

## Pettit looks to Nepo to lead Huskers

### Volleyball

Tournament 7-30  
No. 9 Nebraska vs. No. 1 USC  
NCAA Volleyball Regionals at  
The Pyramid, Long Beach, Calif.



BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER  
Assignment Reporter

The Nebraska volleyball team enters this weekend with the possibility of a season-ending loss looming over its head like a dark cloud.

But NU Coach Terry Pettit remains confident that the Huskers can avoid a possible storm by placing the responsibility of leading the team on the shoulders of one of its brightest stars.

The No. 9 Cornhuskers will turn to All-American setter Fiona Nepo to lead what Pettit hopes turns into a successful run through the NCAA Tournament Pacific Regional hosted by No. 1 Long Beach State.

"More than any other player," Pettit said, "she reflects the spirit of our team."

NU faces seventh-ranked Southern California (23-5) Friday night at 7:30 at the Pyramid in Long Beach, Calif.

With a victory, Nebraska (26-6) advances to the regional final Saturday at 9:30 p.m. to play the winner of Long Beach State (31-1) and Washington State (20-9), who face off Friday night at 10. If the Huskers win the final, they would advance to the Final Four for the third straight year.

Pettit said Nepo has turned in her best performances of the season the past few weeks. In the Huskers' victory over Michigan State in the second round of the NCAA Tournament last weekend, Nepo recorded five kills and four service aces to go along with her 36 assists.

"You can't play beyond your setter," Pettit said. "If your setter has doubts or struggles, you'd have to have an awfully strong team to overcome that."

"But Fiona is playing her best volleyball of the season. Last year, she spent a lot of energy just learning the position. But now, she has the ability to have an impact in ways she never did before."

Nepo, named to the All-Big 12 first team last week, is not the only

high-profile setter in the Pacific Regional. Long Beach State's Misty May is a strong candidate for player of the year.

A two-time Big West Conference player of the year, May averages 3.05 digs per game and 12 assists per game and has recorded four triple-doubles (kills, assists, digs) this season.

USC Coach Lisa Love said the setters' decision-making ability could determine the outcome of the regional.

Love predicted Nepo would cause problems for Southern California.

"There is no question about it," Love said. "No one is more key than the person at the setter position. Nebraska is an outstanding physical team, but it's their talented setter that allows them to run a very diverse offense."

Nepo's ability to diversify NU's offense helps keep opponents off-balance, Pettit said, an aspect that was missing earlier this season during a stretch when NU lost four of six matches.

But Nepo shares the responsibility for putting the Huskers, winners of 11 straight, back on track.

"I realized that I needed to play at a higher level as we were heading toward the end of our season," Nepo said. "Now, all of the teams in our regional have such strong hitters and setters that for us to compete, I have to play at a higher level."

Pettit said the Huskers also need outside hitters Mandy Monson and Angie Oxley to continue their high level of play.

Monson has hit .300 or better in the last eight matches.

Oxley, who earned conference freshman-of-the-year honors, leads NU with 3.27 kills per contest.

"This promises to be as competitive a regional as there is in the tournament," Pettit said. "USC has an All-American middle who hit .450 for most of the season, and they are very athletic."



MATT MILLER/DN  
SOPHOMORE DENISE KOZIOL bumps the ball to a teammate during a match earlier this season. Nebraska's passing has helped the Huskers to an 11-match win streak and into this weekend's NCAA Regionals in Long Beach, Calif.

### Men's Basketball

## NU looks to ditch road woes

BY SAM MCKEWON  
Staff Reporter

After nine games this season, the Nebraska men's basketball team has met its first crossroads of the year.

The Cornhuskers (7-2) have lost two of its last four games — both on the road — and must play away from the Bob Devaney Sports Center again Saturday at 7 p.m. against Minnesota in Minneapolis at Williams Arena.

After NU's 84-73 loss to Creighton Wednesday, sophomore guard Cookie Belcher pointed to the Golden Gophers as a critical opponent.

"It's a must-win-type game for us," Belcher said. "We have to beat Minnesota on Saturday."

