

Walker uses spring to refresh lineup

Loss of seniors forces changes

BY JAY SAUNDERS
Assignment Reporter

In the four years the Nebraska soccer program has existed, the team has lost a few games, but it has never had to deal with the loss of key players.



Walker

But coming off a successful season, NU is having to regroup this spring without the services of its first graduating class. The Huskers lost five seniors, including former All-American Kari Uppinghouse and goalkeeper Rebecca Hornbacher, after last fall's 18-4 season.

"This is a different kind of year," NU Coach John Walker said. "The dynamics of the team has changed a little bit."

The Huskers lost the most players on defense. NU needs to fill voids in three starting spots in the backfield. For three years, Hornbacher was the starting goalkeeper and set almost all of Nebraska's goalkeeping records. Sophomore Karina LeBlanc will fill Hornbacher's spot. LeBlanc played in 11 games last season, but has yet to start a game in goal.

Walker said he is not as sure what to do about replacing Stephanie Vacek at sweeper.

NU started its spring schedule, which consists of six exhibition games, Sunday with a last-minute 5-4 win at Florida. The Gators, who have 11 seniors, finished last season ranked No. 14.

Against the Gators, junior Sharolta Nonen played central defender, which is a change from the outside defender position she played last fall.

The Huskers revolve their offense around the position of central midfielder, which is where Uppinghouse played since coming to NU. Junior Amy Walsh moved from forward to central midfielder

against Florida.

"We are certainly trying things to see how they work," Walker said. "Being versatile makes them better players. It is important to understand the roles of everyone on the team."

Against Florida, the changes didn't stop at just sweeper and central midfielder. Walker used a lot of players at several different positions. Juniors Jenny Benson and Isabelle Morneau, who usually play offense, played part of the Florida game in the backfield.

Benson, who was fourth on the team in scoring last season, said she doesn't mind being moved around.

"We are getting used to playing without the four starters we lost," Benson said. "It is big that people know how to play two or even three positions. You never know when an injury is going to happen."

Walker said his philosophy in the spring is to experiment against the best teams in the country.

This year is no exception.

NU plays the top three teams in the country on consecutive weekends in April. The Huskers play at No. 3 Notre Dame, which beat NU in the second round of last year's NCAA Tournament, No. 1 North Carolina and No. 2 Connecticut.

The Huskers were scheduled to play No. 4 Santa Clara, but the Broncos were taken off the schedule so NU could play the U.S. Under-20 National Team.

"I can say with quite a lot of confidence that there is no one that has a tougher spring schedule than us," Walker said. "This is the time for each player to make large strides. We will have a realistic picture of our team in the spring."

Walker said the win over Florida was a good start after replacing the five seniors. He said all the work this spring will help when the Huskers open up the season Sept. 1 against Iowa State.

"It is a nice, natural evolution," Walker said. "We obviously have a lot of talented players, but we haven't dropped off any on creating a positive environment."

NU men's gymnasts top poll after victory over Oklahoma

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bests in the all-around - Hardabura (57.975), Letter (57.60) and Nelson (57.050).

Hardabura recorded career-best efforts in five of the six events. A little hop on his horizontal bar landing was all that kept him from recording a career high in that event.

Nelson won the floor exercise and parallel bars. His 9.925 on the parallel bars was his second best score ever - the other coming when he won the 1997 NCAA Championship.

Letter provided the other win for the Huskers on the vault with a 9.80. On Friday against No. 15

Minnesota, NU finished one, two and three in the all-around. Letter won with a score of 57.60, Nelson finished second at 56.975 and Bill Mulholland was third with 56.900.

With the recent success and improvement, Allen said he was worried his team might peak too early.

"You don't like to see the horse run too well too soon," Allen said. "It is an old team, so they know how to hold it for a while."

But Hardabura said he is not worried.

"We have so much more in us," Hardabura said. "We aren't even close to peaking."

One reason the Huskers still have room to improve, Allen said, is

because Bill Mulholland has struggled this year.

Allen said he is still waiting for Mulholland, the lone senior on the team, to come through in the all-around, but Allen is not too worried.

"He will be there," Allen said. "I don't want to bring him out too soon."

The No. 1 Huskers will take on No. 7 Ohio State Sunday at the Bob Devaney Sports Center in what Allen called the dual meet of the year.

Hardabura said NU is ready to show Ohio State the win in Oklahoma was a fluke.

"We have something to prove," Hardabura said. "It's time for pay-back."

Coaches call tourney 2nd season

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start off the tournament today at noon at Municipal Auditorium. The Buffaloes won last year's inaugural Big 12 tournament, defeating Kansas State, and must win again to return to the NCAA Tournament.

Oklahoma State and Missouri then will play the second game at 2:20 p.m. today, and the winner of that game will face Nebraska Wednesday at 2:20 p.m.

Oklahoma State Coach Dick Halterman said his Cowgirls, who

are 17-9 overall and 10-6 in the conference, could receive an NCAA bid with a few wins in the tournament.

Oklahoma State players are looking to get an opportunity to go back to the NCAA Tournament.

"I think we belong (in the NCAA Tournament)," Oklahoma State senior Renee Roberts said. "We need to win at least a couple games. I think we definitely belong, and we can play with anyone if we play well."

Missouri Coach Joann Rutherford said she hopes her Tigers can make the game with the

Cowgirls a little more memorable than the 86-54 loss to OSU in January.

"The players have put it very well - it's a new season," Rutherford said. "No one comes in with a home court advantage. I've seen many teams that come off a conference championship and come in the tournament and lose the first round."

"It's tournament time, folks. It's exciting. It's who shows up, who gets excited about it, who puts together 40 minutes and who wants to win. That's what it's all about."

Swimmers place 2nd in Texas

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team captain Keith Ebbert were able to achieve that goal. Kalmikovs claimed the conference title in the 200-yard breaststroke, improving his time by .79 seconds. Ebbert finished second in the 200-yard individual medley with a career-best time of 1:50.12.

"That was a really nice surprise," Ebbert said. "Overall, I had all best times, and the times will probably qualify me for NCAAAs."

Nebraska's swimming success carried over into the diving competition. All-American Danny Bergman won the one-meter, posting a score of 563.37 - a Big 12 record. Bergman defeated defending meet champion Mark Naftanel of Texas A&M to grasp his first conference title.

"I think the thing that we found was that the conference was much faster this year than it was last year," Bentz said. "I see we're going to have a very high-quality conference."

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