

Core players important, but bench can contribute

By SAM MCKEWON
Staff Reporter

For the Nebraska men's basketball team, the most important players may not be out on the floor, but on the bench.

Despite returning a core of six players (junior guards Tyrone Lue and Troy Piatkowski, sophomore guard Cookie Belcher, junior forwards Larry Florence and Andy Markowski and junior center Venson Hamilton) from last season, NU still has questions — of depth at several positions — that will not be answered until the Nov. 16 season-opener against UNC-Greensboro.

The Huskers will have to rely on freshmen Todd Smith, Brant Harriman, Rodney Williams and Chad Johnson to fill the Huskers' rotation. Smith is injured and not expected for the opener.

Nebraska Coach Danny Nee said depth is one of the major focuses of early practice this season.

"Depth is certainly a problem for us, but these things take care of themselves as the season goes on," he said. "We have decent depth at the guards but we're a little thin up front."

NU does return a solid nucleus, which accounted for 69.2 percent of the scoring and 62.9 percent of rebounding last season.

The Huskers' success this season starts with All-American candidate Lue, who earned second All-Big 12 honors last season after averaging 18.8 points per game with 4.3 assists per contest. He was then selected to play on the USA 22 & Under World Championship Team this summer.

Nee said Lue is NU's leader on and off the court.

"He's the best point guard in the Big 12 and one of the best in the country, period," Nee said. "He doesn't need to statistically improve his numbers, so he's more focused on making every member of this team better. He's going to be a dominant force."

Belcher also resumes his starting role at the two-guard position from last year. A member of Big 12's all-rookie team last season, Belcher averaged 9.2 points per game and 3.8 rebounds per game. Belcher struggled from the free-throw line, however, making only 49.4 percent of his attempts last season.

Nee said Belcher, who has been hampered by a hamstring injury, should be ready for the opener and a breakout season shooting the ball.

"Cookie has worked a lot on his free-throw work and his three-point work," he said. "He knows he needs to improve his outside shooting."

At small forward, Florence is again NU's designated defensive stopper this season and looks to be completely healthy after two seasons of chronic knee problems. Last year, Florence tallied 7.3 points per game and 3.8 rebounds per game.

1997-98 Nebraska Men's Basketball Schedule

Date	Opponent	Time
Nov. 5	Team Pella	7:05 p.m.
Nov. 10	Marathon Oil	7:05 p.m.
Nov. 16	N.C.-Greensboro	1:05 p.m.
Nov. 19	Western Illinois	7:05 p.m.
Nov. 22	New Orleans	7:05 p.m.
Nov. 25	Colorado St.	7:05 p.m.
Nov. 29	Texas-San Antonio	7:05 p.m.
Dec. 1	Tulsa	6:00 p.m.
Dec. 5	N.C.-Wilmington	8:30 p.m.
Dec. 10	Creighton	7:05 p.m.
Dec. 13	Minnesota	7:00 p.m.
Dec. 27	Virginia	9:30 p.m.
Dec. 29	2nd Round	3:00/9:00 p.m.
Dec. 30	Final Round	TBA
Jan. 3	Kansas	8:05 p.m.
Jan. 7	Oklahoma St.	7:05 p.m.
Jan. 11	Colorado	12:05 p.m.
Jan. 18	Oklahoma	12:05 p.m.
Jan. 21	Texas	8:05 p.m.
Jan. 24	Iowa St.	12:45 p.m.
Jan. 28	Kansas St.	7:05 p.m.
Feb. 1	Kansas	2:35 p.m.
Feb. 4	Missouri	7:05 p.m.
Feb. 7	Kansas St.	12:45 p.m.
Feb. 11	Texas A & M	7:00 p.m.
Feb. 14	Baylor	1:00 p.m.
Feb. 18	Missouri	7:05 p.m.
Feb. 21	Colorado	7:00 p.m.
Feb. 25	Texas Tech	7:05 p.m.
Feb. 28	Iowa St.	6:30 p.m.
Mar. 5-6	Big 12 Tournament	

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DANNY NEE
Nebraska basketball coach

Healthy again, Florence is ready to become a more complete player this season, Nee said.

"Larry worked as hard as anybody in the off-season," he said. "We know he's a good defensive player, and he's really focused on cutting down on his errors."

Markowski and Hamilton man the power forward and center positions for NU.

Nee likens Markowski, who averaged 4.2 points per game and 3.9 rebounds per game last year, to former Husker Bruce Chubick with savvy court knowledge and strong offensive rebounding.

With the graduation of Mikki Moore, Hamilton becomes the Huskers' go-to player inside.

Nee said Hamilton plays a big role in how much Nebraska achieves in the season.

"He's got to show up every night and play consistent," Nee said. "I know he wants this."

Harriman and Johnson will serve as reserves in the post.

Piatkowski serves as the team's

sixth man and could play at either forward or guard. After playing in only eight of the Big 12 games last year, Nee said he will look to the junior for an outside shooting threat.

