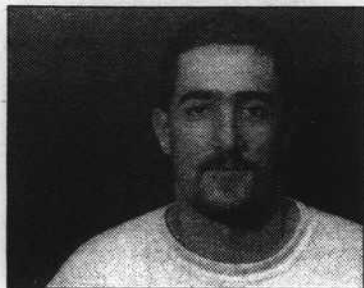


SPORTS

Wednesday, January 31, 1996

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SPORTS OPINION



Derek Samson

NBA's magic losing charm, causing harm

The NBA can't be hurting for publicity this bad.

Magic Johnson, doing his best imitation of a professional boxer, once again ended his off-and-on retirement Monday and played for the Los Angeles Lakers on Tuesday night.

Perhaps it was entirely Johnson's decision. After all, the word "Magic" in the NBA world now only means the team from Orlando. But his comeback could be a result of pressure from the NBA after several events led to the dwindling of the league's popularity.

Ever since the NBA gained so many fans during the 1980s, when Johnson and Larry Bird highlighted the Lakers-Celtics finals nearly every year, the league has been on a decline.

First came the retirements of Johnson and Bird in 1991. Johnson retired after learning he had HIV, and Bird's bad back forced him off the court.

Then came the retirement of Michael Jordan after the Chicago Bulls won their third straight title in 1993.

In June 1994, Sports Illustrated split its cover between the NBA finals and NHL finals, stating that the NHL was hot, and the NBA was not.

Jordan, despite denying he would ever return and having several ceremonies after his retirement, returned near the season's end. But even with sports fans still mad at baseball for its strike-shortened seasons, Jordan's return hasn't recaptured the NBA fans.

So Johnson, at age 36, returned to relieve his past.

"I can still do some of the things I'm used to doing," he said Monday.

Unfortunately, some is not enough to save the NBA. The only thing Johnson is doing is making the NBA look like more of a circus (although the Lakers' attendance should skyrocket) and making his own career end on an even more sour note.

Johnson claimed he returned only to satisfy his own beliefs that he could still play. If that is the reason, he should fit right into the selfish attitude that runs rampant in pro basketball.

If it's to save the sliding NBA, the gesture is nice, but it will just be another mark in the failed-publicity-attempts category.

For basketball fans, until the battles of teams like the Lakers and Celtics of last decade return, the commercials will be the only items of interest.

For sports fans, this is just another reason to fight for football year-round.

Samson is a senior news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan sports columnist.



Matt Miller/DN

Nebraska sophomore first baseman Todd Sears practices Tuesday at Schulte Fieldhouse. Sears, who hit .346 with 10 home runs and 50 RBI last year, will lead the Huskers into action this weekend against New Mexico in Las Cruces, N.M.

Huskers ready to play ball

By Todd Walkenhorst
Staff Reporter

It's 10 degrees below zero. The state is covered in snow. And it's time for Cornhusker baseball.

The 1996 Nebraska baseball team has a completely different look than a year ago. Left fielder Darin Erstad, who led the team last season with a .410 batting average, 19 home runs and 76 RBI, was selected as the first overall pick by the California Angels in last year's amateur draft.

Nebraska coach John Sanders said his team had lost a lot of its stability.

The Huskers also will try to fill holes in the pitching department. Hard-throwing Alvie Shepherd, who accounted for five of the team's seven saves a year ago, was a first-round selection by the Baltimore Orioles. Also gone from last year's 35-23 team was pitcher Craig Sanders, who turned pro a year early after posting a 6-2

record.

Third baseman Jed Dalton also was drafted, but his position may be filled without changing the name on his old jersey. His younger brother, Josh, a freshman from Papillion, is the leading candidate to start at third base.

New faces dominate this year's roster. This year's team features 23 new players, but it will be awhile before the Huskers are seen around Lincoln.

Thanks to the Nebraska weather, the Huskers are scheduled to play their first 10 games on the road. They will not play host to a game at Buck Beltzer Field until Feb. 28 when they play in-state rival Creighton.

Six pitchers will return to the team this season. Junior Jonas Armenta led the staff in 1995 with a 3.49 earned run average and nine wins.

"Armenta is the one pitcher coming back who had a lot of innings last year," Sanders said. "We may try him

in a variety of roles this season to see where he works best."

Transfers Steve Fish and Jay Sirianni should crack the starting rotation, Sanders said, along with redshirt freshman Jason Allen. Fourteen freshmen are listed on Nebraska's roster.

"Our team is a little bit like the young, innocent and restless," Sanders said. "We have some young players and some innocent players without any Division-I experience. And we have some restless players who are ready to play."

One of the few players to have a starting position locked up is first baseman Todd Sears. Sears, a 1995 freshman All-American, batted .346 last year and hit 10 home runs before missing the final 13 games because of a staph infection in his leg.

