

Viola leader of young infield

BY MIKE KLUCK
Senior Reporter

In the Nebraska softball team's season-opening tournament, the Coca-Cola Classic at Tempe, Ariz., the No. 19 Cornhuskers faced four Top 20-ranked teams and finished with a 1-5 record.



Viola

This weekend, NU travels to Columbus, Ga., to participate in the Leadoff Classic Tournament — a tournament that allows only teams that qualified for an NCAA Regional the prior season.

Consequently, 11 of the 18 teams participating in the pool-play tournament are ranked in the Top 25. Nebraska's first game of the tournament is against Nicholls State with a rematch of last year's regional where the Colonels won 2-0 to end NU's season.

With a ferocious schedule and eight newcomers participating on this

year's squad, one key ingredient the Huskers need is leadership. That job has fallen on the shoulders of junior shortstop Ali Viola.

"I guess I just feel an obligation to this team to try and be a leader," Viola said. "Some days it's me; some days it's somebody else."

"I feel like I've been here for four years — just as long as anybody else. I've already put a lot of playing time under my belt, and I feel real comfortable with my position. I'm just trying to be the steady Eddie of the team and calm everybody else."

NU Coach Rhonda Revelle said she talked with Viola, a first-team All-American, during the summer about asserting herself as a team leader.

Revelle said Viola's acceptance of her role will be crucial in helping to take the Huskers to a higher level this season.

"She's always had that in her," Revelle said. "She's always had leadership qualities, and as she gets more comfortable, she will only get better. She's already shown herself to be very much a stabilizing force for our team."

Viola showed her leadership ability early this season against Arizona. Although NU lost 15-2 to the No. 1

Wildcats — the only game the Huskers lost by more than one run — Revelle said she is pleased how Viola took control and gathered the team together after the loss.

Last season, Viola, from Novato, Calif., was named second-team All-Big 12. The season before, following her freshman year, she was named the Big Eight player of the year.

Viola is still proving her consistency in the field and at the plate. In the Coca-Cola Classic, Viola hit her 29th and 30th career home runs to become NU's all-time home run leader. She is also the 14th person in NCAA history to hit more than 30 home runs in a career.

This season, Viola is surrounded by a young infield. True freshman Jennifer Lizama starts at second, while sophomore Kelly Pinkepank is playing her first season at third.

"I'm basically the veteran on the infield," Viola said. "I feel ready to take on that role, because I'm really comfortable and I know what my job is. It has kind of allowed me to pay attention to other areas where people are unsure about where they are supposed to be in certain situations."

Nee anticipates 'electric zoo'

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counted for 10 miscues.

"That's way too many," Luc said. "If I can cut down on that, the team will feed off me, and we'll have a better chance to win the game."

To win the game, which will be televised nationally by ABC, Nebraska must overcome an obstacle absent in the teams' first meeting. KU center Scot Pollard, a 6-foot-11 force in the paint, plays for the third time Sunday since recovering from a fractured right foot.

With Pollard missing from the lineup, the Big 12 champion Jayhawks (28-1 and 14-1) struggled — Kansas-style. Three days after Nebraska took KU to overtime in Lawrence, Missouri beat Kansas 96-94 in double overtime. The Jayhawks bounced back to win 69-62 at Iowa State and stomped Colorado by 40 points on Feb. 15.

But Jayhawk Coach Roy Williams, whose team won 70-68 Monday at Oklahoma, said not all has run smoothly this season. In addition to losing Pollard, Kansas played without Jacque Vaughn for its first 10 games, and the senior point guard has been human-like at times since his return, averaging 10.3 points and 6.1 assists per game.

"In some ways, it's been the most challenging coaching year I've had," Williams said. "We've had to continually make changes and have youngsters understand that their roles are going to change a little. The respect that the kids have had for each other

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ROY WILLIAMS
Kansas basketball coach

is the key."

With victories at UCLA, Virginia, Colorado, Texas Tech and Iowa State this season, Williams said, KU knows the pressure of playing before a boisterous crowd. The Jayhawks began the season ranked second, moved to No. 1 on Dec. 2 and haven't left the top spot since.

"You get everyone's best shot," Williams said. "No one is going to be unenthused. But there should be no time when the other team is more ready than you are."

Nebraska will be more than ready Sunday, Nee said.

"I think the place is going to be a zoo on Sunday," Nee said. "I think it's going to be an electric zoo. But I don't think we can have a bad start against Kansas. We have to be up 10 at half and then hold off their spurt."

With a win on Senior Day — Nebraska will honor Mikki Moore and Bernard Garner before the game —

Men's Basketball Starters

Sunday, 2:47 p.m.
Devaney Center

Nebraska 16-12 (7-8)				
Pos	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
F	13 Bernard Garner	6-7	245	Sr.
F	5 Larry Florence	6-5	225	So.
C	32 Milt Moore	6-11	220	Sr.
G	30 Cookie Belcher	6-3	200	Fr.
G	10 Tyrone Lue	6-0	170	So.

Kansas 28-1 (14-1)				
Pos	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
F	34 Paul Pierce	6-7	220	So.
F	45 Raef LaFrentz	6-11	235	Jr.
C	35 Scot Pollard	6-11	265	Sr.
G	35 Jerod Haase	6-3	191	Sr.
G	11 Jacque Vaughn	6-1	195	Sr.

the Huskers meet the magic NCAA Tournament criteria of the old Big Eight Conference. Since the tournament expanded to 64 teams in 1985, no Big Eight team with 17 Division-I wins and a .500 league record has missed the Big Dance.

"We've just got to come out and play the way we did in the second half (Wednesday)," said NU forward Troy Piatkowski, who scored a career-high 11 points against OSU. "We've had a great February, and I don't see how we can't be a bubble team."

Beck happy to end month

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That win can come either at Gallagher-Iba Arena, a place where Beck has never won in her 11-year career as NU's coach, or in the Big 12 Tournament on Tuesday at the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City, Mo.

"I feel good that we can go down to Stillwater and rebound from it," Beck said after NU's 66-58 loss at No. 8 Kansas on Wednesday night. "I don't feel down about it."

But Beck said Saturday's game is not a must-win situation for the Huskers, who have lost four of their last five outings by a total of 13 points.

The Huskers have lost three of their last four games by five points, and against the Jayhawks NU blew an eight-point halftime lead. It was the largest halftime deficit KU faced at Allen Fieldhouse this season.

"I'm not going to say it is (a must

win)," Beck said. "I'm not going to do that to myself. If we won (against Kansas) it would have taken a lot of pressure off us. If we don't win then we are going to have to play well in the Big 12. But I can't say 19 is not going to get us in."

Beck bases her optimism on how the Huskers have been playing against the league's and the nation's top teams. Nebraska beat Texas Tech 62-57 in Lincoln during February and lost by one point in overtime at Texas on Feb. 17.

Anna DeForge, whose 23 points against the Jayhawks moved the junior up to ninth on the NU's all-time career scoring chart with 1,188 points, said the Huskers must keep their chins up at Oklahoma State.

"The last couple of games we've been right there and just haven't been able to get over the edge," DeForge said. "It gets really frustrating and really disappointing."

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