

Crnich, Hedbeck enjoy final year

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McFadden. McFadden suffered a season-ending injury before the start of the 1996 season.



Hedbeck we heard about Jen, everyone — myself included — thought we would be hurting. I didn't know what we were going to do. But then I started realizing that we had people like Megan (Korver) and Tonia (Tauke), and I knew we could overcome it."

Hedbeck said she and Crnich tried to remain optimistic, setting new goals for the team as the season progressed.

"With a younger team, we had to take things step by step," she said.

The Huskers took things slowly as they developed from a 5-2 team in mid-September to a 27-3, Big 12 championship team by late November, allowing Crnich and Hedbeck to ease into their expanded leadership role.

"Being a verbal leader was something that I wasn't used to and it was difficult," Crnich said. "I tried to show leadership through the way I handled myself on the court and in practice."

NU sophomore setter Fiona Nepo said the two seniors led by example and earned the respect of

the younger players.

"They were good role models for the team on and off the court," Nepo said. "I don't think we necessarily looked up to them from the beginning, but they stepped into that role of leadership, and we couldn't help but follow."

As Crnich and Hedbeck matured, they became two of the Huskers' steadiest players. Although sometimes overlooked, the consistent defensive play of the two seniors was significant to NU's return trip to the Final Four.

Pettit recognized Hedbeck, who competed for the Swedish National Team before arriving at Nebraska in 1993, as a player with great character. An offensive weapon for the Huskers her first two seasons, Hedbeck was restricted to backcourt duties her junior and senior years because of a chronic injury in her hitting shoulder.

After seeing limited action her first two years at Nebraska, Crnich earned a starting spot in the NU rotation as a junior. Her most remembered moment is her career-high 25 kills in the national championship match against Texas.

This season, the Huskers continued to rely on Crnich both offensively and defensively. Like last year, Crnich saved her best for last, recording a season-best 16 kills and a match-high 15 digs against Stanford.

"Kate showed that she was a hitter to watch," Nepo said. "And Maria was the best defensive player on our team. We'll fill their positions next year, just like good teams do, but we will definitely miss them."

Stanford ends Husker season

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lost a game in three tournament matches.

NU took a game, but the Cardinal out-blocked the Huskers 29-11, forced 15 service errors, and Walsh did the rest. The 6-foot-2 All-American did not record a hitting error after the first game, smashing 19 kills on .471 hitting with 12 digs, eight blocks and three service aces.

Walsh, the nation's top recruit a year ago, earned the Final Four MVP award after another 17 kills and a .438 hitting percentage in the championship match.

Stanford erased Nebraska's first-game momentum by opening game two with 13 straight points, setting the tone for the rest of the evening. Folk, an alternate on the 1996 U.S. Olympic team, added 15 kills for the Cardinal.

"I won't really say that we are satisfied," said Nepo, who posted a Final-Four best 57 set assists in the loss. "But I have no regrets. We came so far and people doubted us."

"It just would have been great to beat Stanford, but we can't really think about that now. We'll just have to learn from this and take the experience on

to next year."

After the match, Pettit praised NU's intensity, discouraged only that Nebraska was unable to fully exploit Stanford's little-exposed weak spots.

"There were opportunities where we had Stanford reeling," he said, "and maybe if we had been a little more experienced, we could have taken advantage. But that's no reflection of the effort."

"I'm very proud of this team because they flat out left everything on the court, and they've done that for 34 matches."

Next year, Nepo and Reitsma lead a unit that returns all but Hedbeck, Crnich and Stacie Maser, whose career has been cut two years short because of a chronic knee injury.

"They were able to compete at this level because mentally they have great character," Pettit said, "and they've pushed themselves all year. But every team is vulnerable, and you are only as strong as your weakest links."

In 1997, Nebraska's weakest links will be stronger. Jaime Kronidak, Megan Korver, Renee Saunders and

Tonia Tauke, all major contributors this season, gained valuable experience in its two hours and five minutes

"Nebraska will be back."

DON SHAW
Stanford volleyball coach

on the court in Cleveland.

"For next year," Reitsma said, "it's going to be a big advantage for these players to have been here before."

Nepo said Nebraska expects a third-straight trip to the Final Four, Dec. 18 and 20 at Spokane Arena in Spokane, Wash.

"The challenge to them," Pettit said, who will begin his 21st season as NU's coach next fall, "will be to come out and work as hard as this team did. If they do that, they are going to be a nice team."

Nebraska may see Stanford again somewhere down the road, perhaps in Spokane.

"They can use that as payback," Stanford's Shaw said. "They haven't beaten us, so they will be motivated. Nebraska will be back."

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