

Huskers' 6th place showing better than expected, Cip says

By Dave McBride

"We're getting into almost a completely different season now," Husker basketball coach Joe Cipriano said as his team headed into its Big 8 schedule.

"It's been a little bit up and down so far this year, but we've given a lot of freshmen some experience. We're definitely a better team than last year."

Cipriano's youthful Huskers were 7-5 as they began their regular Big 8 conference schedule Saturday night at Kansas.

The Christmas vacation schedule brought a sixth place finish in the annual Big 8 holiday tournament in Kansas City and a 66-58 loss at Wichita State in their final contest before the conference opener.

"I think we had a better showing in Kansas City than I expected," Cipriano said. "I thought we played with a lot of enthusiasm, and we improved with every game in the tournament, and with the exception of a bad 20 minutes, we could have easily won two games."

The Huskers faced defending Big 8 champ Kansas State in the opening round and suffered through a disastrous first half that put them out of the game early.

After trailing only 21-18 late in the half, the Huskers gave up 16 straight points to the Wildcats and managed only three more points of their own before intermission. Their offensive output in the eventual 68-47 loss was the lowest of the year.

Nebraska came back the next afternoon to beat Oklahoma State 69-62 in a loser's bracket contest with sophomore guard Jerry Fort leading the way with 31 points and eight rebounds. The Huskers, who are connecting on only 41 per cent of their field goal attempts for the season, shot a season-best 50 per cent with 29 of 58 against the Cowboys.

The bad 20 minutes Cipriano spoke of was the second half of the final round consolation game with Kansas.

The Huskers led at halftime, but Kansas rallied behind forward Roger Morningstar's 28 points and a 53 per cent field goal shooting.

Combined with a defensive change, that gave the Jayhawks a 75-66 win.

"We've been having problems with a zone defense this year, and it's bothering us a little," Cipriano said. "We haven't been able to handle changing defenses, either. Kansas started out with a man-to-man in the first half in the tournament, and we scored 40 points on them. They came out in the second half with a zone, and our kids just couldn't adjust."

"It looks like we may be in a situation where we have to go with one group of players against a man-to-man and a different group against a zone, and that's not good for us."

The sophomore backcourt combination of Fort and Ricky Marsh, along with junior forward Steve Erwin, were the only Huskers to start each of the first 12 games. The other two starting spots had been rotated between senior Brendy Lee and freshmen Ron Taylor, Rickey Harris and Mark Enright.

Cipriano said he was generally pleased with the progress his squad has made and pointed particularly to the play of Taylor and freshman Bob Siegel.

Taylor scored 21 points and grabbed 17 rebounds in a 73-55 win over Northern Iowa just before the holiday break, then came back

With a team-leading 23 points in the tournament loss to Kansas.

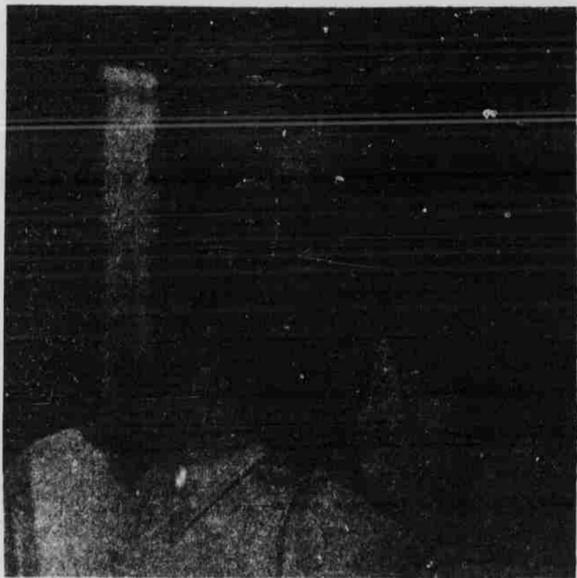
Taylor was averaging 10.9 points per game heading into the conference season, second only to Fort's 18.1 average, and was the team's leading rebounder.

Siegel, Cipriano said, "has been really coming on. He's started to lose some weight and looks like he could be one to really help us, and I'm glad to see that."

The former Fairbury High School star had appeared in eight games, scoring nine points and grabbing 10 rebounds, at the end of the vacation schedule.

After seeing the conference teams in Kansas City, Cipriano said he foresees a five- or possibly six- team race for the Big 8 title.

He said he feels Kansas State, Kansas and Colorado have the best chance for the league crown.



Coach Joe Cipriano

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