



SPORTS

Ready to run

The Big 12 indoor track and field championships start today at 9 a.m. at Bob Devaney Sports Center and continue through Saturday. **PAGE 9**



A & E

High-powered music

The Winter Electronic Music Festival will bring local musicians and the digital tools of their trade to the Wagon Train Project Saturday. **PAGE 12**

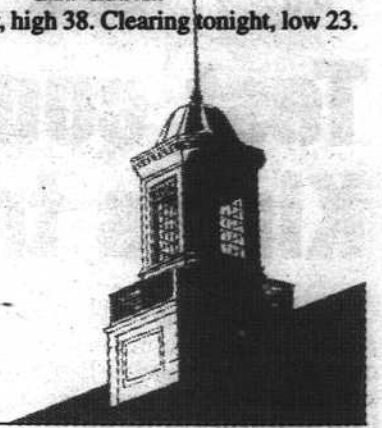
FRIDAY

February 21, 1997

GRAY MATTER
Windy and gray, high 38. Clearing tonight, low 23.

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Leading the Way
The black leaders of the Lincoln community

Shaping the Future



JAY CALDERON/DN

SEN. ERNIE CHAMBERS reads a newspaper in his office in the State Capitol. Chambers has represented Omaha's 11th District for 27 years and defies the Legislature's suit-and-tie standard by wearing short-sleeved sweat shirts and Levi's jeans.

Chambers struggles for all Nebraska senator takes job duties to extreme

Editor's note: In honor of Black History Month, the Daily Nebraskan is profiling prominent black leaders in the Lincoln community. Today is the last in a five-part series.

By ERIN SCHULTE
Senior Reporter

Flip through the pages of the legislative roster and the occupations of Nebraska's state senators are easy to predict: lawyers, business owners, ranchers, insurance agents, professors and farmers.

On Page 11, though, one man's job description cuts against the grain. It says, simply: "Defender of the Downtrodden."

That defender is Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha, a 27-year servant in the Legislature and the only black senator.

Chambers is as unique among the state's

49 senators as Nebraska's one-house Legislature is among the other 49 states.

He's appeared on national television to challenge the president of the NCAA and lambasted apartheid in front of a U.N. committee.

He's fought for the rights of women athletes, criminals, gays and lesbians, North Omaha blacks, and white supremacist farmers.

He has a law degree from Creighton University but has never taken the bar exam.

During floor debate, he eloquently quotes the Bible, literature, and poetry to make a point or win arguments.

There is a weight bench in one corner of his office; his own framed drawings are tucked away in another.

He breaks the unwritten starched-suit-and-tie dress code of the State Capitol, speeding around the halls in a short-sleeved sweat shirt and Levi's — the same ones he

wore on "Donahue," to the United Nations, and when he met President Jimmy Carter.

Over the years, he's been described as an "incurable idealist," a "man of the people," an "apostle of the very poor," and an "outspoken Negro firebrand."

Among his colleagues, he has been — for the better part of three decades — a chronic thorn in the side and a recurring burr in the saddle.

But he's been something else. "He's the conscience," said Rich Lombardi, who has been a lobbyist at the Capitol for 17 years. "If he was on the East or West Coast, he'd be a celebrity."

In his domain

Inside Room 1107 in the west wing of the Capitol in Lincoln, the day is a flurry of

Please see **CHAMBERS** on 6

Senators debate death penalty

Legislature

By BRIAN CARLSON
Staff Reporter

Legislators considered two bills Thursday expressing different ideas about the future of the death penalty in Nebraska.

LB331, sponsored by Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha, would eliminate the death penalty and ensure life sentences instead. LB390, sponsored by Sen. Jim Jensen of Omaha, would seek to shorten the length of time between death sentences and executions by limiting the number of appeals at the state court level.

Rick Wallace, president of the Nebraska chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, told members of the Legislature's Judiciary Committee that the death penalty should be eliminated because it is racially biased.

He said when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the death penalty's constitutionality in 1976, justices insisted the penalty be applied uniformly but with attention to each individual case.

But the criminal justice system has been unable to reconcile these criteria, Wallace said.

"Twenty years have passed since the Supreme Court said the death penalty must be applied fairly, and the system is still fraught with mistakes," he said.

Jim Cunningham, representing the Nebraska

Please see **APPEALS** on 3

Rec center staff, security make fights anomalies

By JOSH FUNK
Staff Reporter

The Office of Campus Recreation does everything it can to ensure that students have a safe workout, its director said Thursday.

Stan Campbell, the director of Campus Recreation, said the Lee and Helene Sapp Recreation Center is a safe environment.

The fight in the weight room Wednesday was an exception in the rec center's history.

"Considering the number of people that use the center, the behavior is quite good. This time of year we get about 3,500 uses a day," Campbell said.

There are only two entrances into the rec center, and both of them are staffed by desk workers with student ID card scanners to prevent unauthorized entry.

Please see **SECURITY** on 3