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Women's gymnasts aim to have historic season

By **DARREN IVY**
Assignment Reporter

Despite the loss of All-American gymnasts Shelly Bartlett and Kim DeHaan from last year's women's gymnastics team, the cupboard is anything but bare.

The Cornhuskers return nine letterwinners, and 1997 Big 12 Coach of the Year Dan Kendig thinks this year's team has a chance to be just as good - if not better - than last year's squad.

"Our goal is to win our fifth conference title in a row," Kendig said. "That is something no other Nebraska team has ever done. We also want to get ourselves into a position to compete for a national title."

Avoiding injuries, having underclassmen step up, and finding where people fit it will be keys to winning a fifth straight conference title, Kendig said.

Depth shouldn't be a problem. "Since I've been here, the strength of our program has been our whole group," Kendig said.

Heather Brink, a sophomore All-

American and the Big 12 Newcomer of the Year, from Lincoln, agreed with Kendig and said practices will be competitive this year.

"It is going to be a fight to stay in the lineup," Brink said. "It will probably come down to the night before meets to see who's doing the best in practice."

Brink, Misty Oxford, a junior All-American from Kelso, Wash., and Nicole Wilkinson, a sophomore All-Big 12 gymnast from London, Ontario, will play key roles for NU this year, Kendig said.

Oxford earned All-American status in the vault, balance beam and floor exercise last year, but couldn't crack the lineup in the uneven bars. But according to coaches, she has improved and may compete for national honors in that event this year.

"Misty keeps getting better and better each year," Kendig said. "We expect a big year out of Misty. She has the ability to be an All-American in all four events this year."

Brink, the first Husker to earn All-America honors as a freshman, will try to equal her performance from last year when she was an All-American in the all-around and the vault at the NCCA Championships.

Wilkinson has seen limited action as she continues to recover from surgery to remove a bone spur in her left foot. At the Maui

Invitational Saturday, she only competed in the uneven bars.

But Wilkinson said she is getting better and set Feb. 20 as a target date to do the all-around for the first time this season. That date can't come soon enough for Kendig.

"Once she gained some confidence and adjusted to the college level, Nicole was as consistent as any gymnast we had last season," Kendig said.

With no seniors on the team, Brink, Wilkinson and Oxford will also have to take over leadership responsibilities. Oxford said the juniors and returnees know they have to take on a leadership role.

"People who have been here have to show (freshman) what kind of work ethic it takes," Oxford said. "When you step up and do better it carries over to everyone."

Oxford said she hoped the veterans' work ethic will carry over to the four freshmen: Amy Ringo, from Phoenix, Betsy Akinwale, from Richfield, Minn., Stacie Sizer, from Omaha, and Kathy Ligon, from Cypress, Texas.

For NU to be successful, the freshmen and other underclassmen are going to have to fill in for the departed seniors, Oxford said.

"Because we lost the two seniors who contributed so much, the freshmen are going to have to step up right away and can't be intimidated."

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