

**Sports Opinion**



**Andrew Strnad**

## Depth, Nepo key to NU's path to title

We may just see Nebraska win the national championship after all.

No, not the football team. They're a year away. I'm talking about the volleyball team.

Now it's very premature to say that the No. 3 Cornhuskers will win the national title. Things go wrong from time to time.

However, barring a disaster like a season-ending injury to senior setter Fiona Nepo, we just might see the Huskers win their second title in four years.

All the signs are there for, at the minimum, a trip to Madison, Wis., for the Final Four.

NU (15-0 overall and 6-0 in the Big 12) has blown through its matches, dropping only one game (Stanford on Sept. 5) along the way.

While the Big Red has stomped on the little fish of the Big 12, it has defeated five ranked teams, including two-time defending champion, No. 7 Stanford.

This weekend will prove to be NU's first conference test with No. 13 Texas and No. 15 Texas A&M coming to the NU Coliseum where the Huskers have won 53 consecutive matches.

Sorry, Colorado, but you won't be playing Nebraska at the Bob Devaney Sports Center anytime soon.

As a team, Coach Terry Pettit says he has never had quite the number of weapons at his disposal as he does this year.

NU doesn't have an Allison Weston, a Lisa Reitsma or anybody else who averages five kills a game, but what it does have is a corps of players who all have and know their roles on the court.

Oklahoma Coach Miles Pabst calls Nepo the heart and soul of the team. She is that, along with the bread and butter.

She runs the show on the court, a show that features a tremendous supporting cast.

Middle blocker Megan Korver leads the nation in hitting percentage at .470, while the team is hitting .348, good enough for second in the nation.

While Pettit says the defense hasn't been up to snuff so far, the Huskers are the second best blocking team in the nation, averaging four blocks a game.

Plus, with the return of Mandy Monson and Jaime Krondak to the back row, this team might be the most complete team in the nation.

This is all without mention of several young outside hitters who are mostly sophomores.

To paraphrase Pettit's favorite phrase when addressing the media, I say to him, "Terry, I 'sense' a trip to the Final Four."

**Strnad is a senior broadcasting and political science major and a Daily Nebraskan staff writer.**

## Haafke: A&M game bittersweet

By **DAVID WILSON**  
Senior staff writer

A little miscommunication almost ruined a career day for Nebraska senior walk-on Billy Haafke.



**Brown**

But the poise he has shown throughout his five-year career with the Cornhuskers didn't die Saturday. The 5-foot-11, 190-pound split end was the intended receiver when quarterback Bobby Newcombe threw an interception that ended Nebraska's final drive of the game. One minute and nine seconds later, the play proved to

be fatal as NU lost to Texas A&M 28-21.

Haafke was running the play that most of the perimeter players were running; unfortunately, Newcombe wasn't on the same page.

The mix-up came somewhere between the coaches signaling the play to Newcombe and Newcombe signaling it to the players.

And though Haafke had caught a career-high three passes for 23 yards, he was on the receiving end of criticism from ABC game analyst Gary Danielson while Newcombe yelled at him on the sideline.

Receivers Coach Ron Brown was the first to attempt to calm Newcombe as a national television audience watched.

"You have miscommunication on a lot of things during a game," Brown said. "It just so happened that

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**RON BROWN**  
NU receivers coach

on that play, the players weren't all on the same page.

"Billy Haafke ran the right route. The TV people got on him quite a bit. They don't understand the context of what we're doing. Billy should not be blamed for that."

Newcombe didn't want to discuss the miscommunication issue

Tuesday, but said he was pleased with Haafke's efforts filling in for an injured Kenny Cheatham.

Haafke didn't see his playing time increase significantly against the Aggies, but he was used more as a receiver than as a blocker. Prior to

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## McWilliams enjoys role as understudy

■ **Playing behind setter Fiona Nepo, the sophomore is waiting her turn but is ready if needed.**

By **JOHN GASKINS**  
Staff reporter

After the Nebraska women's volleyball practice, sophomore setter Jill McWilliams was on her way to the locker room when she was lured by Assistant Sports Information Director Aaron Babcock to stick around for an interview.

McWilliams rolled her eyes in disbelief. It was hard for her to believe she deserved the spotlight.

But she better be prepared for it. As backup to All-America candidate and senior setter Fiona Nepo, McWilliams holds the distinguished role of understudy.

Nepo has received high praise for not only setting the school's all-time set-assist record, but for her no-frills enthusiasm and leadership.

"(As the setter) you've got to be the leader on the court like on the quarterback of the football team," McWilliams said. "You've got to call the plays and basically run the show out there."

As the 1996 Iowa high school co-player of the year, McWilliams ran the show quite well for Grandview Park Baptist High School, leading it to a Class I-A state runner-up finish.

For the last two years at Nebraska, however, she has watched Nepo take charge. McWilliams said she could have started as a freshman for other Big 12 schools that recruited her.

But she said she was quite willing to give that up to be a part of the powerhouse tradition at Nebraska.

"When I'm going to spend every day putting this much time into volleyball, I figure I might want to play for one of the best teams in the nation," McWilliams said.

The main transition has been going from starter to backup and having the pressure of being the heir apparent to one of NU's best players ever.

Nepo should know what that feels like. As a freshman in 1995, she played backup to All-America setter Christy Johnson, who led the Cornhuskers to the national title that year.

"One of the things you get as a setter when you first come here is having the pressure (of answering), 'Oh, yeah, is she going to be able to fill (the current player's) shoes?' Nepo said. "But you just take it a day at a time."

Part of the pressure is being prepared to take over the team at any given point in a game or season.

"My role is to show in practice that people can count on me, that if something happens to Fiona, they know I'm able to step in and take over for Fiona and run things," McWilliams said.

"I'm just trying to give my teammates confidence."

Judging by Nepo's assessment of her backup, McWilliams has earned that confidence.

"If I sprained my ankle and she came in the game, I wouldn't be worried, and I don't think any of the other players on the team would be worried, either," Nepo said.



MATT MILLER/DN

**ALTHOUGH SOPHOMORE SETTER JILL MCWILLIAMS backs up All-American Fiona Nepo this season, she said she is ready to step in and play.**

At certain times in the season, McWilliams may also be called on to run the 6-2 offense, a formation that would utilize two setters. Such a setup would give Nepo a chance to attack as a hitter.

"Our team is so strong right now, I have no problem in calling upon Jill McWilliams to come in and run the 6-2 so Fiona can be used as an attacker," Head Coach Terry Pettit said.

Pettit said he also would have the confidence in McWilliams to step up and run the offense if Nepo

were suddenly taken out of action.

"Nothing would change," Pettit said. "We'd run the same offense, use the same game plan. I think Jill would be ready."

Which is exactly why McWilliams is here in the first place.

"Oh, yeah, that'd be awesome," McWilliams said. "I don't want anything to happen to Fiona, but I feel like I'm ready to go and (take over)."

"That's what I've been waiting for."