

Returning core powers '98 team

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
Senior Reporter

More than a few bumps complicated the road the Nebraska softball team traveled to earning its first NCAA Regional Tournament bid in three years last spring.

The Cornhuskers relied on the strength of a freshman pitcher who threw an incredible 400 innings last year, a power hitting lineup that dominated games even after its most powerful hitter was sidelined with a knee injury, and an infield that consisted of three athletes playing out of position to cover holes left by injuries.

"It was a challenging year that kept me awake at times," Head Coach Rhonda Revelle said.

But the Huskers' ability to successfully overcome last year's challenges will translate into an easier path on a much longer road, Revelle said — one that leads to the College World Series.

"This team has turned a corner maturity-wise because we had to," she said.

"We're as strong as we've ever been. If we stay healthy, this could be the type of year that as a coach, you just want to savor."

The Huskers may get an early indication of just how appropriate CWS talk is this weekend. Nebraska opens its season today against Cal Poly San Luis Obispo at 4 p.m. in Honolulu at the Second Annual Paradise Classic.

The first two days of the tournament will include round-robin play with a single-elimination tournament following on Sunday.

Of the six teams participating in the tournament, four received votes in the preseason NFCA/USA Today Top 25 poll.

Revelle said Nebraska is ready for the challenge.

"The roster is deeper, and the tradition is stronger," Revelle said.

"Now when I look at Nebraska softball, it better resembles what athletics at Nebraska are."

Defensively, the Huskers return their key players. But even with three

NU needs road wins for tournament berth

BY LISA VONNAHME
Staff Reporter

It's crunch time.

With an NCAA Tournament berth at stake and only five games remaining in the season, the Nebraska women's basketball team, which defeated Kansas 84-69 Wednesday, must finish strong for a chance at postseason play, Coach Paul Sanderford said.

"We have to build on the second half against Kansas," Sanderford said. "These next two games are important for our confidence and to build some momentum going into the Big 12."

The 25th-ranked Cornhuskers (18-7 overall and 7-4 in the Big 12 Conference) look to survive the first of three remaining road games Saturday. Nebraska takes on Oklahoma (8-13

All-Americans and five first-team all-conference honorees back, the infield will have a different look.

Shortstop Ali Viola returns after sitting out much of 1997 with a knee injury, moving Jennifer Lizama — who filled in at short — back to second base and temporary second baseman Alice Brewer back to right field.

Revelle said the combination of Lizama and Viola in the middle is one of the strongest in the nation.

"Lizama is the best second basemen I've had the privilege of playing with here," Viola said. "While I'm thinking ahead and trying to get back in the swing of things, she is solid and it takes a lot of pressure off me."

Big 12 catcher of the year Jenny Smith also returns.

The Huskers also will be strong at the mound, where for the first time since 1994, they have a staff comprised of both left- and right-handers.

Jenny Voss returns from a record-breaking freshman campaign where she won 24 of 29 games and pitched in more than 80 percent of NU's innings.

Revelle said either junior college transfer Christie McCoy or freshman Lori Tschannen will have to take some pressure off Voss.

"Voss could do what she did again because of her sheer will," Revelle said. "But if we do that to her for the next three years, it will begin to take its toll."

Offensively, NU could dominate with its power, Revelle said. Six of the top eight Husker season home run marks are owned by members of the 1998 squad.

"Power is not something we strive for, but we did win a lot of games on home runs last year," Revelle said.

"We were fourth in the nation in that category. But I would trade some of that power for a little more contact. We need to lower our strike out ratio."

Overall, Smith said the pieces are in place for Nebraska to build on last season's success.

"Every year your expectations rise," Smith said. "Our freshman class gets better every year. It's hard to believe, but they do. And they come with the realization that we are becoming a national power, and that's what they expect."

NU faces 'must-win game'

Women's Basketball

and 4-7) in Norman, Okla., at Lloyd Noble Center at 2 p.m.

"They're dangerous," Sanderford said. "In this league it just seems like everybody struggles on the road. Oklahoma will be ready to play, and we're not taking anything for granted."

