

Winter Sports Preview

Reitsma moves on to basketball

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What a sight it must have been to watch the mild-mannered Lisa Reitsma, a three-time All-American for the Nebraska volleyball team, catching and throwing elbows in the paint during the first day of the NU women's basketball team's pre-season practice.

If, before her one-year stint with the NU women's basketball team began three weeks ago, Reitsma didn't realize the physical pounding college basketball players endure on a daily basis, she does now.

Reitsma, a 6-foot-4, three-year starter who completed her volleyball eligibility last fall, received a crash course in toughness that first week of basketball practice.

Bruises dotted her arms and legs. Both toenails on her big toes fell off. A nasty shiner developed below one eye.

"When I told people I was going to try basketball for a year, some were like, 'What are you doing?'" Reitsma said. "Sometimes, I wondered myself. But it has been worth it. This will be a great experience."

The game of basketball humbles Reitsma, one of the most decorated volleyball players ever at NU. She has

gone from a star in one sport to a role player in another. An instinctive and intelligent player at the volleyball net, she sometimes feels lost in the paint.

But she has contributed in the Cornhuskers' two exhibition wins. In her first game for NU on Nov. 3, Reitsma grabbed nine rebounds and scored four points in 19 minutes. And Sunday in a 71-42 win over Shelen (Russia), she posted six rebounds and a blocked shot.

"The first game, I was like a fish out of water," said Reitsma, a first-team all-state selection five years ago at Iowa's Hull Western Christian High School. "I felt real jittery. It was a nervousness that I hadn't felt since my freshman year of volleyball."

As days go by, however, Reitsma said she grows more comfortable with her new sport. It seems like such a long time ago that the idea of playing basketball even popped into her head.

It was Husker Volleyball Coach Terry Pettit who suggested to Reitsma last spring that she take some time away from volleyball and play basketball for a year. Pettit already had spoken to Nebraska Women's Basketball Coach Paul Sanderford about the possibility, and the idea appealed to Reitsma.

She liked the idea of staying in school to complete her degree instead of training for the U.S. National Team.

Reitsma also was feeling the after-effects of a mentally taxing senior volleyball season. Her status as a returning All-American and the only senior on the team during the 1997 season forced Reitsma into a leadership role that

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LISA REITSMAN
NU basketball player

didn't suit her shy, laid-back demeanor.

To add to her frustration, injuries to key players hurt the volleyball team's chances at a third-straight trip to the NCAA Final Four, and a second-place Big 12 Conference finish translated into a disappointing season.

"Both Coach Pettit and I knew that I needed a rest," Reitsma said. "I don't think I realized before the season how tough it was going to be on me mentally to be the only senior on the team. Coach Pettit wanted me to step up and be a leader vocally and mentally because we had a young team, and that's what we needed. But it was hard for me."

"There are some things I wish I could do over. That last year was definitely the hardest of the my four years."

Which is why Reitsma has found exactly what she needed with the women's basketball team. Sanderford defined her role early - Reitsma knows she is on the team to rebound and play defense. And Sanderford says Reitsma has the potential to fill that role well.

"Reitsma is a freshman in the fact

that she hasn't played in four years, but, at the same time, she's a senior in maturity and her mental approach to the game," Sanderford said.

"She's been a real pleasure to have in the program. She's an intelligent young lady. She's very focused and very committed."

Reitsma's dedication has impressed her teammates. NU guard Brooke Schwartz said Reitsma blends in.

"There are so many little things at this level she needs to learn," Schwartz said. "But if she had been in the system for four years, she would be an All-American."

Schwartz's compliment and others like it from her new teammates have relieved Reitsma, who was unsure of how the Huskers would react to her experiment.

"I didn't want them to think I thought that I was some big volleyball player who was going to come in and take over the team," Reitsma said. "I wanted them to know I would try to help in whatever way I could."

Nee stands by method of coaching

NEE from page 13

ting in-state talent slip away. But the talent pool, Williams said, isn't that deep.

"We don't live in a hotbed of talent," Williams said. "We have to go into other peoples' back yards to get talent."

Lincoln Northeast graduate Mike Hahn, Nebraska's Mr. Basketball in 1998, said he didn't receive a phone call from Nee until the end of his season. Hahn went to Pacific.

