

Preparation is key to Pettit's success

BY ANDREW STRNAD
Staff writer

Terry Pettit was 11 years old playing on a Little League baseball field in Crown Point, Ind., when he found out what the most important things in life really are.

It wasn't winning games, championships or personal awards. It was more a sense of preparation.

One day at practice Pettit's father and coach, Harold, was teaching the team members how to slide into home plate away from the catcher using their left hands.

Over and over Pettit slid into home plate, dusted himself off and got back in line to do it again.

The young Pettit wondered what the method to his father's madness was, and never once thought he would ever have to employ this detailed maneuver in a game.

The very next game he played put him right into that very situation, running home with a play at the plate.

He shouldn't have gone home, but he did, and he was safe.

"What occurred to me right as it happened was not the joy of being safe, but an understanding that I was safe because of preparation," Pettit said.

Harold, who doubled as a milkman, always pointed out the details to Terry, giving him a better understanding of preparation.

Pettit has lived by that credo the last 41 years of his life. It is what drives him.

In his 25th year of coaching and 22nd at Nebraska, Pettit is two victories from becoming the fourth volleyball coach in NCAA history to amass 700 wins. He stands 698-136.

During his tenure, Pettit has coached 16 American Volleyball Coaches Association All-Americans, won the AVCA National Coach-of-the-Year award twice, led five teams to the Final Four and put one national championship under his belt.

But all the recognition and wins don't mean a whole lot to him. Pettit said reaching a milestone like 700 wins is almost trivial.

In some ways, the 52-year-old Pettit echoes the theories of the great New York Giants Manager John McGraw, who rolled up 2,700 wins and won three World Series between 1902 and 1932.

Little Napoleon, as he was called, said his players were deserving of the wins. All he ever did

was point out the weak spots in the opponent. Listen to Pettit for awhile, and you'll hear the same.

"Somewhere in the 1970s, we moved from a culture that focused on actors to a culture that focused on directors and a culture that focused on baseball players started focusing on managers," Pettit said. "Really, you go to the movies to see the movie stars, not the director.

"I've always said that if you have a choice of one of us not showing up - me or (NU setter) Fiona (Nepo) - you better hope that I don't show up."

For Pettit, it's not about winning as an end to the means, but to instruct and instill the values he was taught while growing up - not the destination, but the journey.

Hard to grasp

While Pettit's philosophy may be cut and dried, understanding him is not the easiest task for those who know him.

Ask junior defensive specialist Nikki Henk, who transferred to Nebraska after playing a season at the College of Charleston in South Carolina.

Henk transferred to NU so she could play for what many call the best volleyball program in the country. Her first impressions of Pettit were like many other players': a man who had a tremendous drive to make his team the best in the nation.

"He's real intense. That's the first thing I noticed about him," Henk said. "Things get a little crazy at times in practice because he's so passionate about what he's doing."

Even Pettit's colleagues in coaching find him to be very determined and focused on achieving a particular result.

Stanford Head Coach Don Shaw, the NCAA's winningest active coach, has known Pettit for 19 years and still says he doesn't have a true sense of how focused Pettit can be.

