

Huskers reach Big 8 heights despite early league predictions

Before the start of this year's Big 8 basketball season, conference coaches were asked to predict the final league standings. UNL was picked seventh in that poll. Then, after the Big 8 tournament in December, a poll was taken of league sports writers. The Huskers were again picked seventh.

Now, at the end of the season, one can look at the final standings. Lo and behold, the Huskers are in the lofty reaches of the upper division. They edged into fourth place with a 7-7 record and defeated nationally ranked Kansas State University (KSU) along the way.

What are the reasons for the unpredicted rise to prominence?

dennis onnen press box review

"They really molded together as a team in January, February and March," Husker Coach Joe Cipriano said. He also mentioned the effective Husker defense, which he called the best in the conference. During a 3-game stretch at the end of the year, Kansas University (KU), and Colorado University were held to their lowest season point totals by the Huskers.

For the second year in a row, the Huskers were led in scoring by sophomore Jerry Fort, who averaged 18 points a game. He set several records along the way, including sophomore marks for field goals, field goals attempted, points and best average. In the midst of a 33-point outburst against Missouri University, he set a Husker record by sinking 15 field goals.

The only other Husker to break a record was Rickey Harris, who grabbed 116 rebounds to overtake Fort's freshman mark of 106.

Fort's season total of 468 points was the fifth highest in Husker history, and it moved him into 10th place on the career scoring list.

Although Fort was the only player to average in double figures, Cipriano was quick to point out the contributions of other players. Replacing senior starters Brendy Lee and Tom Novak next year is one of his main concerns.

"We're going to have to replace the two seniors and develop more offensive punch," he said.

Sophomore Ricky Marsh and junior Kent Rackewey will be among those battling for Novak's guard spot. Freshmen Harris and Bob Siegel are prime contenders for the forward position vacated by Lee. Besides Fort, frontliners Larry Cox and Steve Erwin are returning starters. However, their spots aren't assured.

"There's plenty of competition," Cipriano said. "Nobody has a spot."

One of the promising aspects for increased offensive output is the fact that the six top scorers are returning next year.

Individual department leaders were fairly well distributed among the Huskers this year. Lee gathered 197 rebounds to lead in that category for the second straight season. Cox and Erwin had outstanding 57.9 field goal and 88.6 free throw percentages respectively, but neither had enough attempts to qualify for records. Marsh led in assists with 77.

The Huskers ended with a winning record at 14-12, but that mark was padded by early season victories over such nonentities as the University of Minnesota Duluth, MacMurray College and Northern Iowa University. Their record was hurt when they had to face both KU and KSU, the top two finishers in the Big 8 tournament league race.

Before the season began, there were rumors of a Husker starting lineup consisting of three freshmen and two sophomores. It turned out almost like that in the first game when a junior, two sophomores and two freshmen took the floor.

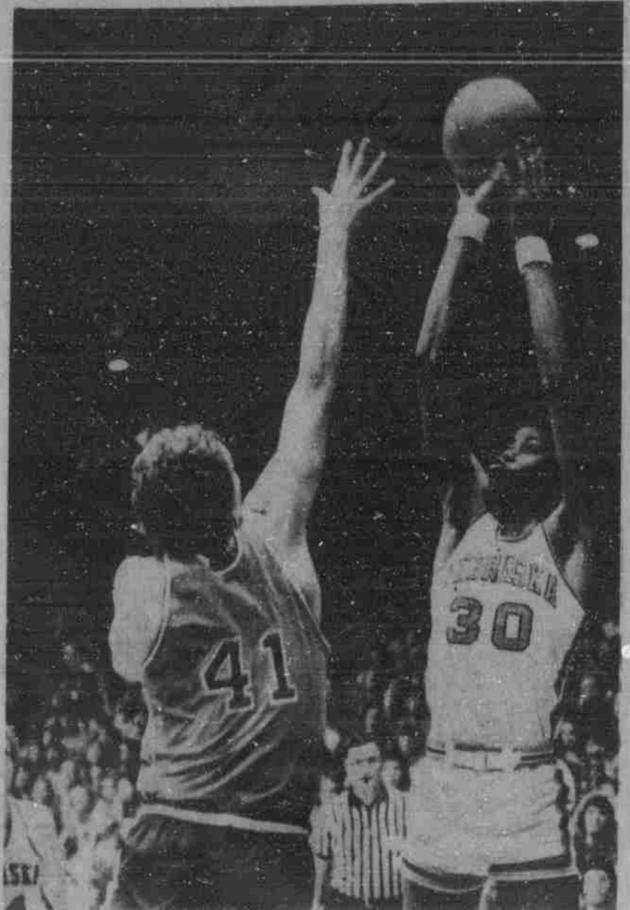
However, the freshmen's inexperience showed in the early part of the season, and by the beginning of the Big 8 race, veterans Lee and Novak had earned starting spots to help stabilize the Huskers.

One of the signs of a young team is its relative inability to win on the road, and that was certainly a distinguishing characteristic of this year's squad. The Huskers were stellar at home with an 11-2 mark, but on the road they could manage only a 3-10 record.

However, flashes of maturity were exhibited, such as the late season win over KSU in Manhattan, breaking the Wildcats' 21-game home winning streak.

Increased maturity will be instrumental to the Huskers' success next year, according to Cipriano. He is hopeful experience gained this year and early next year will have helped in that regard by the time the Big 8 grind rolls around.

Judging from the late season surge and 13 returners, Husker prospects should be the brightest in years.



Forward Rickey Harris, here shooting over Kansas State University's Larry Williams in a Jan. 22 game, set a season record for rebounds by a freshman.



Jerry Fort, here putting in two points against the University of Oklahoma, set a season scoring mark for sophomores.

sports shorts

V gh-ins for intramural wrestling will be at the Fieldhouse between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. today. Competition begins Monday.

The National Rifle Assoc. Collegiate Smallbore Rifle Sectional Match will be hosted by the UNL Rifle Club March 15-17 at the Military and Naval Science Bldg.

The UNL Soccer Club will travel to Concordia College Saturday for a 2 p.m. match. The Omaha Huskers meet UNL Sunday at 2 p.m. in a contest at Memorial Stadium.

Last weekend Matt Kush and Mark Stromberg, varsity oarsmen on the UNL Rowing Team, traveled to the University of Wisconsin to participate in the U.S. National Rowing Team Program. Both oarsmen are working towards for a position on the national rowing team, which will represent the United States at the World Championships in Lucerne, Switzerland, this August.

This Friday----- March 15th

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