

Sports year in review

NU Sports seasons filled with success, marred by tragedy

By Mitch Sherman
Senior Editor

Championships, heartbreak, unprecedented accomplishments, teamwork, intensity, disappointment and world-class performances on the playing fields. Turmoil and tragedy off it.

The last nine months of Cornhusker athletics have been the best of times, and they have been the worst of times.

We've seen perhaps the greatest runner ever to set foot on the turf of Memorial Stadium in a Cornhusker uniform nearly ruin his future with one ill-advised decision. We've seen that same man resurrect his life, and with the backing of his coach and teammates, lead his team to a national championship.

We've watched a volleyball team — motivated by the heartbreak and driven to reach the top — achieve greatness and refuse to die because of three battle-tested seniors' leadership.

We've stood on the sidelines and watched an embattled men's basketball team and its heavily criticized coach ripped apart at midseason, only to rebound and prove everyone wrong by finishing the season with five straight wins and an NIT championship.

We've witnessed a women's basketball team, powered by a combination of proven veterans and young talent, reach its goal of the NCAA Tournament before falling in the first round to Colorado State.

We've seen a wrestling team, the latest version of Tim Neumann's powerhouse under construction, falter at the NCAA Championships. We've seen the Husker track squads claim their spots among the nation's elite, and a swimming program on the upswing as it prepares for the challenging waters of the Big 12 Conference.

Husker soccer, in its second year, has moved forward and shown signs of becoming a national power before the end of its first decade. A Nebraska softball team, constantly improving, year by year, has moved another step forward this season; and the Husker baseball team has struggled to recover from the loss of 1995's key players.

Nebraska tennis has been a disappointment; the women's golf team showcased its first-ever conference champion and their male counterparts have searched for consistency in an up-and-down year.

For the first time in 18 years, Francis Allen did not find a way to guide his men's gymnastics team, plagued by injuries this season, to the NCAA Championships. But the women's team earned its second straight trip to the championships after a record-setting year that ended in

"On the surface, the year in Nebraska sports appears much like many others. But under close inspection, these last few months have been filled with events never before seen or experienced in Lincoln."

the disappointment of failing to qualify for the Super Six.

In the early morning of Sept. 10, Lawrence Phillips, a junior I-back on the football team, entered the apartment of a teammate and assaulted Kate McEwen, a member of the women's basketball and Phillips' ex-girlfriend.

Later that same afternoon — less than 24 hours after running for 206 yards against Michigan State and jumping to the forefront of the Heisman Trophy race — Phillips was kicked off the Nebraska football team.

"We will do everything we can to help him get his life back together," Coach Tom Osborne said. "But he is dismissed from the football team, effective immediately."

Phillips' dismissal was the latest in a long line of black eyes suffered by the program on the national media

front. Earlier in the fall, questions arose surrounding Phillips' encounter with professional agents, and in an unrelated debate, Osborne was questioned nationally for imposing a one-day ban of Daily Nebraskan reporters from practice after the paper published two editorial cartoons questioning the coach's disciplinary tactics.

Riley Washington, a reserve wingback was arrested over the summer and charged with attempted second-degree murder. He spent 13 days in prison, returned to the football team and still awaits trial.

Soon after Phillips was arrested and pleaded no contest, the national media invaded the UNL campus and the city. Sports Illustrated criticized Osborne for the way in which he handled his law-troubled players. CBS ran a 48 Hours telecast devoted to athletes and violence, focusing almost solely on Nebraska.

Phillips spoke publicly for the first time since his arrest on Oct. 19. "I could have just left," he told an Omaha radio talk-show host, "I didn't do that. I stayed here. I'm going to school. I'm going to do what's right."

Five days later, the I-back returned to the practice field, but he did not play in Nebraska's Oct. 28 game at No. 8 Colorado — which, by the way, the second-ranked Huskers won 44-21, their 21st straight victory and eighth win of the season.

With 10:13 to play in the first quarter of the Iowa State game a week later,

Phillips carried the ball for the first time in more than a year at Memorial Stadium. It was a two-yard gain. For the day, he ran 12 times for 68 yards, but showed flashes of the punishing back who ran over, through and around Oklahoma State and Michigan State earlier in the season for 359 yards and seven touchdowns.

"If you're a great running back," Husker assistant coach Frank Solich said before Phillips' return, "you don't lose your ability because you have not been out there."

The return of the star I-back ignited another uproar among the national media.

On Oct. 31, CBS reporter Bernard Goldberg visited Osborne's weekly press conference in the South Stadium's N-Club Lounge.

"If one of your players had roughed up a member of your family," Goldberg asked Osborne, "and had dragged her down a flight of stairs, would you have reinstated that player on the team?"

Osborne did not answer, but he did cut his press conference short 20 minutes before its scheduled end. Goldberg, who delivered a scathing report on the CBS Evening News three days later, defended the legitimacy of his question and blasted the local media for failing to press Osborne earlier.

"It's an obsession, winning," he

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