Nebraska, which is 1-4 in conference road games this season, knows what it needs to do to beat the Sooners in Norman, Sanderford said.

"We just have to come out with confidence," Sanderford said. "You

Please see ROAD WINS on 8



LANE HICKENBOTTOM/DN
NU STARTING PITCHERS Peter Lythgoe, left, and Kenny Duebelbeis take a breather after practice Thursday. Both will likely see action this weekend as the Huskers open their season at the University of Minnesota in the Metrodome.

New coach to open season in Minnesota

BY MIKE KLUCK
Staff Reporter

At Monday's press conference, Nebraska Softball Coach Rhonda Revelle asked first year NU Baseball Coach Dave Van Horn if she could stay and listen to his comments.

Van Horn agreed and joked, "You can help me with the names."

Van Horn will know the names of his Cornhuskers when they open their season Sunday against Minnesota at the Metrodome in Minneapolis. What position they're playing on the field may be another question.

Nebraska will play one nine-inning game against the Gophers on Sunday at 7:05 p.m., and the two teams will play a doubleheader on Monday.

"Right now, the key for us is to find somebody to run the ball down in center field that can give us some offense," Van Horn said. "We haven't seen that yet. I don't

think we have a true center fielder." Van Horn said he has been fortunate with unseasonably warm weather, which has helped him identify the Huskers' talent during the four weeks since his announcement as NU's new coach.

NU has had six scrimmages outside since the beginning of practice.

"Of all the years this was a good year for this to happen for myself and the rest of the coaches," Van Horn said. "We get to see these guys play in live game situations."

"Now if we had been inside for 30 days straight and then gone up to Minnesota and played, I probably would have played the wrong people. We feel like that we have had enough of an opportunity to see everything we needed to see."

One thing Van Horn has seen is the need to move sophomore third baseman/designated hitter Ken Harvey, who hit a NU freshman record .388, to first base.

Van Horn said playing first base will be Harvey's ticket to

playing professional baseball. "I'm real excited that we start next week," Harvey said. "I'm not really much of a practice player. I look forward to games, and I can't wait for the season to start."

Senior pitcher Kenny Duebelbeis, who may start Sunday's season opener, said he is also looking forward to the start of the season.

"Last year we didn't come with the good mindset that we have this year," Duebelbeis said. "We're coming out and we're going to win a lot more games than people say we are. I'm looking forward to the season."

"There's a lot more motivation, a lot more spark and desire. Everyone's attitude is just go out there and play hard for the new coach."

Nebraska will be taking a smaller roster than expected to Minnesota. The Huskers suited up 41 players to start the season, but has since dropped its squad down to 31.

Team sees game as milestone on road to tournament

BY DARREN IVY
Assignment Reporter

After snapping a four-game losing streak, the monkey is off the back of the Nebraska men's basketball team — for now.

The Cornhuskers, 14-10 overall, defeated Texas A&M 75-58 Wednesday to improve to 5-6 in the Big 12 Conference. But on Saturday, fourth-place Baylor, 11-10 and 6-5, come to Lincoln for a 7:05 p.m. showdown.

"It's a must-win game for us," NU guard Cookie Belcher said. "We have to win all our home games and try to get one on the road."

With five regular-season games

Men's Basketball

remaining, Belcher said he thought the Huskers would have to win at least four along with at least one conference tournament game to qualify for the NCAA Tournament.

Belcher said he thought any NCCA hopes would have been eliminated if they would have lost that game.

NU Coach Danny Nee said the Huskers will need the balance they had against A&M again against the Bears. Baylor has a nice, solid basketball

team and play rugged defense, Nee said. Brian Skinner is one reason for the Bear's success.

"He is a first-class player," Nee said. "He is the best pure center in the league, because I consider Raef LaFrentz a power forward."

Belcher said the key to beating the Bears will be making Skinner as much of a non-factor as possible. To do that, NU will play some zone defense and make a conscious effort to check Skinner off the boards, Nee said.

By limiting Skinner and taking care of the ball on offense, Nee hopes NU can start another winning streak.

"We want to finish the season on a positive and get ready for the Big 12 tournament."