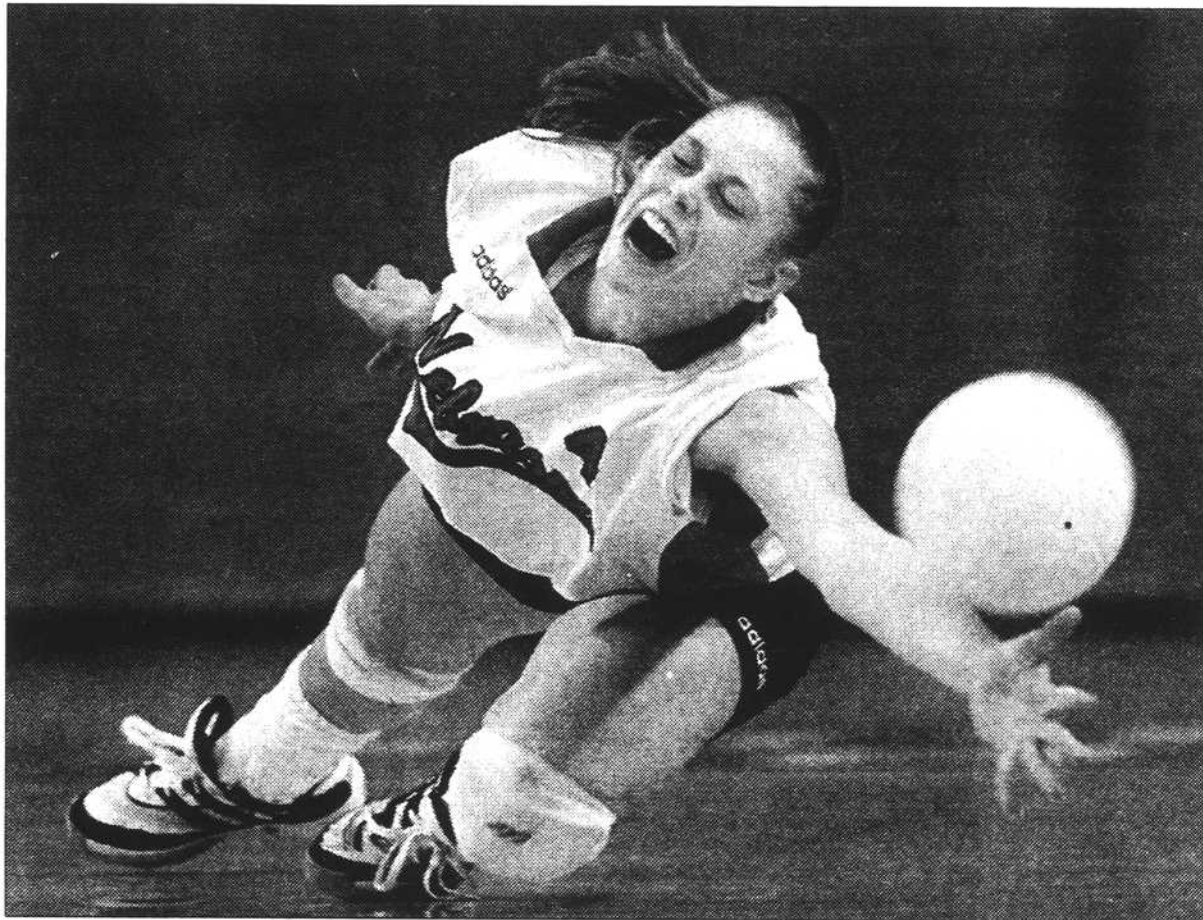


D igging ing deep

NU develops depth despite injuries, inexperience



NEBRASKA'S MANDY MONSON and the rest of the volleyball team reached the regional semifinals in the NCAA Tournament last season. They lost to Long Beach State. MATT MILLER/DN

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
Senior Reporter

For the Nebraska volleyball team, 1997 was a year of development.

It was a year trying to develop chemistry for a team that was without 13 of its 15 players at different points in the season. It was a year of developing depth when injuries to three key players spawned a mid-season setback.

It was a year of developing maturity on a team that listed 11 freshmen and sophomores and one senior on its roster. And most of all, it was a year of learning for a somewhat inexperienced team.

The conclusion of a seasonlong lesson hit the No. 9 Cornhuskers with a

final realization Dec. 15 at the NCAA Tournament Pacific Regional Final in Long Beach, Calif. Top-ranked Long Beach State schooled the young Huskers on the 49ers' home court.

A 15-9, 15-9, 15-3 loss ended NU's year and taught that at the highest level, youth plus enthusiasm and heart come up short when facing experience.

"Long Beach was just a better team than us," said NU Coach Terry Pettit. "They exploited our weaknesses before we really had a chance to make a run of it."

"But I was proud of our team the entire match. We are a team that was rattled at midseason, but we hung in there, and we came back and made a good run at the end of the season."

The Huskers entered the NCAA

battle riding a 12-match winning streak after losing four of six in October.

NU's skid began with back-to-back losses to Colorado and Oklahoma Oct. 8 and Oct. 10. Nebraska hit just .148 against Oklahoma and totaled 13 service errors in three games. The Huskers played without starter Jaime Krondak (back injury) and back-row specialist Renee Saunders, who broke her foot at the end of September. Both missed much of the season.

"I see a sense of self-doubt in them on the court, and I don't ever remember seeing that before," OU Coach Miles Pabst said at the time.

The Huskers lost another match before regaining some confidence and momentum in wins at Texas A&M and

at the NU Coliseum against Baylor. The week marked the emergence of a new starter and key contributor, freshman Angie Oxley, as well as the development of several younger players.

Oxley, who came out of her redshirt season to stabilize the Huskers in the back row, did just that. She led NU with 3.3 digs per game in November and December.

Nebraska returned to its old form the final two months of the season, defeating several ranked teams — including No. 9 Texas and No. 16 Texas A&M — and went 10-0 in November. The mark earned NU a No. 2 seed in the NCAA Pacific Region.

"Five weeks ago, they could have decided to be a mediocre team and limp home," Pettit said on Nov. 31. "They knew they couldn't win the conference, and they could have just let things go, but they didn't do that."

After receiving a first-round bye, Nebraska pounded Michigan State at home in the second round of the NCAA Tournament before losing to Long Beach in California.

"Whenever a team loses, the younger players are already looking forward to next season," NU setter Fiona Nepo said. "We've matured this season. Everybody on our team made the decision (during the slump) to refocus. We weren't just along for the ride."

The Huskers lose only two players, Saunders and Lisa Reitsma, from their 1997 squad. The All-American Reitsma broke the school record for career attacks and completed her eligibility. Saunders, a two-sport athlete, chose to focus on basketball, where she has two years of eligibility left.

But NU returns starters Mandy Monson, Krondak, Angie Oxley, Megan Korver and Nepo, as well as key contributors Tonia Tauke, Nancy Meendering, Nikki Henk and Katie Jahnke.

"I'm very optimistic," Pettit said. "We lose a great player in Lisa Reitsma, but we're really a good young team that's just going to get better. I was glad we were able to push ourselves to this point so that we could experience this."

"And I told the team that while I was proud of them, our goal next year is not to finish second in the regional."

