

Winter Sports Preview

Communication

Huskers' Coach Danny Nee talks, coaches his own way

BY DAVID WILSON
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In an instant, play stops. Firmly gripping a worn basketball with both hands, Danny Nee makes his way across the practice court with a familiar scowl on his face.

He plants his feet near the free-throw line and glares at the huddle of young players under the basket.

Nee, in his 13th season as Nebraska's head coach, will be the first to tell you that in his world, communication is the key.

"You shoot the damn thing," Nee yells as he walks awkwardly toward the hoop, extending his arms. "Don't screw around."

He's blunt. He doesn't deny it. And though his mouth has drawn him much criticism from fans and media since he arrived in Lincoln in 1986, Nee credits his communication skills for putting him where he is today.

"The whole thing is communication," Nee said. "You listen real close, you understand what's being asked of you or what's expected — and you respond accordingly."

"I don't do it well; I do it very well." There have been times, though, when Nee's communication skills — or lack thereof — have come back to haunt him.

Like at the end of the 1997 season, when Nee was criticized for openly showing interest in a coaching job at Rutgers. Or the time in 1996 when he was quoted in local papers, referring to opponents as "cocksuckers." And, of course, there was the player walkout of 1996.

But does Nee ever regret anything he's said or done?

"Oh, hell yeah," Nee said. "Every year I say something or do something that I just shake my head and go, 'Man, that was dumb.' But if you're not doing something, nothing is going to happen. You have to make things happen."

"Being the basketball coach at a premier school, you have to be proactive. You have to attack problems. You have to attack situations."

That's the enthusiasm that NU Athletic Director Bill Byrne loves.

Stand by your man

Through all the criticism, postseason losses, and other situations Nee has found himself in, Byrne has consistently stood behind his coach.

"Sometimes Danny is honest to a fault," Byrne said. "He says stuff to reporters, and believe it or not, they put it into their computers and never forget it."

"But I like his enthusiasm. He's a very funny guy. He has a way about him where people like to be around him."

That wasn't the case in 1996 when nearly the entire basketball team skipped out of practice to meet with Byrne.

There was a lesson learned that winter day — by both the players and by Nee.

"We had some young people who weren't being very mature," Byrne said. "They forgot that the University of Nebraska athletic program is more than just a few individual athletes."

Among other things, Nee learned that he had the full support of Byrne.

"It was not an issue once the players knew there was nothing to discuss," Nee said. "But I was hurt and disappointed. I don't think it ever should have gotten to that point."

"It was really a frustration of how we were playing. We were more talented than that, and everybody knew it."

Taking care of business

After the walkout, the 1995-96 Husker team went on to win the National Invitation Tournament — the only national tournament crown won by a Nebraska basketball team.

But success in the postseason for Nee has been scarce, leading to more criticism from fans and media. In 10 appearances, Nee's Husker teams are a combined 13-9 overall and 0-5 in the NCAA Tournament.

Last season, NU fell to Arkansas in the first round of the NAAs.

"Here at Nebraska, we have not been able to take care of business," said Nee, who was 1-2 in NCAA Tournament games in six seasons at Ohio before coming to Lincoln. "I've won games. I know I can win. And I believe it will happen."

In 12 seasons at NU, Nee has compiled a 223-158 record while guiding the Huskers to postseason appearances in each of the last eight years.

But when Nebraska struggles, the finger shouldn't be pointed directly at Nee, said senior forward Troy Piatkowski.

"I just don't think it's fair for everybody to judge him the way they do at basketball games," Piatkowski said. "You know what they think of him. I think it's unfair. It's not his fault. It's mostly our fault — but he gets the whole blame. Nobody knows the other side of Coach Nee like we do."

Nee on Nee

Though he's a tough coach in practice, Piatkowski said, Nee doesn't have a hard time relating to players.

