

'Big 12' merger to forge empires in baseball, volleyball

By Jeff Griesch
Senior Editor
and Trevor Parks
Staff Reporter

The focus of the merger between the Big Eight and four teams from the Southwest Conference has been on football dollars and sense.

The alliance is supposed to bring in big bucks in television revenue and create stronger competition on the football field.

But the union of the Big Eight Conference with Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech and Baylor will affect much more than football.

It will also affect Nebraska's 20 other athletic programs, much to the delight of the coaches of those teams.

In baseball, Coach John Sanders said, the

"Big 12" could become the premiere conference in the country.

Big Eight



SW Conference

Texas, Texas A&M, Oklahoma State and Kansas all traveled to Omaha last season for the College World Series, composing half of the eight-team field. And all four won more than 40 games last season.

The four Texas schools also will give the northern schools in the Big Eight a sunny, southern destination for early-season away games.

Sanders, who always has struggled to find warm, dry places to play in February and March, said he was excited about the prospects of

playing in the new league.

"The biggest benefit is that it will stabilize our scheduling," Sanders said. "The four warm-weather schools will give us a natural place to play games early in the season and will cut down on our travel."

Sanders said he expected that trips to Texas would replace Nebraska's annual spring trip to California.

He expects the new conference to be divided into northern and southern divisions, Sanders said, but he would like to see intradivisional competition.

"I just don't see any real negatives right now," Sanders said. "I think the competition will make games more attractive to the fans, and I'm for anything that helps the advancement of college baseball in Nebraska."

Nebraska volleyball coach Terry Pettit said the merger would help his program advance even higher, although it is consistently in the top 10.

"It's certainly a plus for Nebraska volleyball," he said. "Texas A&M and Texas Tech are both top 20 programs. Texas is a lot like us — a top five team."

"So from the volleyball standpoint, it'll be great."

And it will be good from a competition and Texas were not easy places to play.

Pettit said Baylor, Texas A&M, Texas Tech and Texas "are not easy places to play."

"As a coach, I would much rather be in a conference that has three or four teams that have

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Travis Heying/DN

Nebraska's Erick Strickland battles for the ball with Oklahoma State's Brook Thompson (on floor) during the first half of the Cornhuskers' 89-81 victory Wednesday night.

NU corrals Cowboys in seniors' final stand

By Jeff Griesch
Senior Editor

Nebraska's seniors made the most of their last stand, winning a good-old fashioned shootout with Oklahoma State, 89-81, before a crowd of 14,605 at the Bob Devaney Sports Center Wednesday night.

And after the crowd cleared and the dust settled, the Cornhuskers, 17-8 overall and 7-6 in the Big Eight, stepped closer to a shot at the NCAA Tournament with their third-straight win.

"We felt we could win all three," senior forward Bruce Chubick said. "It just came down to the effort."

The Huskers hustled and muscled Oklahoma State, using an intense pressure defense to avenge a 98-80 loss to the Cowboys on Feb. 19. Nebraska's aggressiveness forced 20 turnovers from the normally sure-handed Cowboys.

"It was much more of a physical game on our part," Nebraska point guard Jamar Johnson said. "We felt we had to match their physicalness and maintain our defensive intensity if we were going to have a chance to win."

Along with defense, the Huskers used the emotion of the seniors' final home game and the

deafening noise of the fans to get off to a quick start.

"Once again I have to attribute our great start to the fans and the emotion we had," Nee said.

The Huskers jumped to a 14-9 lead behind the hot shooting of Nebraska's seniors.

Eric Piatkowski, Chubick and Jamar Johnson combined to score Nebraska's first 17 points, and Nee said he was impressed.

"All year long I felt that the seniors would have to rise up and accept the challenge, and they met the challenge tonight," Nee said. "I think all the seniors did a great job tonight."

Piatkowski, a senior forward from Rapid City, S.D., scored 17 of his game-high 32 points in the first half to carry the Huskers to a 46-40 halftime lead.

Piatkowski's hot shooting seemed to be contagious in the first half, as the Huskers hit 53 percent of their field goals.

For the game, Nebraska finished at just over 48 percent from the floor and 7-of-14 from behind the three-point arc.

But the Cowboys were just as hot as the Huskers.

Not even a swarming half-court trap by the

See **WIN** on 8

Team unites for an ideal ending

By Derek Samson
Senior Reporter

Nebraska's four seniors sure knew how to go out in style.