But don't think Nee has anything against Nebraska or the Midwest.

He cites living in Lincoln as one of the assets of coaching at Nebraska, despite openly discussing the possibility of leaving on more than one occasion.

The most recent instance came in April 1997, when Nee announced on a radio show that he was interested in an opening at Rutgers.

He didn't get the job, and while most fans were calling for Nee's head, Byrne, as always, backed him.

"I'd much rather have a coach that a lot of people are interested in," Byrne said.

If Nee had it to do all over again, he said, he would have kept it quieter.

But then again, communication is the key to Nee's world.

"I'm honest," Nee said. "I'm frank. I don't lie. I'm not (Bill) Clinton. I don't have anything to worry about."

Huskies' Alshammar leads life by her own code

DIVA from page 16

homeland.

In Lincoln, she's just another University of Nebraska-Lincoln student majoring in advertising. That, and one of the best swimmers in the world.

Out of nowhere

Alshammar started swimming when she was 4 years old. The pedigree was in the family as her mother, Britt-Marie S., swam in the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. Alshammar credits her mother for introducing her to the sport at an early age.

The talent has always been there for Alshammar; the desire has not. At age 12, she was ready to quit.

"Swimming's such a boring sport," Alshammar said. "I mean it really is. I was just tired of it. I don't know what was wrong with me, but my mother kept me in it."

By 14, Alshammar won at the Swedish nationals and had figured out she was good. So good, in fact, she never really had to go to practice. When she did, she said, it usually wasn't on time.

Before coming to NU, Alshammar's primary event was the backstroke. It's an event that took her all the way to the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, where, at 18, she finished 16th in 100-meter backstroke. However, that pretty much ended Alshammar's backstroke career.

"I was so sick of the backstroke," Alshammar said. "I swam bad at the Olympics. Not exactly bad, but I could have done better."

At the 1997 Australian Championships, Alshammar won in the 50-meter freestyle, an event she didn't have much experience in. Her new forte was born.

Before she even arrived at Nebraska, Alshammar finished third at the 1997 World Championships in the 50-meter freestyle and eighth in the 100-meter free.

"We recruited her in the backstroke," said Keith Moore, an NU assistant coach and head of the Cornhusker sprint program. "But she performed so well in freestyle. It just came out of nowhere."

Alshammar agreed.

"It was like, 'Oh, I can do (the freestyle) and backstroke once in a while for fun,'" she said.

Alshammar arrived at Nebraska largely because of NU swimmer and best friend Destiny Lauren. Lauren, also from Sweden, convinced Alshammar to come to Nebraska after spending two years in Lincoln.

As a freshman for the Huskers, Alshammar was strong in both the freestyle and backstroke, becoming an All-American in seven events. She was part of NU's NCAA runner-up 800-yard freestyle relay, while her best individual finish was a tie for ninth in the 50-yard free - a finish that left both Alshammar and Moore disappointed.

"I think she could have done better," Moore said. "I think she can be the best in the nation - in the world. She has that kind of talent."

There might be a reason why she isn't the best in the world.

She who defies

In the last 30 meters of a 50-meter freestyle sprint, Alshammar might be the fastest swimmer in the world. Both Moore and Alshammar believe that.

The problem is the start. It's an "old-style" start, Alshammar said. One that her mother taught her. To Moore, it's not "mechanically sound."

"I'm watching the World Championships where she finished third, and after 20 meters, she's dead last," Moore said. "And she starts passing everybody. I couldn't believe what I was seeing."

"If she can get a good start, it will be hard to beat her in the water."

Whether or not Alshammar will adhere to that start is another question.

Coaches can advise, teachers can instruct, and others can criticize, but in the end, Alshammar will do what she wants to do.

"The quality I see in her is defiant," Svensson said. "She's unconventional and a bit shy in saying what she thinks is right."

Said Moore: "Therese expresses her opinion. I express mine. We have differences in opinion. We had a difference last week. That's all part of a coach-athlete relationship."

Alshammar doesn't deny that she's independent, strong-willed, even stubborn. She does understand change can be good. It just comes with a condition attached.

"I love change," Alshammar said. "I love it. But I like my changes, not someone's else's."

Self-proclaimed goddesses can be like that.

