

Cornhuskers again headed to Final Four

By John Adkisson
Staff Reporter

After mounting two huge rallies Saturday night, Nebraska's volleyball team made its most important comeback of the season — to the NCAA Final Four.

The Cornhuskers stormed back from deficits in the first two games and went on to a 15-12, 16-14, 10-15, 15-5 victory over Penn State to win the Midwest Regional and advance to the Final Four for the third time in five years.

Nebraska will now face Pacific Thursday in a national semifinal at College Park, Md. The winner of that match will play for the championship Saturday.

Nebraska coach Terry Pettit, whose team improved to 32-2, said the win over previously undefeated Penn State was a great match between two great teams.

"I think maybe that was as good an athletic event as Nebraska volleyball has put on," Pettit said.

The challenge of hitting against Penn State — Pettit called the Lady Lions "the best defensive team in the country" — gave the Huskers problems early, as they fell behind 12-4 in the first game.

But then the Huskers broke loose and rallied in front of a near-capacity crowd of 3,874. Freshman Nikki Stricker served five consecutive points to close the gap to 12-8, and after a side out, three consecutive Janet Kruse kills gave Nebraska a 13-12 lead. It's lead increased to 14-12, and a Kruse smash off of a Penn State block won the first game and sent the home fans into a frenzy. Kruse finished the match with a team-high 19 kills.

"I think we focused point to point rather than looking at how much we needed to make up," said Husker setter Val Novak, who had 48 set assists. "We just wanted to work through each point."

Nebraska again needed to rally in the second game, falling behind by scores of 10-5 and 11-8. But after a tip by Stephanie Thater returned the serve to Nebraska, senior Becki Bolli served four consecutive points to give the Huskers a lead they would never lose.

With the second game tied at 14, a hitting error by Penn State's JoAnn Elwell gave the Huskers a one-point lead. On the next point, two Nebraska players appeared to trap the ball near the net. But no call was made, and sophomore Eileen Shannon pounded down a spike to give the Huskers a 16-14 second-game win.

Penn State coach Russ Rose disputed the

call.

"The ball came to a visible rest," Rose said. "It was an awfully hard way to lose a game when you're on the road in front of a big crowd."

If Penn State was shaken by the loss of the second game, it didn't show in the third. The Lady Lions raced to a 5-0 lead and never looked back, winning 15-10.

But Nebraska put the Lady Lions away in the fourth game, with Stricker's serving. After Penn State cut a Nebraska lead to 6-5, Stricker finished the match by reeling off nine consecutive points on her serve. Leading 14-5, a kill attempt by Elwell sailed over the baseline and gave the Huskers the victory.

Pettit said he was pleased with the play of Stricker, who served 25 of Nebraska's 56 points without an error.

"I thought she played a very good match all the way around," Pettit said. "She's like everybody else, she's pretty tough."

He said that although the Huskers played well offensively, the key to the game was exceptional play by the defense, which posted 14 more digs than the Lady Lions.

"The challenge was for us to raise the things we're good at to exceptional, and I thought that's what we did," Pettit said. "We raised our defense."

Rose, whose team fell to 44-1 with the loss, agreed.

"Nebraska's defense was the reason we lost," Rose said. "Tonight, they covered the whole court better than I've ever seen a Nebraska team do. That's a tribute to the coaches and the players that they're playing the whole game as well as they are right now."

Pettit also took time to express appreciation to the Nebraska crowd.