Tom Best, Bruce Chubick, Jamar Johnson and Eric Piatkowski played their final home games Wednesday night and left the Bob Devaney Sports Center for the last time with a 89-81 victory over 21st-ranked Oklahoma State.

But the way Nebraska earned the win will stick in the minds of the seniors.

Piatkowski, who scored a game-high 32 points, said the pregame ceremonies for the seniors helped to motivate him.

"I was extremely fired up from the time they announced all the seniors to the time I walked off the floor," Piatkowski said. "Throughout the whole game it never really crossed my mind that this would be my last game in the Devaney

Center."

The seniors were ready from the start and dominated the first half.

Chubick started the game with a conventional 3-point play, and Best ended the first half with a 3-pointer from the corner with five seconds remaining.

The foursome combined to score the Huskers' first 17 points and 19 of their first 21, which helped Nebraska leap out to a 29-17 lead. Best's 3-pointer gave Nebraska a 46-40 halftime advantage.

In all, the seniors combined for 31 at the half. Piatkowski had 17.

Nebraska's younger players said they knew the game was important not only for the team's chance at an NCAA-tournament bid but for the seniors as well.

See **SENIORS** on 8

After this winter's events, Osborne needs a spring break

Ever since Byron Bennett's last-second field goal sailed wide to the left in Nebraska's 18-16 loss to Florida State, Cornhusker football coach Tom Osborne has watched things fly past him at a frenzied pace.

A hectic recruiting season went down to the wire. Then a shooting incident surfaced, allegedly involving one of his players.

And of course, he had the same nightmare he has every January: more legislation from the NCAA Convention.

All of it has left Osborne feeling like a bus load of burned-out students in mid-March.

He can't wait for spring break.

"I just want an opportunity to get a little break," Osborne said Wednesday. "The big thing about coaching is that from the first part of August on, we go seven days a week."

"This last weekend was the first weekend I had a day off."

And what did he do?

"I took a nap. I haven't done that in a long time."

Unfortunately, Osborne couldn't sleep through the past two months.

A day after experiencing another heartbreaker in Miami, Osborne began the January recruiting blitz in the South.

It was a battle that almost didn't end.

"The recruiting was a little nerve-racking," Osborne said. "It came down to the end. With a week left, we only had 10 or 11 players. We ended up with five or six good players committing during those last few days."

"So it was tougher than usual, but it ended up OK."

Osborne only hopes Tyrone Williams' situation ends the same way.

Williams has been charged with two felonies. He is accused of firing two shots into the back of a car on Jan. 30.

"The situation with Tyrone has



Todd
Cooper

been disturbing," Osborne said.

Probably more than Osborne will let on. Osborne has said he won't condone Williams' actions. But he also has said he can't abandon the compassion he has for Williams.

He hasn't. When he should have only had to worry about investigating the latest offensive schemes, he felt compelled to conduct his own criminal probe.

He interviewed the victim and his players and went to look at the car.

The incident, unlike any he has experienced in 30 years of coaching, took its toll. The emotional damage was visible at a banquet in early Feb-

ruary, when Osborne choked up while apparently referring to Williams.

"Now, you realize you're going to have to deal with those kinds of things," he said.

To top it off, Osborne had to contend with more constrictive legislation from the NCAA. At this year's convention in January, member institutions passed a rule eliminating the position of recruiting coordinator.

With it, the NCAA's noose on football programs became a bit more snug.

"We've seen very little legislation loosen up lately," Osborne said. "It seems like it continually tightens."

As does the pressure on Osborne. Osborne has said Dave Gillespie, Nebraska's current recruiting coordinator, will remain on staff, probably as an assistant coach.

That most likely means Osborne will have to get rid of another assistant coach.

Or hope for the best.

"Rather than try to fire a coach, we'll wait and see if someone gets a coaching position somewhere else," he said. "We hope to do it through natural attrition."

If that doesn't happen, Osborne will have to make another difficult decision by Aug. 1.

It'll be about as tough as the past two months have been.

"I really haven't been able to get away," Osborne said. "But it hasn't been that bad. I enjoy coaching. You just know that there is going to be turmoil. It comes with the territory."

"You're in trouble any time you get to thinking as a coach that you're going to have six months where you don't have to deal with anything."

Six months?

For Osborne, spring break would suffice.

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