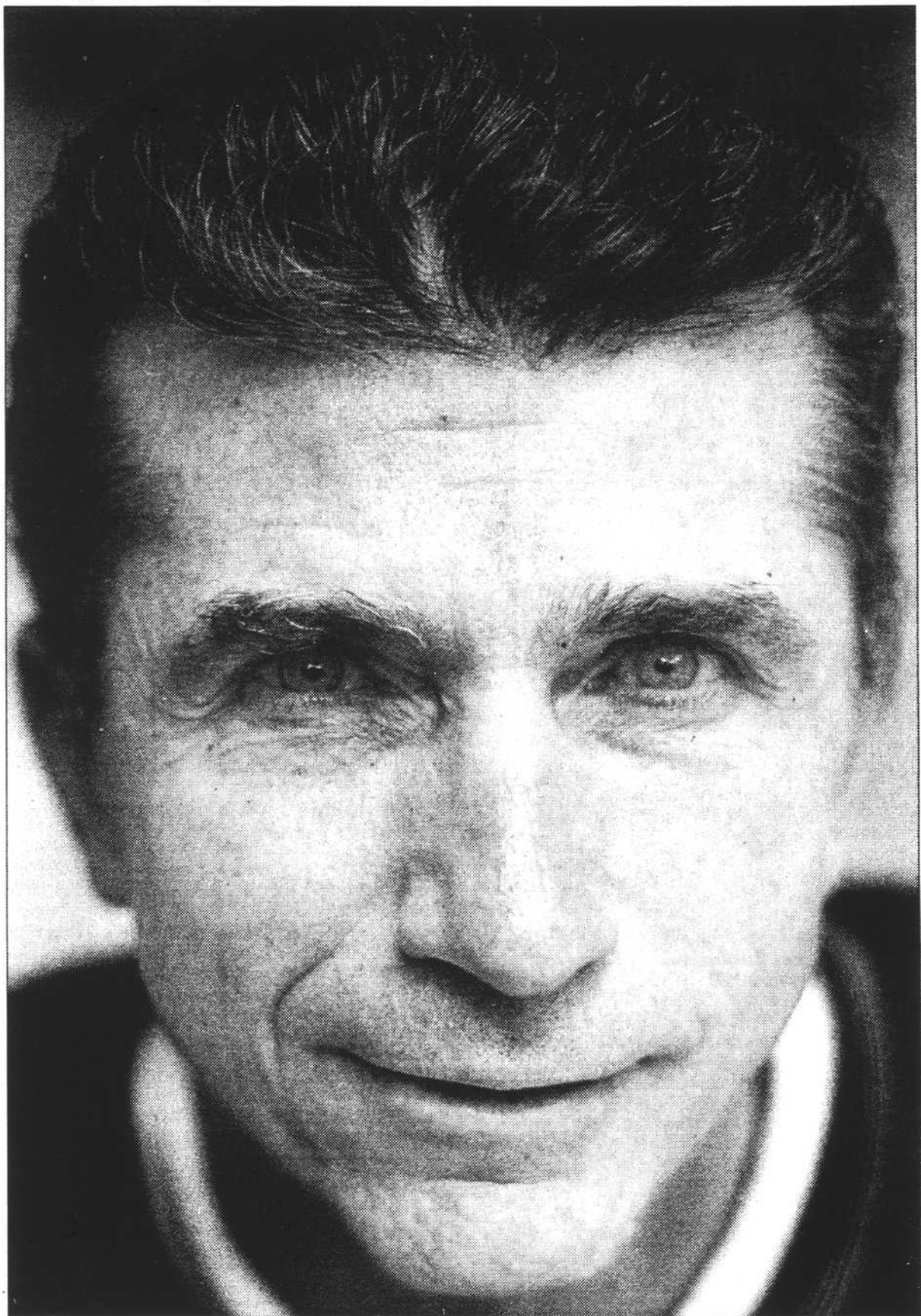
Both Byrne and NU Assistant Coach Jimmy Williams said they have seen Nee's relationship with his players develop over the last few years.

"He's mellowed quite a bit since I've been here," said Williams, who came to Nebraska in 1991. "He's settled down, and he's a lot more patient with things."

"Danny really knows who he is and knows where he is. I think that comes with maturity and comes with age."

Nee admitted he has matured since arriving in Nebraska at the age of 41.

At 53, Nee said he knows how he is



MIKE WARREN/DN

HEAD BASKETBALL COACH DANNY NEE enters his 13th season at Nebraska, where he holds a 223-158 record. The men's team begins regular season play in the Devaney Sports Center on Nov. 14.

perceived, and he doesn't let the criticism get to him.

"I don't have control over that," Nee said. "The thing I can tell you is that I think it's important to know who you are."

"I know who Danny Nee is."

White men can't jump?

Nee grew up in New York, where he played basketball with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar — then known as Lew Alcindor — at Power Memorial High School.

He experienced success on the best

From then on, success didn't just fall in Nee's lap.

He was living away from the East Coast for the first time in his life — far away from his roots.

Nee adjusted quickly and captained the Warriors' freshman team, leading the squad in scoring, but he forgot to be a student as well. So he joined the U.S. Marine Corps.

"Once I hit the bar scene, and I wasn't playing, and I was struggling academically, I just joined the Marine Corps," Nee said.

Then came Vietnam.

"It sucked," Nee said. "It was hard. Vietnam was a bad deal. You go back — why did you make it and your buddy didn't. Then, we were not received well back here. In '68 when I got out, we were perceived as killers. In the Marine Corps, if you don't train to kill — what the hell, that's what the Marine Corps is."

"It was a really bad deal. It messed me up. It just messed me up. It took me a long time to get over that physically, emotionally and mentally. You're a Vietnam veteran — it's something that you never forget. It was 30 years ago, but it was like yesterday."

"I don't think my players — they don't know what the hell went on. But that's what I am. That's where I'm from, and that's what I deal with."

A breath of sunshine

After receiving a bachelor's degree at St. Mary of the Plains College in Dodge City, Kan., Nee returned to the East Coast to coach the junior varsity basketball team at Red Bank, N.J., Regional High School in 1972.

He then coached at Brick Township, N.J., High School before moving on to coach at Ohio University.

"When I started off, no one gave me a break," Nee said. "Every goal that was reached was by hard work and getting after it — persistence."

Twenty-six years after becoming a coach, Nee said he appreciates what he has worked for.

"About Jan. 3, when the (Nebraska football) bowl game is over, I think I'm the envy of most sports fans in Nebraska," Nee said. "Then, and especially the second week of March, when it's tournament madness, I'm getting up in the morning, and I'm happy to go to work. Going to work every day, most years, is a pleasure. This year, it's been like a breath of sunshine."

"I've been dealt a pretty good hand. I'm the basketball coach at Nebraska — and to have a family, I feel real lucky."

An honest Abe in Lincoln

The toughest part of his job right now, Nee said, is recruiting.

"We're not people's first choice," Nee said. "It's hard."

Nee has also been criticized for let-

Please see NEE on 15