

Seniors Crnich, Hedbeck plan to lead by example

By **MIKE KLUCK**
Senior Reporter

For three seasons, Kate Crnich and Maria Hedbeck have proven to be valuable defensive stoppers for the Nebraska volleyball team.

This season, the Cornhuskers' lone seniors want to be respected as great all-around players.

And if last season's NCAA Tournament Final Four was any indication, both Hedbeck and Crnich, who are roommates off the volleyball court, are ready for their new roles.

In the NCAA semifinals against Michigan State, Hedbeck, the 1995 Big Eight co-backcourt specialist of the

year, recorded a season-high 17 digs. Earlier in the tournament against George Mason, Hedbeck tied her career best with four service aces.

In the NCAA championship match against Texas last December, Crnich, from River Forest, Ill., had a career-best 25 kills and 21 digs. Her performance helped earn the Huskers their first national title and Crnich a place on the NCAA Championship all-tournament team.

"I was really excited because I thought I was an average hitter and a good defensive player," Crnich said. "But it showed at the end that I'm an all-around good player."

The fifth-ranked Huskers will be counting on the expertise of their seniors this year in trying to win the first

Big 12 championship and defend their national title.

However, Crnich and Hedbeck both realize this year's team will be different from last year's squad.

The Huskers will have to replace co-national player-of-the-year Allison Weston, All-America setter Christy Johnson and the best passer in Nebraska history, Billie Winsett. In addition, All-America candidate Jen McFadden will miss the season with a back injury.

"We don't have the big star players, so we're going to have to be a hard working team," Hedbeck said. "Our attitude is going to mean a lot."

"This year, we can't afford just having a bad day when we play a match.

We could do that last year and still win. This year is going to be different."

During preseason practice, Crnich said, the Huskers prepared their attitude for a grueling schedule. Ten of NU's 1996 possible opponents participated in the 1995 NCAA Tournament and seven were ranked in the final USA Today/AVCA Top 25.

"This year, we're more prepared physically," Crnich said. "Physically, we're ready to go, but mentally we have to get stronger."

But Hedbeck, a native of Sollentuna, Sweden, said the Huskers are being realistic in their preparation and goal-setting.

Both seniors said the Huskers will

probably not set a goal of repeating as national champions. They said they will concentrate on the Big 12 championship first, then regionals. If they make it that far, anything can happen, even a repeat championship.

"We know we're going to be good," Hedbeck said. "But we also know we're going to have to work really hard for it."

"We're probably going to lose several matches along the way. If we set the goal to win the national championship again, and then we start losing a couple of games, people will start getting frustrated and we won't be able to make our goal. It's better not to set a goal that high this year."

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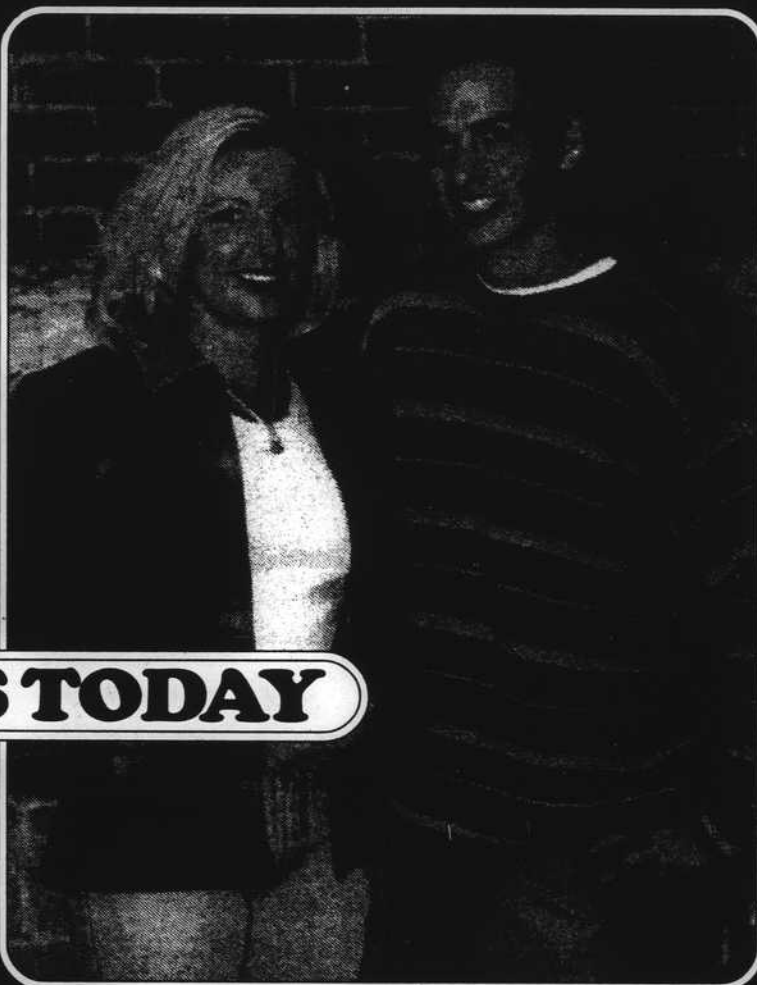
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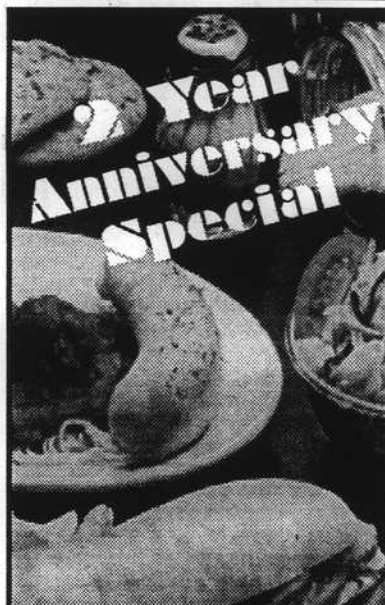
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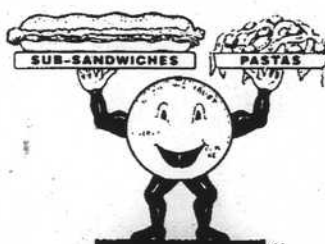


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