

Any Fort in a storm

by Bart Becker

Jerrell Fort has taken a big step right in stride. A year ago he was shooting baskets for Hales Franciscan High School in Chicago. Tomorrow afternoon he'll step out onto the court representing the University of Nebraska.

Fort is one of only four freshmen starting regularly on a Big Eight basketball squad.

Fort figured all along he could do the job in the college game.

"I got into the game early in the season," he said. "I knew that if I got some playing time my play would get better."

"I did some things in high school I'm not doing now," he admitted. "I take a lot better percentage shots now. The game is definitely rougher than high school. But it's not as quick."

Fort attributes the quickness of high school games to the lack of big men on high school teams.

"In high school you've got more little guys playing. So the game is naturally faster. But here it gets a little slower."

Coach Joe Cipriano has indicated some surprise that freshmen have been playing as well as they have.

"I'm surprised a little bit," said Cipriano. "I think we put a stigma on the ability of sophomores and freshmen to handle the job. The ones who can do it are the ones who play a lot of basketball."

Fort has played plenty of basketball. "I played in the summer leagues," he said. "It's rugged. It's just like the pros."

The summer leagues are two times tougher than this."

Fort, who had worked with youngsters in a Recreation League Program in Chicago, said the summer leagues are frequented by college and pro players. He mentioned that he had played against Cliff Meeley, a former standout at Colorado.

Fort was captain on his high school team at Hales Franciscan High School in Chicago. There he averaged 19 points, eight rebounds and six assists per game. For his efforts he was given an All-Catholic League honor and honorable mention All State.

At Nebraska he has performed equally well and has already made a favorable impression on Husker fans.

Through 14 games he has pumped through 191 points, only two less than team leader Lee Harris. His high game output was 27 against Kansas.

The only Big Eight freshman scoring more than Fort is Oklahoma freshman Alvan Adams, who was leading the league in scoring, rebounding and field goal percentage.

Fort said he hasn't yet felt any extra defensive pressure from opposing teams. If and when they begin to give him extra attention, he is prepared.

"I figure like this," he said. "They'll cut me down, but when they do I'm ready."

"If they start watching me too close, or dropping a double team on me, then I can just pass to the open man," he said. "Then I become another threat."

Fort thinks the Nebraska team will improve. He came here because he felt he'd have a chance to play. He's getting that chance and is optimistic.

"We'll end up doing better. We'll progress," he said. "We've got a relatively small team so we have to have that controlled fast break. I think we're only about two players away from having a real good team here."

Fort also believes the Big Eight is a good league to play in.

"Anybody can win. I like to upset teams," he said. "In this league you've got some good players and you can get some recognition."

"But I came here because I thought I'd have a chance to play. That's why I chose the place."

The 6-3 Husker said he thinks the rule which allows freshmen to compete in varsity athletics is a good one. It will give him the chance to get more mileage out of his college career.

Another major change for Fort was moving from an all black high school team to Nebraska, where the black student population is small.

"On the court you just play as a team," he said. "You do the best you can and it doesn't make any difference who's out there if they can play the game."

"I felt kind of odd when I first came here. But I think it was the whole thing of readjusting to another place and being away from home."

"Now I feel right in place. Right in place."



photos by Gail Folda