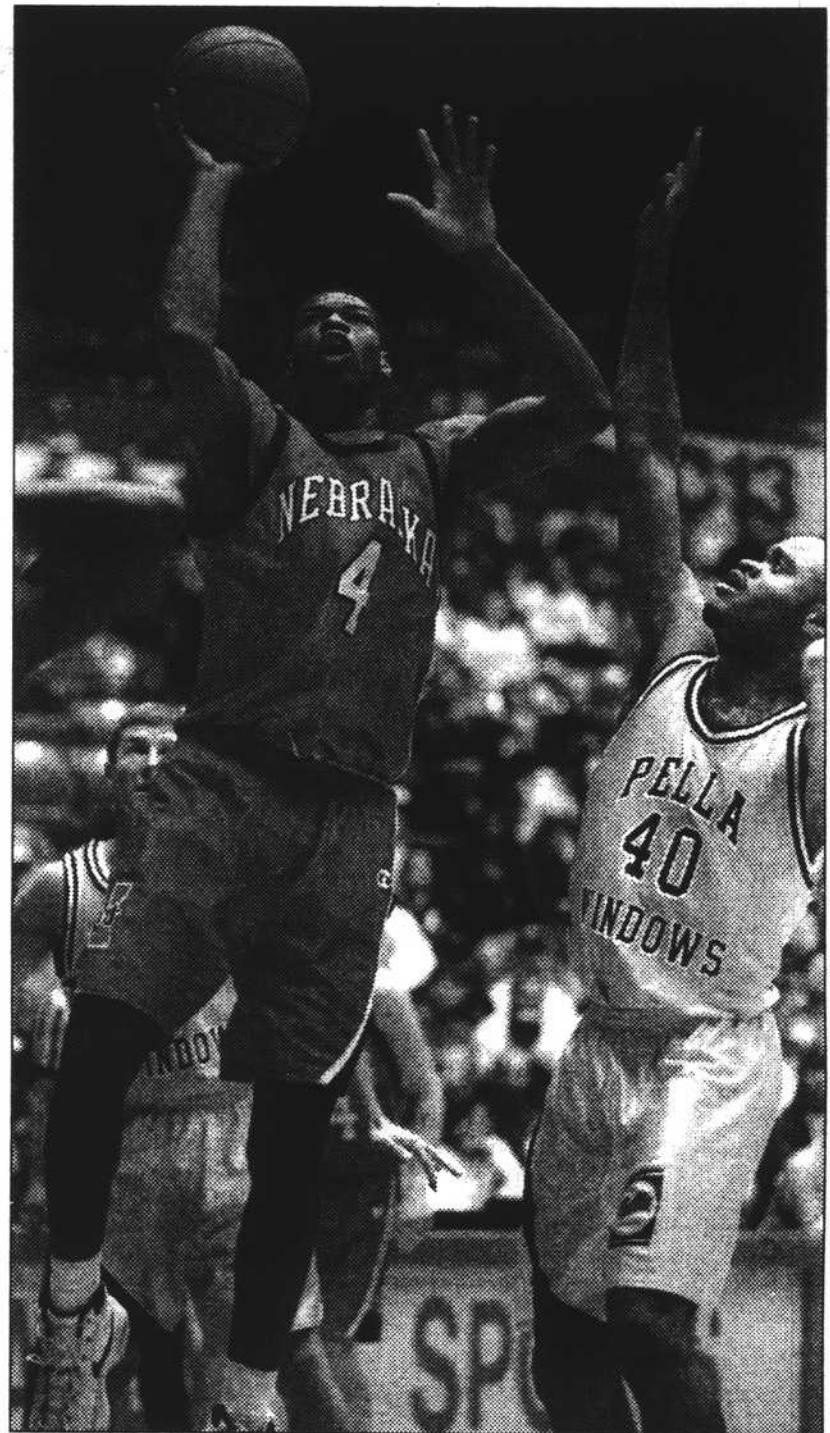
"He's got a great touch and he's got a good stroke as his brother did," Nee said. Piatkowski's brother Eric is a former Husker, who now plays with the Los Angeles Clippers in the NBA.

NU is picked to finish fourth in the Big 12 Conference.

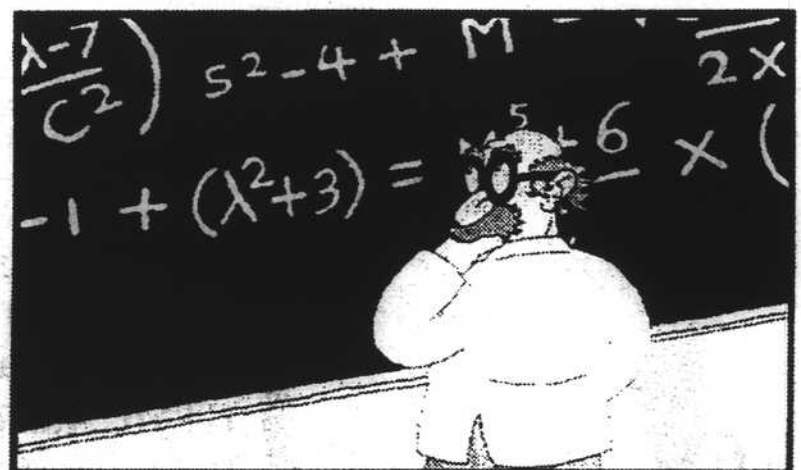
Kansas is the conference's prohibited favorite, while Oklahoma and Texas Tech will receive Top 25 consideration.

Nebraska has to take care of its home-court advantage to succeed in the Big 12 and put itself in position for the NCAA Tournament, which is the team's top goal, Nee said.

"We've got some tough games in nonconference and the Big 12 isn't easy," Nee said. "We have to win our games at home and try and steal some on the road. You win all your games at home in conference and go .500 on the road, and you're in the NCAA Tournament, usually."



RYAN SODERLIN/DN
JUNIOR FORWARD VENSON HAMILTON scores a layup against Pella Windows Howard Eatman. Hamilton will have to pick up the rebounding for the Huskers after the loss of Mikki Moore.



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ON THE COVER

NEBRASKA FRESHMAN SWIMMER JOE BURGARD competed in the Big 12 Invitational Swim Meet earlier this season. Many of the Husker winter sports have already begun competition or will start their seasons within the next two weeks.

RYAN SODERLIN/DN