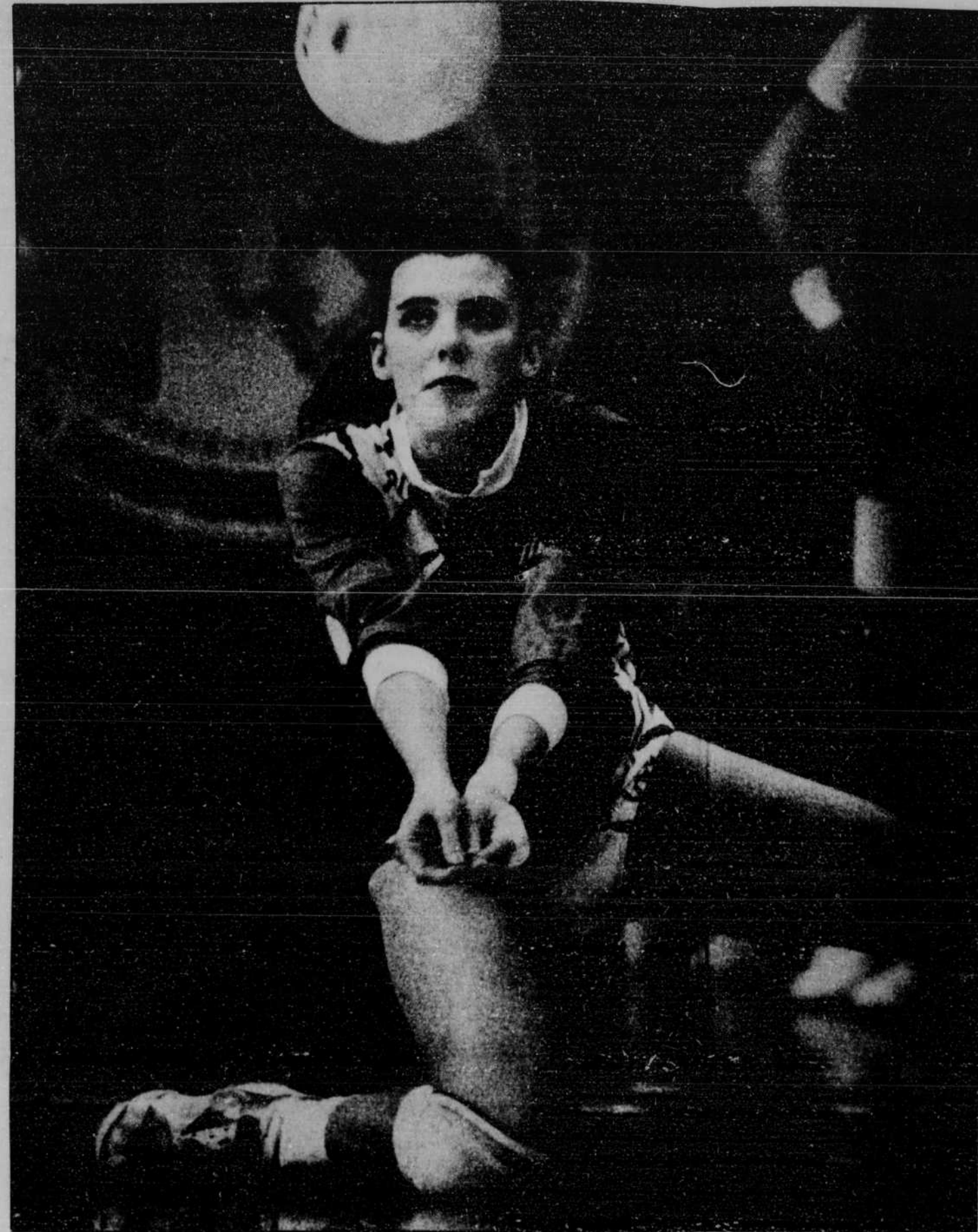
"I want to thank the fans for not just their support tonight, but for their support throughout the year," he said. "They certainly did a good job tonight."

Despite winning the regional, Novak said, there still is work to be done.

"We're taking it one match at a time," she said. "That's been our outlook and that will be our outlook."

Pettit said his team still has something to prove, especially following Nebraska's two Final Four losses in 1986 and 1989, where they were swept in the championship match both times.

