

VOLLEYBALL 1992



Jeff Haller/DN

Nebraska middle blocker Stephanie Thater was named Big Eight Player-of-the-Year last season, and she will try to lead the Cornhuskers to their 17th straight conference title this season. Thater, a senior from Union, Mo., led the team with a .353 hitting percentage last year.

Volleyball leader emerges

All-American senior has experience to head this year's team

By John Adkisson
Senior Editor

Stephanie Thater sat in the stands at last year's NCAA volleyball Final Four, absorbing the fact that she wasn't playing.

She could only watch as Ohio State — the team that had ended Nebraska's season in the Midwest Regional final just a week before — got hammered by eventual national champion UCLA.

"People were coming up to me and asking me why I wasn't out there, how Ohio State could have beaten us," she said. "I really didn't have an answer."

Thater, an All-American middle blocker from Union, Mo., who is entering her senior season at Nebraska, had the answer to just about every other question that opponents threw at the Cornhuskers last year.

She racked up huge numbers and led her team in almost every category: 426 kills, a .353 hitting percentage, 28 solo blocks and 157 blocking assists. Add to that the title "Big Eight Player-of-the-Year," and it was an incredible season for Thater, right?

Almost. "Some people say we needed the Ohio State match because we needed to lose or because we didn't think we could lose," Thater said. "We didn't think that. They just raised their level of play, and I don't know what happened on our side of the court."

"But you've got to go on," she

said. "It's just a memory now."

But that memory, combined with a desire to continue playing volleyball internationally after her senior season, will help her push the Huskers this fall, she said.

With fellow seniors Eileen Shannon and Debbie Brand, Thater is now a leader on a team where she has always been the understudy.

In 1989, she received little playing time but valuable experience behind All-American Virginia Stahr. In 1990, she played on a team that reached the national semifinals. And last year, she piled up the statistics but yielded most of the limelight to seniors Janet Kruse and Cris Hall.

"I guess I've always thought of myself as a leader, but it's true that seniors are expected to do more," Thater said. "I'm ready to be the one to put it away."

Her coach is ready for that, too.

"I think there are three dominant volleyball players in the country," said volleyball coach Terry Pettit. "Natalie Williams (from UCLA), Bev Oden (from Stanford), and Stephanie."

"She's much more versatile than the average middle blocker."

Pettit said consistency was the only element that Thater needs to take her game to another level.

"She has raised her level of play every year she's been here," he said. "And now it's not really a matter of raising her level. It's being more consistent."

And it's being modest, a Thater trademark. Raised in Union, a town

of about 5,000 people, Thater said that coming to a high-profile volleyball program and becoming a big-time player could have blinded her.

"You come up here from a small town and it's unbelievable," she said. "But I really don't concern myself with stuff like 'I want to get the most interviews' or anything like that."

"I'm just not like that."

Thater looks at this year's schedule and sees dates with teams that beat Nebraska last season. Teams such as Pacific, teams like New Mexico, teams like Ohio State on Sept. 12.

"All the teams that didn't see the real Nebraska, a lot of them we play this year," she said. "This season is just total redemption."

And after this season, she doesn't want to put the volleyball down. Whether it be in Europe, on the beach, or competing for an Olympic spot in 1996, Thater is sure she will continue to play — somewhere.

Thater said watching former Nebraska setter Lori Endicott play on the United States Olympic team in Barcelona helped seal her decision to try out for the Olympic "B" team next January.

"I used to never think I'd want to keep playing," she said. "But now I know I do. I want to play."

Pettit said she was ready right now.

"All she needs to do is step onto the court," he said.

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