

1994 loss sparks volleyball team to title

By Trevor Parks
Senior Reporter

AMHERST, Mass. — The Nebraska volleyball team's goal to win the national championship was born on a cold evening at the NU Coliseum, Dec. 10, 1994.



Pettit

On that night, the undefeated, untested Cornhuskers lost to Penn State in the Midwest Regional championship, providing the spark for what would transform into a magical 1995 season.

Kelly Aspegren and Peggy Meyer's careers came to an end, but the rest of the team would return the next fall to make a run at the school's first national title.

During the 1994 season, in which the Huskers finished with a school-best 31-1 record, Nebraska relied on eight players to get the job done. The Huskers lost one key player, Jen McFadden, for the season when she tore her anterior cruciate ligament against Illinois on Oct. 25.

In August, Coach Terry Pettit stressed the importance of remaining healthy. He said at least two, and maybe three incoming freshmen could add depth. And Pettit said a difficult schedule would prepare the Huskers for the vigorous play of the NCAA Tournament.

Pettit's words of wisdom proved truthful throughout the season.

Senior setter and team captain Christy Johnson went down with a sprained ankle before the Baylor match on Sept. 22, but freshman Fiona Nepo filled in well. The only other player who was hurt was McFadden, who was still feeling the effects of her 1994 knee injury.

McFadden, a native of Dubuque,

Iowa, said she went through a lot of rehabilitation because she wanted to build herself up to be in prime condition when the NCAA Tournament began.

"I tried not to focus on my injury, I tried to stay focused on what our goal was from day one," McFadden said. "I didn't want that injury to hold me back in any way."

Nepo and fellow true freshman Jaime Krondak played vital roles, and with redshirt freshman Stacie Maser, the team went 10 players deep. Another freshman, Renee Saunders picked up some valuable playing time early, but she missed more than a month when her left foot was placed in a cast. Saunders would return for the NCAA Tournament and played against Penn State.

Nebraska's schedule included six ranked teams, allowing the Huskers to brace themselves for their drive to the Final Four, which turned out to be a winter wonderland in Amherst, Mass.

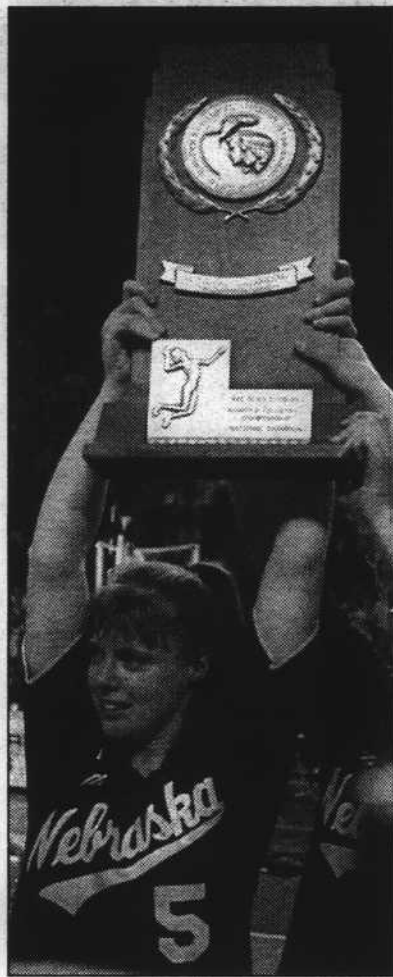
Everything fell perfectly into place on Dec. 16, when the Huskers won the national championship, downing Texas in four games, a match that showcased the future of Big 12 volleyball.

Nebraska began its relentless pursuit of the trophy against the same team that ended its dream in 1994, Penn State. The Huskers easily got their revenge, sweeping the Nittany Lions. The next day Nebraska suffered its only loss of the 1995 season.

Defending national champion Stanford defeated the Huskers in four games. The Huskers collapsed in the fourth, allowing the Cardinal to rally from a 14-6 deficit to win 17-15.

Senior middle blocker Allison Weston — who was named national co-player of the year along with Stanford's Cary Wendell — said the Huskers learned a lesson from that match. The memory remained the entire year.

"We played Stanford right at the



Trevor Parks/DN

Christy Johnson, Nebraska's team captain, holds the national championship trophy.

beginning of the season and got beat," Weston said. "That was probably the best thing that could have happened to us. It put some perspective on the season."

Nebraska then ripped through a series of tournaments, defeating Pacific on the road, sweeping through

the First Tier Challenge, and winning the Wyoming Invitational. In the Arby's Classic, Nebraska crushed George Washington and all-time NCAA kill leader Svetlana Vtyurina.

Nebraska faced little opposition in the final year of the Big Eight Conference. The Huskers rolled to a 12-0 conference record. Nebraska swept every match, allowing no more than 13 points in a single game.

On Nov. 4, the Huskers began a stretch of four matches in eight days, three of which were against top 15 teams. Nebraska swept Texas on the road, swept Notre Dame at home, and won a five-game marathon against No. 3 Florida before more than 4,000 fans at the NU Coliseum on a Sunday afternoon.

