

Among giants

Lue holds NU team together, initiates discipline, respect

BY DAVID WILSON
Senior Reporter

When he couldn't find Troy Piatkowski in the weight room after practice one day last week, Tyrone Lue became concerned. He yelled throughout the Bob Devaney Sports Center, but Piatkowski was no where to be found.

"I thought he walked out of the weight room without lifting," Lue said. "I thought he was skipping out."

That's exactly what Nebraska

Coach Danny Nee likes about Lue, NU's junior point guard.

"He's responsible for himself and he's also responsible for helping the other players on the team be better," Nee said. "He knows for us to be successful this year, he has to make everyone on the court that he's playing with a better player."

Last year, Lue shared leadership responsibilities with seniors Bernard Garner and Mikki Moore, but this year, the Cornhuskers boast no seniors in the starting rotation. That leaves Lue with a lot of pressure on his shoulders.

"Nah," he said with a shrug.

A second-team All-Big 12 selection by The Associated Press, Lue led Nebraska in scoring last season as a sophomore with 603 points — the third best scoring performance in NU history.

But this season, Lue is not looking to improve his numbers, Nee said.

"Tyrone doesn't have to improve his statistics," Nee said. "He doesn't have to score more points than he did last year. The only statistic that matters to him and should matter to everyone on this team is our win and loss statistic. He has to lead us to make us a better program and a better team. And he's doing that. He's doing a great job."

As a true freshman opening the 1995-96 season, Lue was thrown into the fire and finished with 296 points and a 69 percent shooting percentage. Lue laughed when asked how much he has improved in just two seasons at Nebraska.

"I've improved a great deal," Lue said. "It's just probably more the mental part than anything."

Most of the Huskers appreciate Lue's talent, but probably none more than his distant cousin and shooting guard, Cookie Belcher. The 6-foot-3 sophomore, who attended the same elementary school as Lue in Mexico, Mo., said he has seen Lue improve every year.

"He comes and he practices hard every day and even if he has a bad practice, it's good to us just because he's so good," Belcher said. "Last year, there were a couple of seniors that also were leaders, but this year, it's just him. I think he knows that. He wants to be more focused and make the team his."

Along with Nee, Lue is helping this year's Husker squad develop a winning attitude, which has not been the team's strength over the past few seasons. Five freshmen enter into the picture this season to fill the shoes of five lettermen that do not return.

Lue said he went to Nee at the end of last season with a few suggestions.

"He's a nice guy, but I just thought he had to take a different

approach and be harder on us so we can have the self-discipline and maturity to execute down the stretch," Lue said.

And Nee has responded.

Along with Nee's new approach, Lue has added a few new tricks of his own. Aside from being the team leader, Lue has improved his play on the court, aided by a stint with the USA Basketball 22 & Under World Championship Team last summer.

Under Coach Rick Majerus, the University of Utah head coach, Lue and the USA team finished 4-2 in the FILA Summer Pro League against tough competition that included some NBA players.

"He was mean and strict, but I guess that's the way he is," Lue said of Majerus. "He kept drilling us, but I learned a great deal. It's kind of funny that I learned so much in two weeks, but I did."

An irritated peroneal nerve in his right knee — caused by icing — sent Lue home early, as the rest of the team traveled to Australia to compete in the International Basketball Federation 22 & Under World Championship. But the experience was well worth it, Lue said.

With his knee back to 100 percent, Lue will take the court this season as a contender for All-America honors. His quick road to success doesn't surprise Nee, who said Lue is the best all-around player he has ever coached.

"I think players grow into stardom," Nee said. "Eric Piatkowski (now with the Los Angeles Clippers) came as a redshirt, played a little bit as a freshman, started as a sophomore, was an All-Conference player as a junior and an All-Star as a senior and a first-round draft choice. It took him five years."

"Tyrone Lue has become this in three. He's a star. He's not one of the best players in the conference, he's one of the premier players in the country."

But Lue said Nebraska fans don't need to worry about losing him to the NBA after this season.

"I'll be here next year," Lue said. "I'll be here."