

NU soccer could sack Big 12 goal

BY JAY SAUNDERS
Assignment Reporter

With Nebraska and Texas A&M returning this season as nationally ranked soccer teams, the biggest race in the Big 12 Conference might be for third place.

The Cornhuskers and the Aggies are expected to lead the young conference in its second season. Nebraska comes into the fall season ranked sixth nationally, the same place it ended last season, while A&M is not far behind, ranked eighth in the preseason poll.

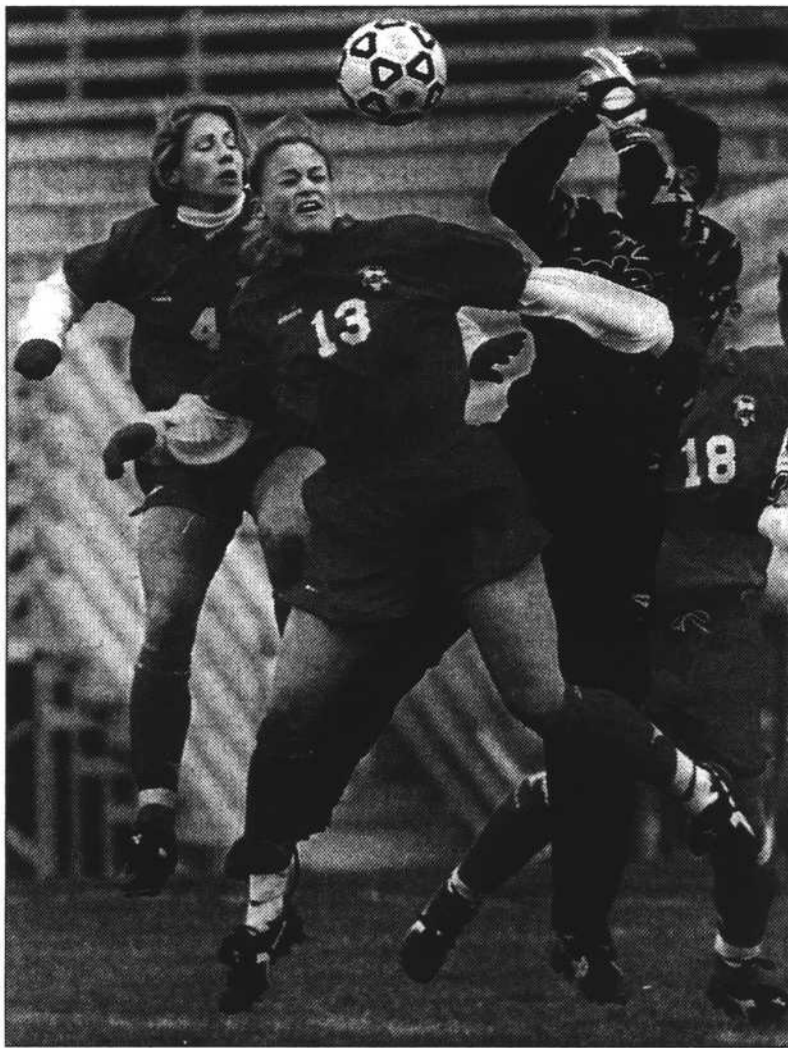
Good recruiting classes and more-experienced teams are expected to increase the talent and competition level in the conference. Whether that will be enough to challenge Nebraska and Texas A&M for the top two spots remains to be seen.

"It was an excellent conference last year, even though there were a lot of first-year teams," Oklahoma coach Bettina Fletcher said. "Teams are going to gun for first, but third place will be what everyone is shooting for."

Nebraska returns nearly everyone from its NCAA Tournament run last season. Coach John Walker's lineup includes All-America forward Kari Uppinghouse and goalkeeper Rebecca Hornbacher, who returns as one of the nation's top goalies. A&M lost four starters from last year's team but reloaded with talented freshmen and 15 returning letter winners.

Baylor heads a group of young teams that will challenge the top two teams. The Bears return all 11 starters from last year's 17-3-1 season in which they finished third in the Big 12. Baylor almost pulled off an upset over A&M in the conference tournament semifinals, losing 5-4 in overtime. Courtney Saunders, who scored 18 goals and won the offensive MVP award in the Big 12 Conference Tournament, leads the Bears' scoring attack.

"Baylor can be looked at as a



MATT MILLER/DN

NEBRASKA'S LINDSAY EDDLEMAN and Tanya Franck battle the Texas A&M goalie for the ball in the Big 12 Championship Game.

spoiler," Oklahoma State coach Karen Hancock said. "Anyone in this conference can be recognized as someone who can knock off one of those top teams. Anything can happen in this crazy game."

After Baylor comes a group of young teams that are hoping to be noticed. Texas Tech, Missouri and Texas all have potential to make big strides from last year. Add to that race Oklahoma, which is in its first year in the Big 12 Conference. Last season, Oklahoma went 1-13 as an independent, but the Sooners return seven starters and have a talented freshman class.

Solid recruiting classes across the board should make a major impact. The Big 12 is hoping to join the

Atlantic Coast Conference and the Southeastern Conference as one of the nation's elite leagues.

"We have six or eight very good teams in the conference," Baylor coach Randy Waldrum said. "For years, the ACC has been the conference to play in. We can model ourselves after that and hopefully better it down the road."

Colorado coach Austin Daniels said the success of Nebraska and Texas A&M last season helps tremendously in getting the Big 12 to that elite level.

"They won games with a tough national schedule," Daniels said. "Two of the top teams in the country are in our conference. That gives the Big 12 a lot of credibility."

Volleyball teams rap on NU's door

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
Assignment Reporter

As the Big 12 Conference enters its second volleyball season, most league coaches agree that the conference title is Nebraska's to lose.

But an abundance of talent and returning experience from the top of the league down to the very bottom could result in an interesting race for second.

"In terms of the conference race, Nebraska is at the top, and the rest of us are challenging," Texas coach Jim Moore said. "Texas A&M and Colorado will be very good. I think you can throw Texas Tech and Kansas State in there also. All of those teams could beat anybody at any given time."

Each of those six teams competed in the NCAA Tournament last December. Texas Tech lost its first match, but Texas, Texas A&M, Colorado and Kansas State all posted first-round victories. Nebraska, the defending conference champion,

advanced to the Final Four before being eliminated by eventual national champion Stanford.

Each of last year's top six finishers, except Kansas State and Texas Tech, return at least four starters.

Overall, the conference returns seven of 12 all-conference selections.

Despite the returning talent and experience on each of last year's top teams' rosters, Kansas coach Karen Schonewise - who was a two-time All-American at Nebraska - said the door is open for teams that finished in the league's bottom half last season to climb into the top six.

"We had a really great spring and the intensity level in practices has been much higher this year," Schonewise said. "I think we'll be in the top five or six if we stay healthy, and I think there will be surprises in the conference this year."

Oklahoma coach Miles Pabst agrees that the race for second is wide open, which includes his team.

"It's all going to depend on staying

healthy," Pabst said. "We return six players who contributed a lot. Nebraska is definitely above the rest, but then I'd say it's us, Texas A&M, Colorado and Texas."

Please see VOLLEY on 8

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