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LeBlanc learned from early mistakes

BY DARREN IVY
Staff writer

In just her third game as the starting goalkeeper for Nebraska, sophomore Karina LeBlanc had already faced a



LeBlanc

crossroads. She had given up four goals and been red-carded in the UCLA game, which the Cornhuskers lost 5-1. LeBlanc was in unfamiliar territory. The 18-year-old Canadian had never given up that many goals. She was frustrated. Her confidence waned. She had two roads she could take.

"After UCLA, I could have packed

it in and slumped down," LeBlanc said. "But I excelled from there rather than slumping. I've learned from my mistakes."

LeBlanc's whole first season as the starting goalie has been a learning experience.

The Maple Ridge, British Columbia native is a fast learner. In the 15 games since the UCLA game, LeBlanc has allowed just six goals. On the season, she has posted 10 shutouts, while compiling a 15-2-1 record. Her 0.67 goals against average ranks her 11th nationally.

When a ball does make it into the net, it eats at her.

"I take it personally each time a ball goes in the goal," LeBlanc. "Each time it does, it just rips at your soul."

But she has learned from the UCLA game that she can't dwell on a goal once it has happened.

She applied that knowledge in the Big 12 Tournament on Nov. 5-8 against Texas A&M and Missouri.

Against the Aggies, LeBlanc didn't let the two goals she gave up faze her. She played her best when the game was on the line at the end of regulation and in overtime. She made a school-record 12 saves.

"She was outstanding this weekend," Walker said. "She made big saves that kept us in the (A&M) game."

LeBlanc only made one save against the Tigers, but it came at a critical time, Walker said.

"We were leading 2-0 and they had a breakaway," Walker said. "She stopped it and preserved our two-goal cushion."

Making saves is just one part of LeBlanc's duties.

"I feel I'm a part of the game, even when I don't have to make saves," LeBlanc said. "The goalkeeper job is

wide. You have a lot of tasks to do."

One of the hardest adjustments LeBlanc had to make was playing away from the goal. In NU's scheme, the goalie often comes to midfield when the Huskers are on the attack. Additionally, the ball is played back to LeBlanc and she has to use her feet to pass it.

"The teams I've played with, I stayed inside the 18-yard line," said LeBlanc.

Now that it's NCAA tournament time, LeBlanc is going to have to continue her hot streak.

Walker said after the past weekend, LeBlanc's confidence should be "sky-high."

That's important because in the NCAA tournament the majority of the games will be one and two-goal games, Walker said.

"It can come down to how well the goalie plays."

Huskers enter new territory with struggles in red zone

BY JOHN GASKINS
Staff reporter

The red zone. Once an offensive unit gets in it, the scope of the game changes.

The red zone is the field inside the offensive opponent's 20-yard line. The offense sees blood and looks to score, while the defense either toughens up or awaits their impending doom.

"The noise level picks up down there, the intensity level rises and the field becomes more reduced," NU Receivers Coach Ron Brown said.

Nebraska's opposing defenses have suffered their share of doom over the years. The normally overpowering Big Red offense has scored an average of 82 percent of the time when in the red zone over the last five seasons.

However, contributing to the occa-

sional periods of sluggish ball movement this season has been the seeming inability for the Huskers to score once they get near the goal line.

"Overall, it has not been as easy for us getting the ball in the end zone," Head Coach Frank Solich said.

"We've had a couple games where we've got it done at a pretty high level, but we've not been as consistent as what teams have done in the past."

Statistically, this year's offense is right on pace with recent years, with 82 percent efficiency in the zone. NU has not been in the red zone as many times.

Plus, in games and situations where scoring has been most crucial, the offense has sputtered.

Brown said the offense has made different types of mistakes. Aside from four missed short field goals, the offense has four turnovers and one loss on downs inside the 20, not to mention

a plethora of penalties.

"Those are the things that kill you," Brown said.

An example of such a situation was in NU's 20-16 loss to Texas on Oct. 31.

The Huskers had the ball at the Texas 8-yard-line, leading 13-10 midway through the third quarter. With a chance to put the game away, the offense collapsed as quarterback Eric Crouch fumbled and Texas recovered. Minutes later, the Longhorns tied the game.

"It's been tough this year for this offense to really click as a unit," Crouch said.

"We've had to put in so many different players. That's real hard on the players... adjusting to speed, adjusting to different players and how fast they're going to run the option with you."

Another factor has been improved defense on the Huskers. Brown said

defenses have picked up on formerly successful goal-to-go plays like bootlegs or first-and-goal passes to the end zone.

"Five or six years ago, those things were almost automatic," Brown said. "Inside the 10-yard-line, we'd often throw the ball on first down. Now teams play the pass in that situation."

"The teams are coming up with blitzes we haven't seen before to stop our running game," split end Kenny Cheatham said.

It won't get any easier Saturday when the Huskers face the nation's second-ranked defense - Kansas State. So how will the Huskers try to avoid the Wildcats' blitz and get the ball in the end zone?

"Grind it out," Cheatham said. "Maybe a field goal here, a field goal there, a touchdown here, and still come out with a victory."

Kubik accepts role at point guard

KUBIK from pg. 7

ahead. "Everyone's is going to follow my lead," she said. "I have to make sure we are in the right spots at all times."

Kubik said there is a downside to being a leader this year. It means she won't be playing with her sister Jami.

Anyone who saw the Kubik sisters play last year would know that gritty, no-

nonsense play runs in the family.

The two grew up competing against their older brothers and sisters at their family's farm near Cambridge.

Jami Kubik thinks being young in a big family made Nicole extra competitive.

"She hates to lose," she said. "We played a lot of basketball on the farm. We were always smaller (than their older siblings) and had to fight."

Jones commits to NU women for basketball

BY JAY SAUNDERS
Staff writer

Nebraska Women's Basketball Coach Paul Sanderford said one important step in building a good program is keeping the best in-state players in Nebraska.

Wednesday, Sanderford signed what could be the biggest name in Nebraska high school state history.

Stephanie Jones, from Omaha Benson, signed her letter of intent to play at Nebraska for the next four years.

"(Signing) was the biggest relief I have had in a long time," Jones said. "I didn't know until (Tuesday) where I was going to end up."

Jones was recruited by Connecticut, Duke and Colorado, among others. But Jones decided to stay close to home, and Sanderford can thank himself for that.

"(Nebraska) has one of the best coaches in the country," Jones said. "I'm a good player but he is going to make me a great player."

Jones, a 6-foot-2 senior, still has one more year to play at Benson. Last season, Jones led the Bunnies in scoring and was named to the All-State team.

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