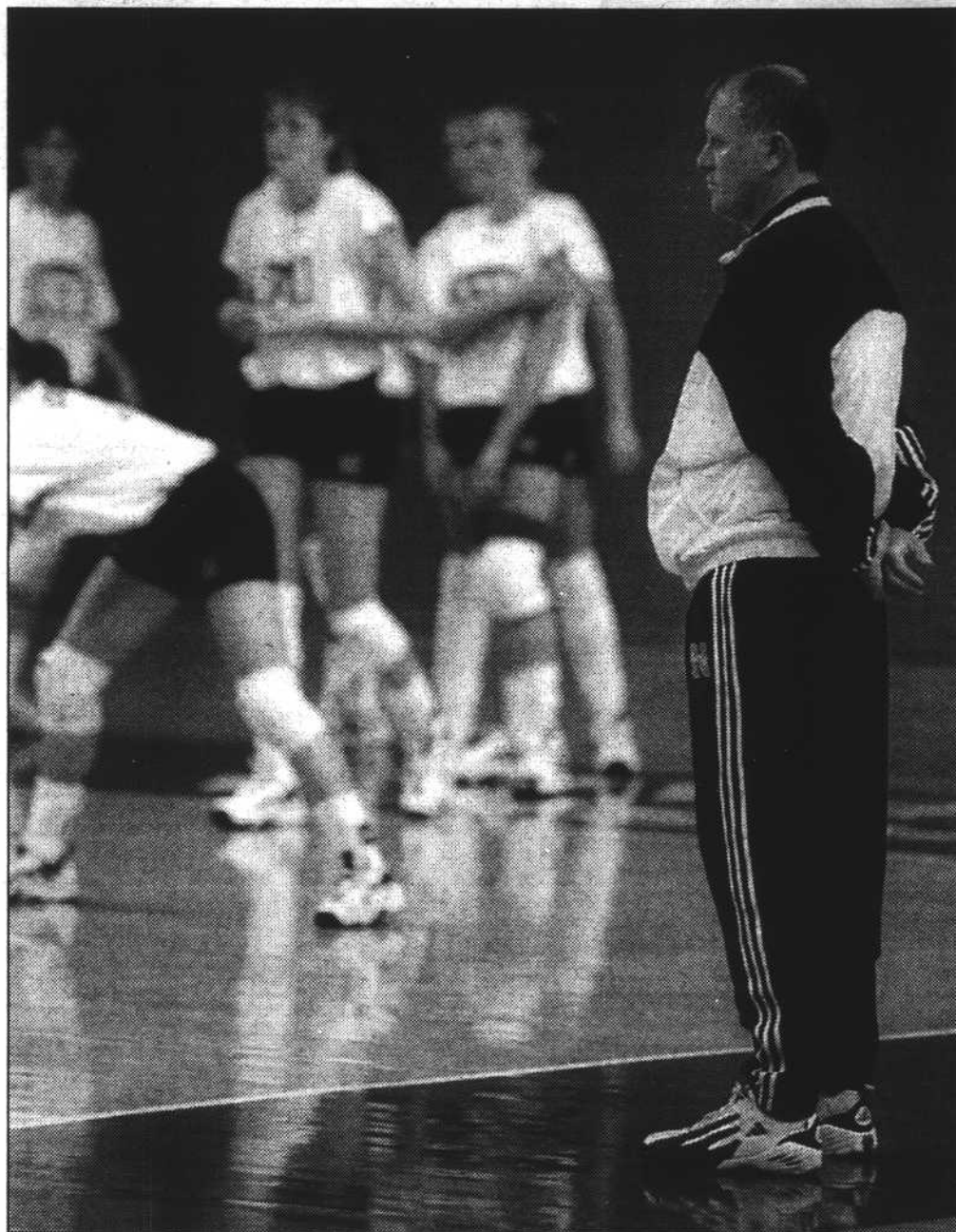
"We golf a lot together, and we compete on the course, and I don't think I have a complete grasp of the guy yet," Shaw said. "But I think that's the way he likes it."

The family traits

Someone who does have a complete grasp of Pettit's persona is his daughter, Katherine.

The 20-year-old sophomore plays setter at Colorado State and said she has absorbed some of the same traits as her father: his passionate nature, his love for volleyball and his perspective on life.

"I'm most proud of his perspective on a situa-

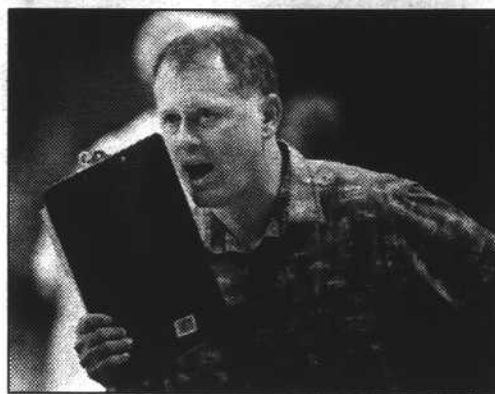


MATT MILLER/DN
NU VOLLEYBALL COACH TERRY PETTIT is two wins away from his 700th collegiate win. He is known for his preparation, focus and passion for the game he coaches day in and day out.

tion," she said. "Turning to him, I find a lot of relief, and he's been there and done that. He's very reliable because he's had so much experience in life."

Growing up, Katherine spent hours in the gym with her father and always wanted to play college

Please see PETTIT on 7



1995 season best for NU volleyball

BY JAMES NICAS
Staff writer

One goal ... one focus ... one champion.

The phrase on the media guide said everything the 1995 Nebraska volleyball team expected from their season.

