs.

In 1994, Gay helped the Sting un-



MATTHEW WAITE/DN

CO-CAPTAIN Kristen Gay has scored four goals in the Nebraska soccer team's three wins this season. Nebraska's 3-1 win over Duke propelled the Huskers to a No. 12-rating in the latest poll.

der-17 team to the state and Region III championships and a fourth place finish at nationals. In 1989 and 1990, Gay helped the under-14 team win consecutive state and Region III titles.

"I just want to come out and lead by my actions," Gay said. "It helps a lot having the great players. It makes you play better and compete harder. As

a team, we wanted to get up in the top 20."

Gay said the Huskers intend to stay among the nation's elite.

"We just have to compete with the intensity we do every practice, and everything we do in practice carries over to the games," Gay said. "If we keep that high intensity we should be OK."

NU volleyball team's 5-1 start satisfies Pettit, Husker players

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wouldn't be competitive in," he said. "If we continue, we are going to be a very good volleyball team. And very good volleyball teams compete for national championships."

The fourth-ranked Cornhuskers (5-1) return to the road this weekend, traveling to North Carolina to play the Tar Heels on Friday and Duke Saturday.

"It's a great start," the 20th-year coach said. "We are right where we want to be."

NU has been solid on defense. The Huskers average 19 digs per game and 3.7 blocks per game. Nebraska has 27 solo blocks — nine by Megan Korver and eight by Tonia Tauke — compared to only 10 by its opponents.

And while the Huskers are hitting just .224, they have held opponents to a percentage of .162.

Maria Hedbeck, one of two seniors on the team, has been a major reason

the shining defense, Pettit said.

Hedbeck has shown initiative in sharing information on the court, he said, and she has spent time teaching defensive techniques to the younger players.

Despite returning only two starters from last year's team, sophomore Jaime Kronzak said the Huskers are playing much better now than they were at the start of the season.

"I think we are farther along," Kronzak said. "I didn't think passing and defense would go so well at the beginning, but it has. The offense will take care of itself in the next couple of weeks."

Things aren't entirely bad offensively, however.

Nebraska is averaging 16.8 kills per game and the Huskers have committed 41 fewer hitting errors than their opponents.

The mistakes of NU's opponents have played crucial roles in several

Husker wins.

In game five against Brigham Young, the Cougars made six errors leading to Nebraska points. In Friday night's match against Michigan State, the Spartans committed nine errors in the deciding fifth game. In the rematch Saturday, Michigan State committed 29 hitting errors and 13 service errors in only three games.

At this point in the season, Pettit said, he is pleasantly surprised with the Huskers' record. But nothing is coming easy this year, unlike a year ago, when Nebraska swept 22 of its first 23 opponents.

"We haven't played a match yet that the other team wasn't a good team and couldn't have won."

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