Diva

The tattoo on Alshammar's lower back aptly describes her personality, or at least, Alshammar's perception of it. It's big, black and reads: "Diva."

A Latin word, Diva means "goddess." It's what Alshammar believes she is.

"I think I am a goddess, yes," Alshammar said. "I have so much more strength inside me than I do in my muscle mass."

"Every woman is a goddess, in a way. I hope they see that."

How Alshammar got the name Diva isn't quite as high-minded. It goes back to her early swimming days in Sweden when she would skip practice and still win.

"They would kid me and say, 'Oh, you think you're some big f***ing diva, don't you?'" Alshammar said. "It's kind of ironic how I got the tattoo."

Divas, Alshammar said, do what they want to do, regardless of the risk. And Alshammar's done plenty of risky things.

There was the time Alshammar went topless in downtown Lincoln, while Lauren took pictures. Alshammar wasn't completely naked; she had silver paint on.

Her coach, Moore, got to hear that via his wife, Jodi.

"My wife was working downtown at the time, and she tells me about some crazy woman with no top on and silver paint," Moore said. "I told her, 'Oh yeah, that was Therese.'"

"But she doesn't do things that are that extravagant a lot..."

Moore pauses.

"Well... there's this," Moore said, pointing to a picture of Alshammar on his office wall. "See this?"

He points to a picture of her holding

the NCAA runner-up trophy for NU's 800-yard relay team. Seems normal enough.

Wait a minute. Is she licking the trophy?

"Yep," Moore said. "Now understand, that's the runner-up trophy for the NCAA Championships. And she's licking the trophy. That's Therese."

When told about the trophy, Alshammar denied it.

"I didn't!" Alshammar said. "I don't remember that!"

Oh, but Therese, you did.

"Well, I probably did," Alshammar said. "It sounds like something I would do."

"But I don't do crazy things in Lincoln," Alshammar said. "If I ever did something that I thought was crazy, people would have heart attacks."

But there is one thing Alshammar won't say, won't do. And it has to do with the thing she wants most.

Looking ahead

There are 12 individual gold medals in women's swimming to be won at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia. Alshammar's not greedy; she wants only one of them.

And she would give up the awards, the celebrity status - all but her health and happiness - to get it. But she won't guarantee a victory in any event in which she might compete. That, it seems, is even too outrageous a notion for Alshammar.

Hell, she'd even be happy with a silver or bronze, she said.

Strange, really. Alshammar's so confident about everything else - her looks, her attitude, her place in the world - a gold medal prediction would seem to fall in line.

But it doesn't. And Alshammar has a hard time explaining why when asked.

"Winning the Olympics?" Alshammar said. "Um... I... cause... I

... well... OK." Alshammar breaks the stare. She looks away.

"I won't say I'm going to come home with a gold medal," Alshammar said. "Because then people are going to say, 'Oh, you only came home with a bronze.' And that's not bad at all."

She doesn't like to talk about her goals - especially the Olympic ones. But others can.

"I think she's good enough to do it," Moore said. "She has to stay away from injury, but she can be right there."

Right now, Alshammar isn't there. She's 22nd in the world in 50-meter free, one of her best events. She doesn't

know who's first, and she doesn't care. She said she'll be ready for anyone.

Alshammar said she knows how to prepare for big races. And if she doesn't win in 2000, there's the 2001 World Championships. Maybe the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece.

And after that, Alshammar plans to bank on the awards and celebrity she has

garnered so far. Modeling, she said, is a possibility. Better yet, Alshammar would like to start her own fashion business.

"To make a fashion line or design clothes - that'd be all right with me," Alshammar said. "I want to make myself a name. A big name."

Don't believe her? That's fine. Tell her so. Maybe she'll listen. But first, you'll have to look Therese Alshammar down. Otherwise, forget about it.

"I know people are looking at me," Alshammar said. "Around campus, and in Sweden, I know I'm noticed. All the time. Some of them look at me like I'm self-absorbed."

"But people, sometimes they won't look in you or look you in the eye. They're giving off bad karma, bad vibes. I don't pay attention to them. I think it's kind of funny, because proves that I'm a better person."

"If I ever did something that I thought was crazy, people would have heart attacks."**"**

THERESE ALSHAMMAR
NU swimmer