After finishing 31-1 and losing in the regional finals in 1994, the 1995 Cornhuskers wanted to leave no doubt what they wanted for the season.

The high expectations were not left unfulfilled. Nebraska went 32-1 and defeated Texas in the NCAA finals to win the national championship. After three previous trips to the Final Four, the Huskers gave Head Coach Terry Pettit his first national title in 19 years.

"We knew we were one of three or four teams that had a chance to win it going into the year," Pettit said. "Players had prepared themselves in the summer, but nothing is guaranteed, and there were probably teams that were just as good as us that year."

Led by seniors Christy Johnson, Allison Weston and Billie Winsett, Nebraska came into the season No. 1 in the country.

"Going into the season, I felt this was as

good a shot as Nebraska ever had to win it," Johnson said. "We had a group of players that if they took care of what they needed to, then we would win it."

NU's only loss was to No. 2 Stanford. After winning the first game 15-8, Nebraska went on to lose the next three games, including a 15-17 loss in the fourth in which they led 14-8.

Nebraska then won 22 matches, including five against ranked opponents, without losing a game before facing No. 3 Florida.

The schedule prepared the Huskers for the NCAA tournament. After defeating three teams in the tournament, Nebraska faced No. 4 Michigan State in the Final Four.

After splitting the first four games, Nebraska broke open a 7-7 fifth game to win the game 15-8 and advance to the finals against Texas.

Led by Winsett and Kate Crnich's 25 kills each, NU won the four games 16-14, giving Nebraska its first and only national championship. Defeating the Longhorns gave Nebraska the title and fulfilled the expectations of the team.

"The hardest thing to do is to come over a period of three years and work at it," Pettit said. "National championships aren't built over one year, the title was just the tip of the iceberg."

Noth: Pettit changed with time

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
Senior staff writer

Christy Johnson will never forget her favorite spot on the Nebraska volleyball team's bench.

The former NU setter sat next to Head Coach Terry Pettit during her redshirt season in 1993, listening carefully to every word he uttered. She marveled at his ability to foretell the outcome of every serve, transition or attack.

As she watched each prediction come true, Johnson knew she had found a coach who would mold her into a great player. She knew she had found a coach around whom she could model her future career.

"He's been at this so long that, first of all, he has a really good understanding about how the game works," said Johnson, now an assistant coach at Wisconsin. "He's brilliant in that way."

Pettit could earn the 700th victory of his career this weekend if the undefeated and third-ranked Cornhuskers beat No. 13 Texas and No. 15 Texas A&M on Sunday.

And, as Pettit approaches the milestone, Johnson knows she and many other players have him to thank for their own personal success-

es. "I don't think I would have been as good a player if I had played under someone else. I probably wouldn't be where I am today, either."

In 21 seasons at Nebraska, Pettit has directed five teams to the Final Four appearances and one to a national championship.

Pettit has produced five U.S. National Team members and 18 players who have earned a total of 31 All-American awards. He has coached more than 2,000 athletes.

He had dealt with each one and their successes and failures in a different way, Johnson said. She praised his ability to handle those situations.

"He's been through so many things with all his players that he pretty much knows what you're thinking and why you're thinking it," Johnson said. "He has so much experience. He knows situations. He knows how his players are going to work through things and deal with things. And he knows how to help his players when they need it."

Former NU All-American setter (1981-84) and current Nebraska Assistant Coach Cathy Noth remembers a time when Pettit reached out to her. An outside hitter her entire career, Pettit had a hunch about Noth and converted her to a setter. She

became a two-time All-American at the position.

"I had a lot of trust in his ability to train me and make me a better player," Noth said. "I had a lot of respect for him then, and I have even greater respect for him now."

Johnson labels Pettit "one of the best setter coaches in the country." Noth said his intensity and intelligence make him a driven person.

But he has changed over time.

"He gave a lot to us athletes back when I played," Noth said. "But now he has allowed a lot of his life to carry over into the players'. He is more concerned about making sure they are well-rounded people and that they get everything they can out of this."

"You grow softer with age. You learn from experiences, and you learn how important these kids really are," she said.

Noth expects several of Pettit's former players to be in the stands Sunday. And she knows he will be grateful - at least inwardly.

"It has to mean something," Noth said. "He'll be shy about it. He's not a great receiver of public attention. But that's just something that you rejoice about in your heart. What a great personal accomplishment that must be."