

Tennis coach hopes men pick up pace

By Derek Samson
Senior Reporter

For men's tennis coach Kerry McDermott, this weekend marks the beginning of a new season.

Nebraska opens its Big Eight schedule this weekend when it plays host to Oklahoma State on Saturday and Oklahoma on Sunday at the Cather-Pound tennis courts, 17th and R Streets. Both matches begin at 10 a.m.

McDermott said the 4-10 Huskers could concentrate on the season's second and more important half.

"It's like a whole new season now that we're starting the Big Eight," he said. "We basically told our guys that we're 4-10, and there will be quite a few people overlooking us and saying Nebraska isn't very good. We don't mind going in with that role and playing the spoiler. Hopefully we can surprise a lot of people."

McDermott said he was glad the Huskers would face the Cowboys first.

"I think Oklahoma State is the weaker of the two schools, so it is nice to get them first," McDermott said. "Hopefully, we can compete well and get a win, then just see what happens against Oklahoma."

"It also helps having them both at home. Since we only have two home matches, it will be nice to be here. I think the guys are tired of traveling. It will be nice to get some home crowd support."

A weekend sweep could turn around the Huskers' season, McDermott said.

"It would be huge if we could win both this weekend," he said. "I think it would give us the confidence and show the younger guys what we can do in the Big Eight."

McDermott and his team were dealt a major blow when Anthony Kotarac was declared ineligible during the first semester.

Kotarac and Matthias Mueller formed the sixth-ranked doubles team in the NCAA last season.

McDermott said Kotarac's absence had hurt the Huskers.

"That really hurt us," he said. "I think with Anthony, we could have won at least three more."

McDermott said the Huskers' inexperience — Jay Segrist and Brad Bernthal are Nebraska's only seniors — had hurt them.

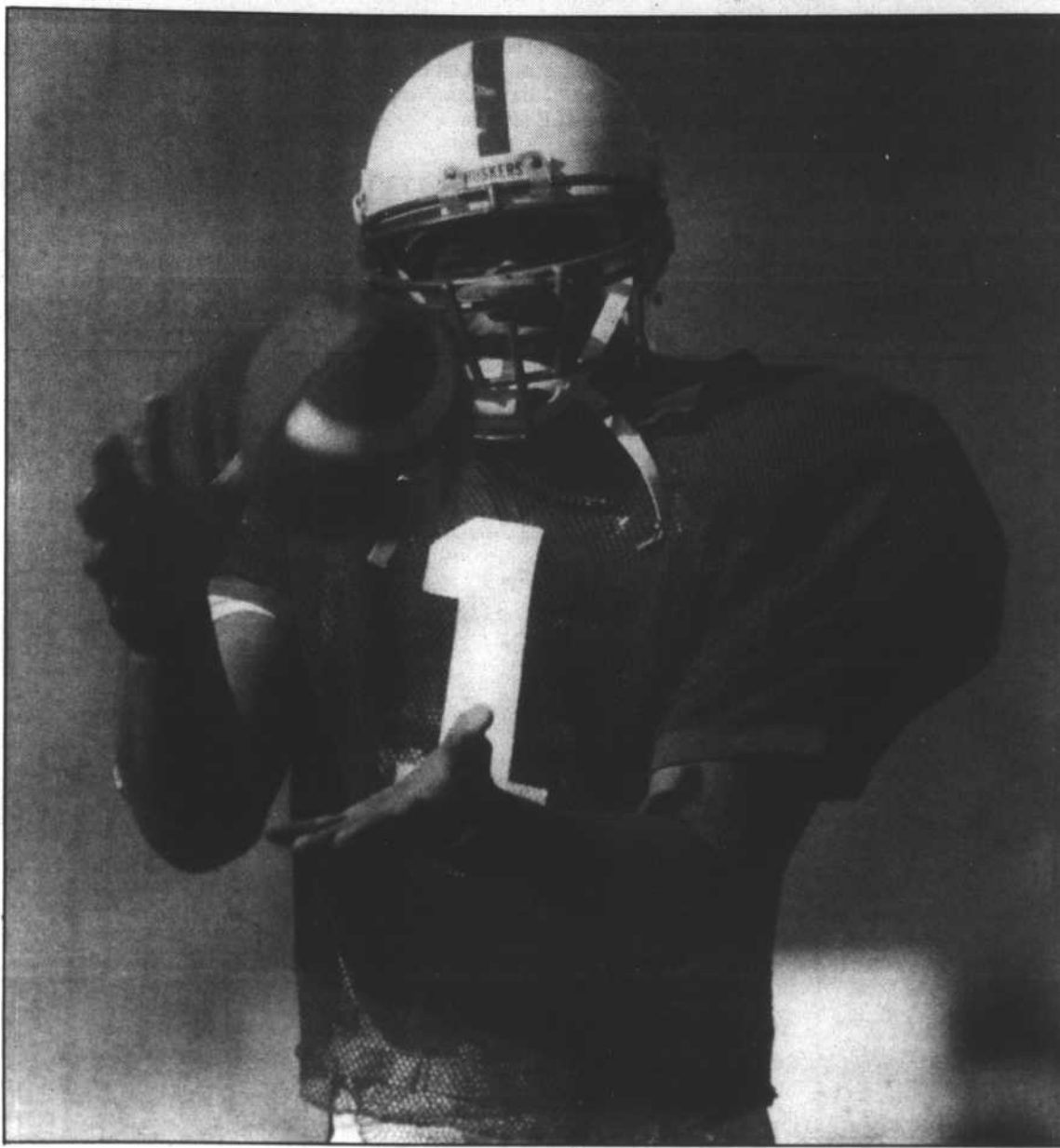
"I don't look so much at what has happened to this point," McDermott said. "Our goal was to finish in the top four of the Big Eight, and we can still accomplish that. If that doesn't happen, we want to finish in the top eight regionally. The season is far from over for us."

