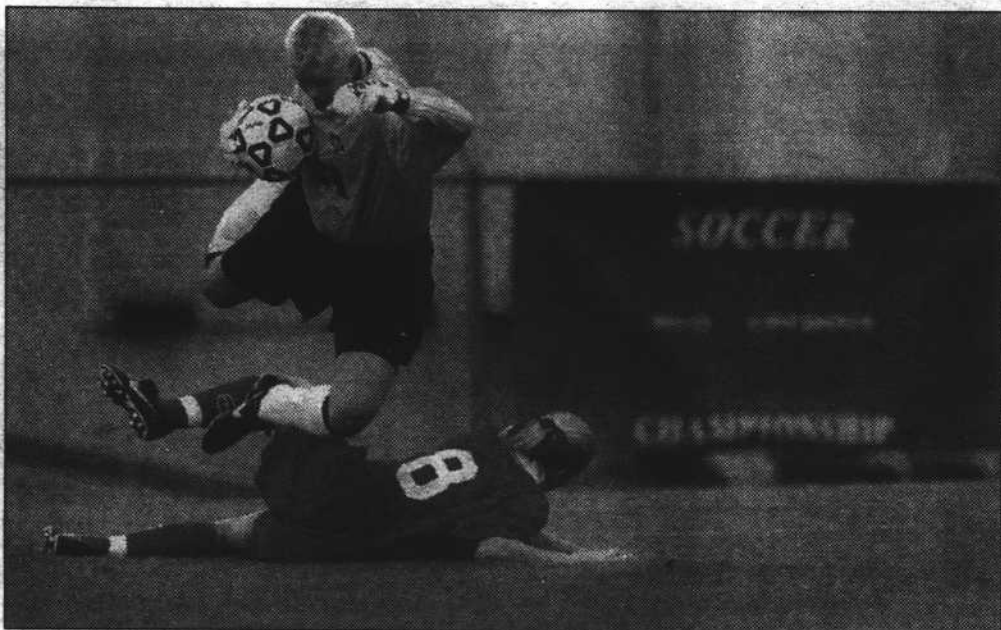


Raising the Bar



NU'S JENNY BENSON slides under Texas A&M's Melanie Wilson in the Big 12 soccer championship. The Huskers lost 3-1 to their conference rival.

MATT MILLER/DN

BY JAY SAUNDERS
Assignment Reporter

Walker sends soccer team into spotlight of success

When John Walker came to Nebraska to coach the soccer team four years ago, he said he wanted to build the Cornhusker program into a national soccer powerhouse in five years.

It took only three years. In the fall of 1996, after only three years of existence, the Huskers went 23-1 and made it to the third round of the NCAA tournament.

Last fall, NU was hoping to build on the success of last season's unexpected run. The Huskers came into the season with the same core of players and added Kim Engesser, a transfer student from Portland University — the team that knocked the

Huskers out of the tournament in 1996.

"The biggest difference was dealing with being a big target on a lot of our opponents' schedules," Walker said. "It was difficult because every team we played we got their best shot. It was like a World Cup final every game."

The Huskers started off the season with four straight wins before running into a roadblock in Texas. NU lost conference games for the first time in two years and hadn't lost two consecutive games since 1994.

"We didn't compete at an appropriate level," Walker said. "We had a lot of pressure after we were behind, but we shouldn't have put ourselves in that position."

The Huskers used an eight-game homestand as the cure for the team's first losing streak in three

years.

All eight games were shutouts. The Huskers outscored their opponents 40-0 in that eight-game stretch. After collecting eight consecutive wins, NU traveled to No. 4 Duke.

There was no letdown from the homestand. The Huskers inched closer to the Big 12 tournament with a 5-0 win over the Blue Devils.

NU then had to go to back to Texas for the Big 12 Conference Tournament. The Huskers won the inaugural tournament in 1996 with a 1-0 win over Texas A&M. After beating Baylor 4-1 in the semifinals, the Huskers were once again matched up with the Aggies.

Texas A&M and Nebraska had developed into the conference's first big rivalry. In this edition, though, A&M handed the Huskers a 3-1 loss.

"We had to treat it like it was our season," senior Kari Uppinghouse said. "(Winning the tournament) was one of the goals we had at the beginning of the season. The team was disappointed that we didn't repeat."

A trip to the NCAA tournament was not guaranteed, but Walker said the Huskers' record and strength of schedule should be enough to get NU in to the 32-team field. Walker was right, the Huskers played host to Michigan in the first round of the

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