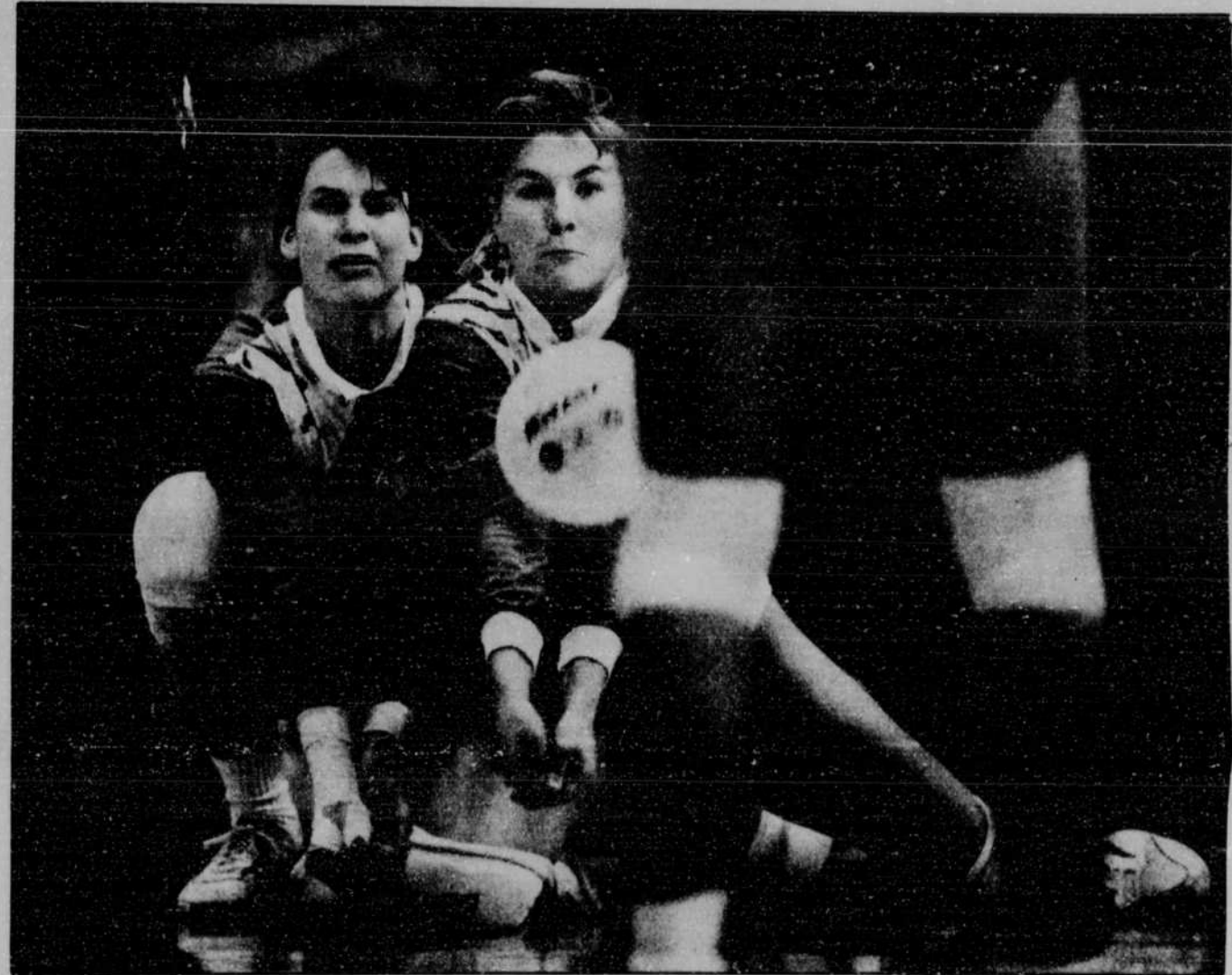
"We haven't accomplished anything that several other good Nebraska teams haven't done," Pettit said.



