

Big 12 standings

	Conference			Overall		
	W	L	PCT.	W	L	PCT.
Nebraska	8	0	1.000	17	0	1.000
Texas	7	1	.875	13	3	.813
Colorado	7	1	.875	13	2	.867
Kansas State	6	2	.750	12	5	.706
Texas A&M	5	3	.625	12	4	.750
Kansas	3	5	.375	13	7	.650
Texas Tech	3	5	.375	14	7	.667
Missouri	2	6	.250	11	10	.524
Baylor	1	7	.125	7	12	.368
Iowa State	1	7	.125	3	17	.150
Oklahoma	1	7	.125	7	13	.350

Sagarin ratings

1. NU
11. Texas
12. Texas A&M
16. Colorado
18. Kansas State
24. Texas Tech

Conference Rankings

1. Big Ten 89.35
2. Big 12 86.03
3. Pac 10 79.83

JON FRANK/DN

Big 12 among best in volleyball

■ Adding Texas schools to former Big Eight helped turn the conference into a powerful force.

BY ANDREW STRNAD
Staff writer

When the Big 12 Conference became a reality, dreams of turning the defunct Big Eight Conference into a volleyball powerhouse was no longer a pipe dream.

The addition of the four Texas schools, particularly Texas, turned the one-man show called the Big Eight into a legitimate bipolar conference.

Balance of power politics aside, the creation of the Big 12 forced the middle-tier schools to get better.

Over the first two years of the Big 12, those middle-tier programs have progressed to the point where the Big 12 is a multi-polar conference with as many as seven of the 11 teams competing for NCAA Tournament bids.

"I don't think there is any question about it; this is the best conference," Oklahoma Coach Miles Pabst said. "I could see six, maybe even seven teams getting in."

As Big 12 play nears its midway point, the conference has five of its teams ranked in the latest American

Volleyball Coaches Association Poll.

Nebraska leads the charge at No. 3 with Texas at No. 12, Colorado at No. 13, Texas A&M at No. 15 and Kansas State at No. 22.

"If you look at the Sagarin ratings, we have six teams in the top 25 and two others in the top 50," NU Coach Terry Pettit said.

In the latest Sagarin Division I Volleyball Power Ratings, Nebraska was ranked No. 1, and the Big 12 is the second-ranked conference behind the Big 10.

Only the Big 10 has more ranked teams (6) than the Big 12.

With the level of play in the conference at such a high level, keeping up with the Joneses has become quite a task.

Last weekend, Texas A&M played Colorado in Boulder on Friday night and then flew to Lincoln to play the Huskers on Sunday afternoon.

"Every weekend in this conference, chances are you'll be playing a ranked team," Texas A&M Coach Laurie Corbelli said. "That makes those back-to-back matches that much tougher."

The tough weekend trips and long flights take a toll on all of the players, but retreating to the days of the Big Eight where it was Nebraska and everybody else isn't the preferred scenario.

"I remember in the Big Eight, Colorado was our biggest rivals," NU

setter Fiona Nepo said. "With the Big 12, all the teams have improved and they all help us play better."

Someone who is new to the Big 12 Conference as a coach, but is familiar with its exploits, is first-year Kansas Coach Ray Bechard.

Bechard coached at Barton County Junior College for 13 seasons in Kansas before leaving to coach the Jayhawks.

"The athletic abilities of the players in this conference are at such a high level," Bechard said. "It's hard to imagine a better collection of athletes in any other conference."

While the Big 12 boasts at least five potential All-Americans, with Nepo, NU middle blocker Megan Korver, outside hitters Demetria Sance of Texas, Stacy Sykora of Texas A&M and Sarah Lodge of Colorado, the quest for a national championship is a possibility.

Texas and Nebraska each have won one national title, the only non-West Coast schools to ever win the championship.

With the Huskers 17-0, many coaches in the Big 12 believe NU is destined to reach its third final four in the last four years.

"They're strong with Fiona. They're strong on the outside, and their block is outstanding," Pabst said. "Terry's got a great team, and along with Texas or Colorado, we should be able to send somebody to the Final Four."

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