The Gators took games three and four from Nebraska, snapping the Huskers' school-record 68-game winning streak. It was the first time Nebraska had lost a game since the Stanford match, 2 1/2 months earlier.

In the regular season, the Huskers played six teams ranked in the top 20. In 1994, they played only two ranked teams all season, including the NCAA Tournament matches.

Nebraska next won the Big Eight Tournament, defeating Oklahoma and Iowa State in Omaha to secure a top seed for the NCAA Tournament.

Nebraska had gained complete revenge over Iowa State for a meaningless spring loss, after which the Cyclones mailed out a newsletter proclaiming their short-lived dominance of the Big Eight's best team.

Once the real season began, Nebraska drilled Iowa State three times by a combined score of 135-54.

The Huskers learned on Nov. 26 that they would play host to the Central Regional as long as they got by George Mason in the tournament's second round.

Nebraska beat George Mason 15-2, 15-5, 16-14, earning the right to bring three Final Four teams from a

year ago to Lincoln for regionals. UCLA, Ohio State and Penn State arrived in town. Nebraska was pitted against Penn State in the regional semifinals.

The Nittany Lions won one game from the Huskers, which Coach Russ Rose later admitted was his team's primary goal. Nebraska beat Penn State 15-7, 15-6, 14-16, 15-2. The next night, Nebraska defeated UCLA 15-9, 15-7, 16-14, advancing to the Final Four for the first time since 1990 and the fourth time in school history.

On Dec. 14, the day of the national semifinals, Amherst was bombarded by eight inches of snow, but Nebraska and Michigan State heated up the Mullins Center. The Big Ten champion Spartans were the nation's Cinderella team after knocking off Hawaii in the Mountain Regional championship.

Nebraska fended off Michigan State's attack, rallying from a game one loss to eliminate the Spartans in a grueling 10-15, 15-8, 15-8, 9-15, 15-8 victory.

The Huskers had been ranked No. 1 for 13 weeks before Stanford took over the top spot right before the Final Four. But the Cardinal underestimated Texas, losing in the other semifinal match to the overachieving Longhorns.

Two days later in the championship match, Nebraska won the school's first-ever volleyball national title, again coming from behind to topple Texas 11-15, 15-2, 15-7, 16-14.

Weston, Johnson and sophomore Lisa Reitsma were named first-team All-Americans. Pettit attributed the Huskers' success to the play and leadership of the three seniors, Weston, Johnson and outside hitter Billie Winsett.

Reitsma, for whom the season was a dream come true, said she would like to earn a couple of more championships before she left Nebraska.

"We're going to have a great team next year, too," Reitsma said.

● Freshman Fiona Nepo's parents, Salei and Sunita Nepo, traveled from Honolulu to Amherst, Mass., for the Final Four. Sunita made flower leis for Coach Terry Pettit, assistant coaches Todd Raasch and Cathy Noth, and seniors Billie Winsett, Allison Weston and Christy Johnson.

The coaches wore the leis during the national championship match against Texas.

● Cornhusker mascot Lil' Red was the hit of the Final Four. The two-day Mullins Center crowd of 14,296 fans cheered for the inflatable Husker during timeouts and between games. During semifinal play, the Stanford team was especially impressed with Lil' Red's antics while watching the Nebraska-Michigan State match.

● Texas coach Mick Haley's game plan to stop All-American Allison Weston worked in the championship match. When the Huskers trounced the Longhorns on Nov. 4 in three games, Weston hit .583 with 16 kills.

Also in that match, Kate Crnich recorded two kills and hit .125. Billie Winsett had seven kills.

In the championship match, Weston had a career-high 22 digs, but hit a season-low .040. Crnich and Winsett had 25 kills apiece, easily career highs for both. In fact, Crnich, who hit .500 in the title match, had never posted

Final Four Notebook

more than 13 kills in a match before dominating the Longhorns.

● Nebraska lost the first game against Michigan State in the semifinals and dropped game one to Texas in the championship match. The Husk-

ers beat Michigan State 10-15, 15-8, 15-8, 9-15, 15-8 on Dec. 14 to reach the championship match. Before the Final Four, Nebraska had won the first game in every match this season and had never scored fewer than 11 points in a game. The last time the Huskers were beaten in the first game two consecutive matches was Nov. 5-6, 1993, against Baylor and Texas.

● Weston's 48 kills in the two Final Four matches left her 12 kills shy of former Colorado star Karrie Downey's all-time Big Eight record. Weston, a three-time All-American, finished her career with 1,778 kills, tops in Husker history.

● Crnich, Weston, Winsett and setter Christy Johnson were named to the all-Final Four team. Joining the four Huskers on the squad were sophomore Kristin Folk of Stanford and freshman Demetria Sance of Texas.

Notebook compiled by sports editor Mitch Sherman and senior reporter Trevor Parks.

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