Belcher said it would serve the Huskers well to go into the Outrigger Hotels Rainbow Classic in Hawaii on Dec. 27-30 with a victory. The Rainbow Classic field includes Kansas, Vanderbilt, Hawaii and Virginia. NU must then face back-to-back road games against Kansas and Oklahoma State in early January.

"We can't allow ourselves to go into Hawaii having not won a road game," said Belcher, who scored 12 points against Creighton. "We've got a tough part of our schedule coming up, and Minnesota starts that."

The Gophers (4-2) may not be the best team to start reversing that trend against UM has three starters returning from a 1996-97 team that was 31-4, won the Big 10 title, and went to the Final Four. So far, Minnesota has lost to Utah State, 75-67, and Alabama, 64-63.

Senior forward Sam Jacobson leads the Gophers with 13.7 points per game and 7.2 rebounds. Junior guard Quincy Lewis, who burned NU for 14 points in a 70-56 Golden Gopher win in Lincoln last season, pours in 12.7 points and 6.3 rebounds per game.

Another problem could be UM's famed Williams Arena, known for its seats below the floor and its intimidating crowds.

Point guard Tyrone Lue, who played in an 81-70 loss to the Gophers at Williams Arena in 1995, said taking the crowd out of the game will be key.

"I know that it can get loud, so we have to be ready for that," Lue said. "We have to come out ready to play from the very beginning."

Lue said Nebraska can not afford to continually lose road games. NU was 4-9 on the road last year.

"We can't win only four road games like we did last year," he said. "That can't happen."

## Taylor brings home Outland for family

BY DARREN IVY  
Staff Reporter

Nebraska senior guard Aaron Taylor, who won the Outland Trophy Thursday night, is a family man.

The All-American center and guard considers the Nebraska Cornhusker football team his family right now, but his most important family is the one he has with his wife, Brandi.

"She's the best wife anybody could have," Taylor said. "She's made a sacrifice and she's a great lady for doing that. She's very understanding and she knows things are going to get better down the road when we are not in school."

Taylor, 23, and his wife met and



Taylor

dated in high school. They were married after his freshman year at Nebraska and have been married 3½ years. Taylor said they plan to move back to Wichita Falls, Kan., some day.

During Taylor's freshman year, Brandi stayed in Texas and finished high school. She now lives and works in Lincoln paying the family's bills, Taylor said.

"My wife and I don't have any kids yet," Taylor said. "But I like kids."

Taylor's love of family and kids was evident three years ago when he started helping with Pacific Pals in Lincoln.

Pacific Pals is a summer camp run by athletes. The athletes take disadvantaged Lincoln youths and lead them through multicultural projects and other activities. The goal of the camp is to keep kids off the streets. Taylor said it seems to be working.

"I still have some of these kids calling me and stopping by my house," Taylor said. "Hopefully these kids are turning out for the better."

Taylor has also formed a brotherhood with his teammates.

Eric Anderson, a senior offensive lineman from Lincoln, and Taylor both started as sophomores and have grown and learned their positions together.

"He's a great guy and a great person to hang around," Anderson said.

Taylor has come a long way since high school.

Not heavily recruited, Taylor ended up at NU after former Husker Scott Saltsman, another Wichita Falls graduate, told NU coaches about him.

Since becoming a Husker, Taylor has been a three-year starter on the offensive line. In 1996, he was runner-up for the Outland Trophy, awarded to the best lineman in the country. Thursday night, he was awarded the trophy at the College Football Awards Show in Orlando, Fla.

But Taylor said he wouldn't have been able to do it without his fellow linemen and teammates.

"I'll give all my credit to those guys," Taylor said. "I wouldn't be where I am without those guys."

When Taylor isn't hunting for defenders to block, he can be found in the outdoors with his two hunting dogs, Tex and Flash.

He said he likes hunting not necessarily for the killing, but because he enjoys spending time in the outdoors with his dogs.

"I love animals," Taylor said. "You got to have a dog. (Tex) is my buddy."

Taylor wasn't able to do much hunting or playing football while growing up in Bitburg, Germany. He lived there for eight years while his father served in the Air Force.

Because football isn't popular in Germany he played soccer instead.

Taylor said he had a lot of German friends. Some still keep in touch with his father.

"I think some people over there still follow me and the Huskers," he said.