Nebraska went 1-5 during spring break, with its only win against South-eastern Louisiana, 4-3.

McDermott said Nebraska was close to coming back from the break with three victories.

"The two matches we really had a chance to get wins were Tulane and Rice," he said. "It came down to No. 1 singles and No. 3 singles, but we just couldn't get it done. On paper, I felt we showed that we were competing well."

"We're very young and inexperienced, and it's been hard coming up with victories. But one positive is that we're showing we're learning how to compete."



Nebraska's Lawrence Phillips, the Huskers' top returner at I-back, catches a pass while warming up before practice Wednesday.

Jeff Haller/DN

Ready to run

I-backs prepared to battle for Jones' spot

By Mitch Sherman
Staff Reporter

After losing the school's No. 2 all-time leading rusher and No. 3 all-time leading scorer in Calvin Jones, one would think the Nebraska football team was hurting for a replacement at I-back.

But Cornhusker coaches aren't sweating.

A stable full of young backs began competing for the I-back spot, left vacant after Jones declared himself eligible for the NFL draft, as spring practice opened Monday.

Led by Lawrence Phillips and Damon Benning, who will both be sophomores next fall, the Huskers' I-back corps is full of talent, assistant coach Frank Solich said.

"Even though we lost Calvin, we feel that we have depth at the I-back spot," Solich said. "It remains to be seen if they can replace him, but we feel some guys have some excellent experience from last year."

Despite missing most of three games last year, Jones rushed for 1,043 yards to finish his career with 3,153 yards and 40 touchdowns.

Phillips was his top replacement in terms of production last season.

The true freshman from West Covina, Calif., ran for 508 yards and scored five touchdowns on 92 carries. He started in place of Jones against UCLA and ran for 137 yards in the Huskers' 14-13 win.

After Jones separated his shoulder in the first half of Nebraska's 18-16 loss to Florida State in the Orange Bowl, Phillips stepped in to bring Nebraska back. He rushed for 64 yards on 13 carries in the second half.

But it remains to be seen if Phillips can handle the top job over a long period of time.

"I played in basically every game," Phillips said, "and I think that helped me. But if I get the opportunity to play a lot in every game, I don't know how I am going to handle that at the college level yet."

Phillips is ready, Solich said. "We feel we have an excellent back in Lawrence," he said. "He came in last year and played enough to get some excellent experience."

Phillips isn't the only one ready to grab the starting I-back spot.

Benning ran for 323 yards and four touchdowns on 55 carries last

year. But he's sitting out spring practice as he nurses an injured foot.

Benning may not make it back until fall practice, Solich said.

Clinton Childs, who will be a junior in the fall, is listed third on the depth chart. Marvin Sims, fully recovered from knee surgery, will also fight for time.

