

# NVA has grown in one year

By SHANNON HEFFELFINGER  
Staff Reporter

Gary Wyma took a big risk last season when he invested thousands of dollars in the fledgling National Volleyball Association.

The women's professional league was suffering from bad management, poor attendance and little media interest.

Wyma restructured the league, buying out minority owners and recruiting new general managers, coaches and players. He studied possible new sights and placed teams in high-interest areas.

Now, after a year away from the West Coast, the NVA has resurrected itself. Fan interest and media participation are at an all-time high, and Wyma's risky venture has turned into a profitable success. The league will expand next season, fielding new teams in Madison, Wis., and Austin, Texas.

"We are tremendously happy," Wyma said from San Diego. "This year, the frustrations are gone. We have 20 times the media and triple the attendance. And it's all because we've gone to the right areas."

One of those areas is Nebraska, specifically Lincoln, where the NVA Championship Playoffs will take place this weekend at Northeast High School. The weekend's matches will

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JOEL McCARTNEY  
Tornados volleyball coach

showcase the top four regular season finishers in the league.

"Lincoln is the perfect place to have the championship," Wyma said. "Because of (NU Coach) Terry Pettit and all he's done at Nebraska, the fans have a real understanding and an appreciation for the game."

On Saturday at 5 p.m., the Colorado Thunder (5-4) will face the undefeated and first-seeded Iowa Blizzard (9-0). In the second semifinal match at 7 p.m., the third-seeded Nebraska Tornados (4-5) take on the Utah Golden Spikers (3-6).

Tornado Coach Joel McCartney said that although his team — which includes several former Cornhusker players — will have a home-court advantage, the fan interest in Lincoln will benefit the three other teams as well.

"Because the fans are so knowledgeable," McCartney said, "it will raise the level of play for everybody. Iowa will be a better team because they are playing here. They'll play well

knowing how supportive and interested the fans are."

The Tornados and the Blizzard both defeated their semifinal opponents twice during the regular season, but those matches cannot be considered an accurate indication of how the teams will fair Saturday.

Because of the nature of the league — teams practice only once a week and players are paid approximately \$100 per match — team members cannot afford to concentrate full time on their NVA careers.

These outside factors have made it difficult for many teams to compete with a full roster during the season. McCartney expects that to be different throughout the playoffs.

"What fans saw during the regular season was not what they will see this weekend," McCartney said. "There will be more parity, because all four teams will be at full strength."

"The team that is successful will win with a strong combination of work ethic and experience. It's going to be a real dogfight."

## Road leads to stardom

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things," Thompson said, "and if I just keep getting stronger and my technique keeps improving, there's a lot that I can do."

Thompson, a junior in the outdoor season although her indoor eligibility expired after she won her first NCAA title in March, envisions the day when she throws 65 feet. Last week at the Drake Relays, she threw 58 feet, 3/4 inches, breaking a 10-year meet record for college athletes. She's topped 61 feet several times this season, but never in competition without scratching.

"She's very proud of what she's done," Colligan said, "and she wears it well and projects it. She loves the training, the discipline that it requires, and she loves the attention, too. And she deserves it."

Syble Thompson knew long ago that Tressa was different from most little girls. When Tressa's sisters slept at night, they snuggled with dolls, Syble Thompson said, but Tressa lined up volleyballs, footballs and basketballs beside her bed.

"We always knew we had a little tomboy in her," Syble Thompson said. "But we are very proud of what she's done. It's kind of overwhelming, and she handles it really well."

Last summer, the Bloomfield Chamber of Commerce named Tressa an honorary member at a banquet in her honor after an eighth-place finish at the U.S. Olympic Trials. Thompson's mother said she hears encouraging words from townspeople daily during the track and field season.

Support from the Bloomfield community, Tressa said, is nothing new. While in junior high school, she played quarterback on the football team, and as a high school freshman and sophomore she played tight end and safety, becoming the first girl in Nebraska history to win a state football championship.

"I had this peculiar instinct that I liked to hit heads and make contact," Thompson said. "If you do that in basketball, they catch you on all those fouls. That's how I am in the shot-put ring. I release all my energy with a throw."

Midway through her senior year of high school, Thompson still held tightly to her dream of playing college basketball. But with the advice of her father, she turned down basketball opportunities at Kansas State and Iowa State to throw at NU.

The Husker coaches, however, had their eyes on Crete's Teri Steer, who instead chose Southern Methodist and provided Thompson with her primary competition before a broken leg shelved Steer prior to the Frank Sevigne Husker Invite three months ago.

"When I came in my freshman year," Thompson said, "no one really expected me to do that well. But I had the determination, and I wanted to be the best."

Following a successful indoor season as a freshman, Thompson redshirted in the spring and switched from a glide throwing motion to a spin technique.

"Watching her movements, I had a sneaking suspicion she could ultimately achieve at a higher level," Colligan said, "even if we had to backtrack a little bit. We were making good progress, but we were making progress down a road that eventually was going to have construction points."

Thompson endured a frustrating stretch of months in which she temporarily lost five to 10 feet of distance on her throws.

"I would go home and sit in my room and beat up my pillow and wonder what the heck I was doing here," she said. "But I had the determination, and I wanted to be the best."


"(Colligan) just hammered my ass. I think he saw in me what no one else saw. He saw that I have what it takes to be the big dog."

Three years later, Thompson, though still not the big dog of U.S. track and field, has nearly mastered the spin technique and ranks among the top three throwers in the United States, along with former UCLA standout Valeyta Althouse and long-time star Connie Price-Smith.

After her NU career, Thompson wants to remain in Lincoln and train with Colligan, she said, in preparation for "at least the next two, and maybe the next three Olympics."

This summer, while she's not in Greece for the World Championships or in Sicily, Italy, for the World University Games in August, Thompson is content in Nebraska.

She wants to work in law enforcement after her days of international competition. And she's secured an internship with the Nebraska State Patrol, a job that may someday send her cruising down State Highway 84, exploring the path to Bloomfield she blazed past on her way to stardom.



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