

SPORTS

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Pride fells softball team, topples ranking

By Trevor Parks
Staff Reporter

Nebraska softball coach Rhonda Revelle said her team had finally returned to the level they were at when the season started.

The Cornhuskers started the year 8-0 and earned a No. 8 ranking in the first regular season softball poll of the year.

Unfortunately the ranking went to their heads.

Nebraska lost five of eight and nine of 17 games, before finishing third last weekend at the Cellular One Capital Classic at Sacramento, Calif.

Revelle said her team had put the shock of the early season ranking behind them.

"We had a lot of things thrown at us early and I don't think we handled them well," Revelle said. "In the last two weeks I feel we're at the level and focus we need to be."

Revelle said the Huskers were regrouping at the right time. Nebraska begins Big Eight play this weekend against rival Oklahoma State.

The No. 13 and 20-10 Huskers play host to No. 18 and 17-11 Cowgirls with doubleheaders Saturday and Sunday at the Nebraska Softball Complex.

Revelle said her team was anxious to start Big Eight play.

"After the Tournament on Sunday, Amy Offenbacher said, 'Let's

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Scott Bruhn/DN

Freshman shortstop Ali Viola hits in a batting cage at the Schulte Field House during practice Wednesday afternoon. The Cornhusker softball team has a four-game series against Oklahoma State this weekend in Lincoln.

Huskers' hot bats swing heavily against MU

By Jeff Griesch
Senior Reporter

The Nebraska baseball team's hot bats were silenced in an 8-1 loss to Missouri in the second game of a doubleheader Wednesday.

The Cornhuskers won the opener 9-2.

Missouri's Keith Massa, 1-5, pitched a complete game 5-hitter as the Huskers fell to 14-10 overall and 3-4 in the Big Eight. Missouri improved to 6-19 and 1-6 in the conference.

Gus Castro, 1-2, allowed five runs in five innings while taking the loss for the Huskers.

Nebraska entered the doubleheader scoring almost 14 runs per game while hitting .362 as a team during the past nine games.

The Huskers used the streak to improve

their team batting average to .322. Last season, Oklahoma State led the Big Eight, hitting .320 as a team, and Oklahoma hit .319 en route to the national championship.

Nebraska's hot hitting was a dramatic turnaround from the Huskers' first 13 games, when they averaged fewer than six runs per game and hit just .289 as a team.

Nebraska coach John Sanders said the biggest reason for the increased production was a change in the batting order.

Sanders moved Darin Petersen from his ninth spot in the lineup to the second spot. Since the change, Petersen has improved his batting average 49 points from .244 to .293.

"Darin is doing a really good job of setting up the three, four and five hole hitters, so they

can drive in runs," Sanders said.

More game experience and at-bats, better pitch selection and confidence have also contributed to the Huskers' hitting spree, Sanders said.

And no one is more confident than Darin Erstad.

The preseason All-American is living up to his billing as the top college player in the country.

Erstad raised his batting average 115 points from .380 to .495 during the road trip. The junior from Jamestown, N.D., went 26 for 41 (.634) with three home runs, a triple, five doubles and 22 RBI during the 9-game stretch.

"I am not doing anything any different than I was doing before," Erstad said. "I am just

relaxing and having fun at the plate, and I think that is what everybody else is doing too."

Mel Motley ran his hitting streak to 18 games. Scott Wulfing raised his average from .149 to .247. Jed Dalton improved his average from .302 to .323. Alvie Shepherd increased his average from .288 to .307 and drove in 15 runs. Matt Meyer's average went from .262 to .299.

"Hitting is contagious, and everybody from top to bottom in the lineup is hitting the ball very hard," Erstad said.

The Huskers continued to produce in the first game against the Tigers, scoring nine runs on 12 hits.

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Replacements give baseball a good name: Dedication

Major league baseball's season is scheduled to open Sunday night, but no one knows who will be on the field.

Will it be the replacement players?

Will it be the real players?

Or will it be no one?

Whether it is Seattle's Ken Griffey Jr. who suits up or 39-year-old Philadelphia replacement shortstop Todd Cruz, I won't mind.

But if no one suits up, I will be upset.

At least put somebody on the field besides the grounds crew.

The regular players probably won't start the season on time, but it would be good to see them on the field.

If the strike settled today, the season wouldn't start until May.

And contrary to popular belief, playing with replacements would be better than starting the season a month late.

The replacements have played together for more than a month and are starting to show some big-league moves.

Although nobody knows their names, at times you can't tell the major-leaguers from the replacements.

Over spring break, I watched three replacement spring training games, and I was surprised.

These guys are actually pretty good.

It wasn't all bloopers like you see on television.

They turned exciting double plays that even major-leaguers could have trouble turning.

Sure they had trouble with pop-ups. The pitchers weren't accurate, and the home runs weren't jumping out of the ball park. But these guys impressed me.

They played hard and enjoyed the chance to bask in the spotlight they had never seen before.

Guys like Cleveland replacement leftfielder Joe Mikalik are giving everything they have for a chance.

Mikalik chased a shot to deep left-center field at Chain Of Lakes Stadium in Winter Haven, Fla., a step too far and slammed into the



Trevor Parks

wall.

As his body crashed into the fence, the sound echoed around the stadium like when fellow replacement player Rodney McCray ran through a wall in a minor-league game a couple of years ago.

Mikalik missed the ball, but I and everyone else appreciated the effort.

But I'm sure some people feel that some major-league outfielder would have caught the ball.

But there is no one, not even Griffey, who could have made the catch.

It wasn't the greatest baseball I had ever seen, but the hard work

showed it wasn't the worst.

Of course, some fans don't, and won't ever, agree.

Attendance is at all-time lows at all spring-training sights in Florida and Arizona.

Detroit averaged more than 6,000 fans a game last year but only had 1,790 last week for a game against Texas.

A normal game with Cecil Felder, Will Clark and Jose Canseco would have packed the house.

The Toronto-Cleveland game was sold out last year in Winter Haven, Fla., but in this year's 14-5 Blue Jay win only 1,400 showed up.

The Blue Jays will have to play their regular-season replacement home games in Dunedin, Fla., instead of the SkyDome because of Ontario's labor laws.

And Florida fans have shown little interest in Florida's first American League team.

Only 1,000 total tickets have been sold for the Jays' first six home-away-from-home games.

One team that has sold out opening day is the Colorado Rockies.

But most of those fans are heading to Denver to see Coors Field's grand opening instead of watching a new set of Rockies take the field.

Fans haven't embraced the replacements, but I like them.

I can live with buying a program to learn the unfamiliar faces that go along with the unfamiliar names.

I can live with slow and inaccurate pitchers.

I can live with dropped, routine fly balls.

It was just good to see baseball again, no matter who was playing. I had bad feelings toward baseball, but not anymore.

Watching the replacements made me long for baseball again. These guys are doing something I always wanted to do.

I lost that loving feeling — but it's coming back.

Parks is a junior news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan sports reporter and columnist.