Brian Knuckles, a transfer from Coffeyville (Kan.) Community College, could see action next season. The 5-foot-11-inch, 195-pound back broke former Husker and Heisman Trophy-winner Mike Rozier's rushing records at Coffeyville.

Knuckles, who has two years of eligibility remaining, ran for 3,087 yards and 37 touchdowns in two years at Coffeyville, while averaging 140.3 yards per game.

With the number of backs competing for the top spot, Phillips said, the competition will be tough and may not be decided until fall.

"I think everyone has the same chance to start right now," he said. "No one is really in front of anyone. We're trying to get a clear picture

See I-BACKS on 8

Pro success is predicted for Switzer

From Staff Reports

Nebraska coach Tom Osborne said longtime rival Barry Switzer's adjustment to the professional ranks should be an easy one.

Switzer, who coached at Oklahoma for 16 years before leaving in 1989 amid scandal, was named head coach of the Dallas Cowboys Wednesday. Former Cowboy coach Jimmy Johnson resigned after leading the team to two consecutive Super Bowl titles.

"I'm sure Barry will do fine," Osborne said. "He's a good coach. It seems like Jimmy Johnson did a good job."

"But Barry's been very successful."

In his tenure as Sooner coach, Switzer won three national titles and won or tied for 12 Big Eight titles. He compiled a 157-29-4 overall record at Oklahoma.

Osborne said he was last contacted about an NFL coaching job "about six or seven years ago." He was last contacted in the '80s about coaching the Houston Oilers.

"There are three fairly firm offers I've had," he said, "but I've never been real serious about it."

Osborne said he preferred the college ranks anyway.

"One thing about college football is that the coach is in a little bit more of a position to make a difference," he said. "I think college football is not 'win at all costs.'"

"In pro football, again, you're bottom-line oriented. That's not too appealing."

Osborne said Switzer's coaching style should appeal to the Cowboy players.

"I'm sure he'll relate well to the players," he said.

NU coach still pursuing UNO spot

From Staff Reports

Nebraska assistant basketball coach Jeff Smith said he was still pursuing the coaching position at UNO.



Smith

"They're in the process of forming a search committee," Smith said. "But as far as I am concerned, I am still an assistant coach at Nebraska."

The University of Nebraska at Omaha job opened up last month after Bob Hanson resigned under pressure. Hanson had coached UNO for 25 years.

Smith, 33, said his goal was to become a head coach by the time he was 35. He has been a Cornhusker assistant since 1988.

"I still have a job here," he said, "and I am still doing everything I normally do."

Smith, who is in Charlotte, N.C., this weekend for the Final Four, said he wished UNO would move quicker.

That way, if he received the job, Smith said Nebraska coach Danny Nee could find a replacement.

NU to compete at first outdoor track meet of season

By Trevor Parks
Staff Reporter

Nebraska's track and field opponents this weekend will have a head start on the Cornhuskers, Coach Gary Pepin said.

The other four teams in the field of the UTEP Spring Time Invitational — Texas Tech, New Mexico State, Illinois and host UTEP — will have a jump on Nebraska because they've already competed in at least one outdoor meet, Pepin said.

The meet, which will be held in El Paso, Texas, marks Nebraska's first event of the

outdoor season.

Besides not competing, Pepin said, Nebraska hasn't been able to practice outside as much as it would like.

"The weather's been somewhat of a problem," Pepin said. "Also, after spring break it takes us some time to recover."

Sprinter Shanelle Porter, pole vaulter John Nichols and hurdler Willie Hibler especially will need some time to recover from lingering injuries, Pepin said. All three are doubtful for this weekend's meet.

Just four Huskers have competed outdoors

this season.

Senior Mike Bailey has the first provisional qualifying time for the men. He finished fourth in the decathlon at the College Station Decathlon/Heptathlon on March 17 and 18.

Also, junior Gene Paulsen finished sixth in the decathlon. Sophomore Colleen McKinney finished fourth in her first heptathlon and freshman Jim Garnham finished 13th in the decathlon.

Pepin said this meet would be the first competition this year for the javelin, discus, hammer throw, 35-pound weight throw and steeple-

chase.

"This will be a good chance for us to open up the season," Pepin said.

Pepin said a few Huskers had decided to redshirt this outdoor season.

On the men's side, distance runner Banti Itteffa and middle distance runner Pat Trainor have opted to sit out.

For the women, freshman shot putter Tressa Thompson and senior Michelle Shoemaker will sit out also.