The Husker outfield also will see

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Beck alters goals, lineup for Huskers

By Jason Brunz
Staff Reporter

Nebraska women's basketball coach Angela Beck said the Cornhuskers have re-evaluated their preseason goals, deciding to shoot for a third- or fourth-place league finish instead of trying to win the Big Eight.

After a 79-77 overtime loss to Iowa State on Sunday, Beck said the Huskers, 13-6 overall and 3-4 in the Big Eight, needed to keep their attitudes positive.

"We've really got to make some better decisions," Beck said. "We can play a little harder than we've been playing."

Beck said Nebraska had to maintain a homecourt edge if it hoped to remain in good standing in the league. Nebraska is now fourth in the conference.

The Huskers have two important home games this weekend. On Friday night, they will play host to No. 19 Oklahoma State, which is 15-3 overall and 5-2 in the Big Eight.

On Sunday afternoon, Nebraska and Oklahoma, 11-8 overall and 3-4 in the conference, will play in the Bob Devaney Sports Center.

"We can't predict what the other people are going to do," Beck said. "We just have to go out and take care of things."

"We only have one player playing extremely well right now and that's Tina McClain," Beck said. "The others are still trying to find their niche."

McClain is averaging 13.6 points and leading the team with 6.5 rebounds per game. She is also 37-of-45 from the free-throw line and scored a career-high 25 points Sunday against Iowa State. Beck said McClain's confidence and on-court maturity had played a major role in her success this season.

Beck said Nebraska needed to make some changes to finish strong in the Big Eight.

"I'm looking to change one, maybe two players for the next start," Beck said. "We've got to re-evaluate our goals at this point."

NU begins crucial stretch tonight

By Trevor Parks
Senior Reporter

Don't expect the Nebraska basketball team to be surprised at the success of Kansas State when the two teams play Wednesday night.

The Cornhuskers know the Wildcats are good. And Nebraska knows Kansas State is not playing as the team expected to finish in the bottom half of the Big Eight Conference.

Nebraska, 15-5 overall and 3-2 in conference play, travels to Bramlage Coliseum to play 13-5 and 4-2 Kansas State tonight at 7:05 in Manhattan, Kan.

Husker coach Danny Nee said Kansas State was a solid team that had an improved inside game.

"Tyrone Davis gives them a real inside plus, and when you talk about big men in the Big Eight, I think he's a quality player," Nee said.

Davis, a 6-foot-8, 235-pound senior, is averaging 14.1 points and 8.6 rebounds per game. Last season, he averaged 11.5 points and 5.7 rebounds per game. Junior college transfer

Gerald Eaker also is helping out down low, averaging 4.8 rebounds, 7.6 points and a league-leading 2.6 blocks per game.

Kansas State is outrebounding its opponents by more than three boards per game. Another Wildcat player who has impressed Nee is senior guard Elliot Hatcher. Hatcher is averaging 15.8 points, 2.7 steals and 3.7 assists per game.

Nee said the Kansas State game would begin an important stretch for Nebraska. In the Huskers' next four games, they play the Wildcats, Missouri and Iowa State twice. Three of those four games are on the road.

The Wildcats are third in the Big Eight behind Iowa State and Kansas. The Cyclones, whom Nebraska plays at home Saturday and Feb. 10 in Ames, Iowa, are second in the league with a 4-1 record.

Nebraska travels to Missouri on Feb. 7. The Tigers are struggling, having lost three of their past four games, including a 106-94 setback at Colorado on Monday night.

Nee said Kansas State and Iowa State were playing with confidence,

Basketball Starters						Bramlage Coliseum Manhattan, Kan. 7:05 p.m.	
Nebraska 15-5, 3-2	Ht.	Wt.	Class	PPG	RPG		
G Tyrone Lue	6-0	165	Fr.	8.2	2.9		
G Jaron Boone	6-6	195	Sr.	15.9	2.7		
F Erick Strickland	6-3	210	Sr.	15.7	4.8		
F Bernard Garner	6-7	225	Jr.	10.8	6.4		
C Mikki Moore	6-11	205	Jr.	8.8	5.3		
Kansas State 13-5, 4-2							
G Elliot Hatcher	6-0	175	Sr.	15.8	2.3		
G Paco May	6-6	185	Fr.	7.1	3.9		
F Tyrone Davis	6-8	235	Sr.	14.1	8.6		
F Mark Young	6-6	190	So.	8.8	5.6		
C Gerald Eaker	6-11	240	Jr.	7.6	4.8		

putting his team in a difficult situation.

"Right now, Kansas State has four wins and Iowa State has four wins. The only thing to do is beat them," Nee said. "At the end of the year, these are going to be looked back on as

monumental games."

Nee said the next four games would go a long way toward deciding which Big Eight teams would be selected for the NCAA Tournament. Nee said if

See **KSU** on 8