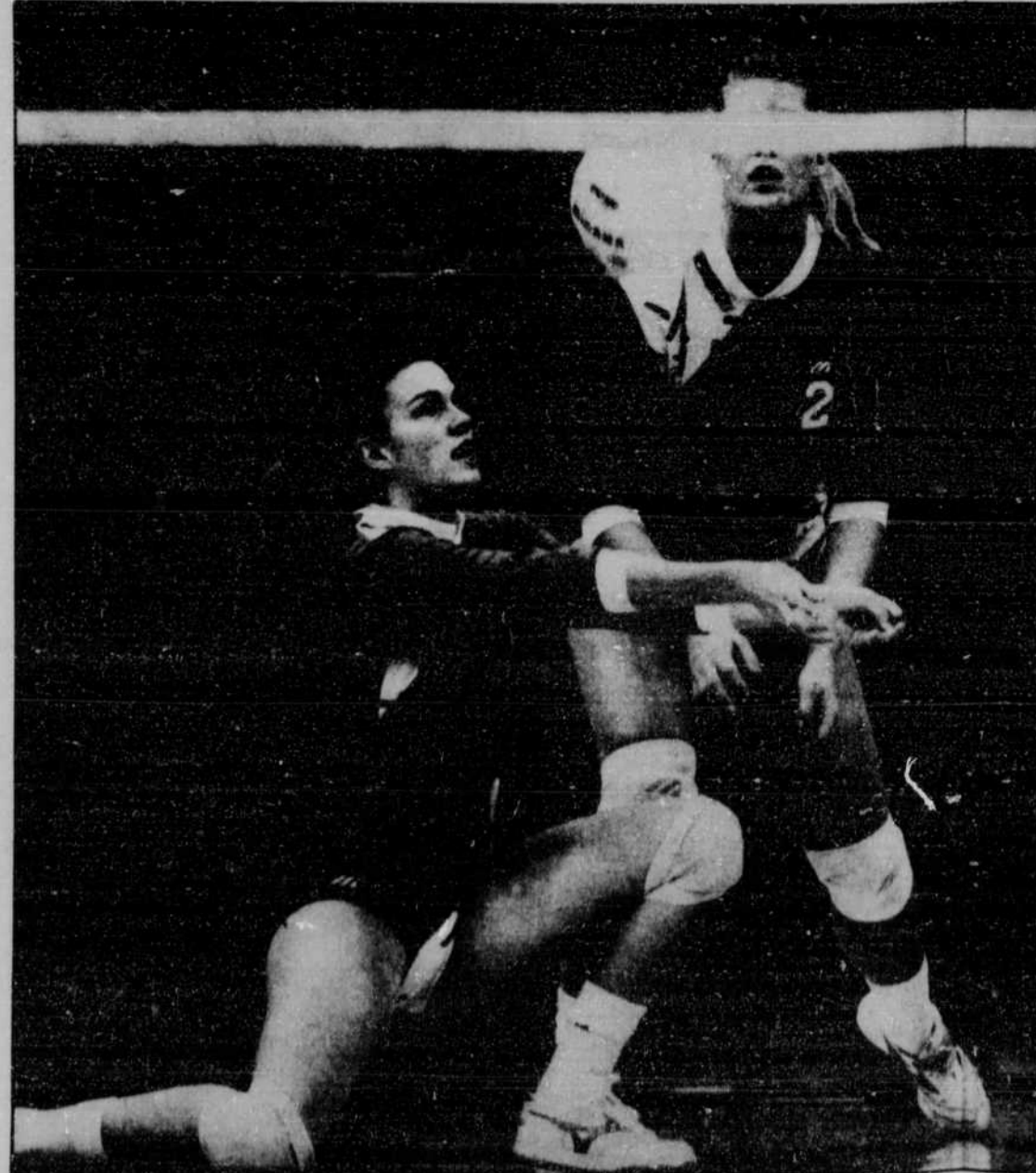
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Penn State coach, players impressed with Nebraska

By Chris Hopfensperger
Senior Reporter

Penn State has now lost seven games and one match.

Saturday night was the first time the Lady Lions lost more than one game in a match all season, and only the fifth time they had to play more than three games to win.

The big difference: This time, they lost.

Nebraska ended Penn State's season Saturday night by beating the previously undefeated Lady Lions 15-12, 16-14, 15-10, 15-5 in front of a rocking, sold-out NU Coliseum.

After the match, Penn State grappled with the idea that the drive for the national title was over.

"I'm disappointed, of course, that we didn't play better," Penn State

coach Russ Rose said. "I'm not disappointed that we made it to the finals of the regional championship and lost to a fine Nebraska team."

"They certainly did what they needed to do against us."

What the Cornhuskers did was shut down the Lady Lions' offense by dismantling the machine-like precision of setter Michelle Jaworski.

The Huskers' ability to serve the ball short kept Jaworski off the net and allowed Nebraska to establish an effective blocking game, Rose said.

Nebraska also played tremendous defense, Rose said, consistently digging the Lady Lions' attacks.

"We had an opportunity to win the match and we didn't get the job done," he said. "And the reason we didn't get the job done was because Nebraska

played better defense than we did."

There was no argument from Penn State middle blocker JoAnn Elwell. "It seemed like every time I went up and swung at the ball, there was someone there to dig it," she said. "It got very frustrating."

Penn State was held to 49 kills and a .092 hitting percentage, while Nebraska rammed the ball back at the Lady Lions 64 times.

Rose was disappointed that his team surrendered the fourth game. The Huskers turned a 6-4 lead into a 15-5 rout, as freshman Nikki Stricker rattled off nine straight service points.

"Other than the last seven or eight points of the fourth game, I thought we were always in the match," he said. "I was disappointed that we kind of folded the tent at the end."

Clockwise from top left:
Nebraska's Eileen Shannon prepares to bump the ball against Pittsburgh Friday night.
All-American Janet Kruse slams a kill Saturday night over Penn State blockers. Noelle Zientara (21) and JoAnne Elwell (14).
Nebraska's Becki Bolli bumps the ball and Chris Hall moves in support during Friday night's game.
Nebraska coach Terry Pettit makes his own call Saturday night.
All-American Val Novak keeps the ball in play while Stephanie Thater moves in to back her up Friday night.