

Utah, ISU ready for NCAAs

BY ANDREW STRNAD
Staff writer

Nebraska volleyball fans are regarded across the country as some of the most knowledgeable in the country.

Two coaches who know about Cornhusker fans hope to show the expected 4,200 fans at the NU Coliseum on Friday night what volleyball is like outside the Big 12 Conference.

“(NU’s) crowd is very similar to our crowd in the way that it recognizes good rallies,” Illinois State Coach Julie Morgan said. “Their crowd is loud and very knowledgeable.”

The NCAA volleyball tournament begins Thursday night, but the festivities don’t begin in Lincoln until Friday at 5 p.m. when Utah (20-9) meets Illinois State (22-9). Morgan State (18-14) will meet Nebraska (26-1) at 7:30 p.m.

Both the Utes and the Redbirds enter the tournament as at-large teams.

Illinois State hails from the Missouri Valley Conference, finishing second to Northern Iowa.

“Our team feels very good for being an at-large team because it says a little bit more for our conference than people think,” Morgan said. “It shows that we had to earn it and didn’t get it automatically.”

Illinois State is no stranger to the NCAA tournament; the team qualified for the fifth time in the 1990s.

The six-time MVC coach of the year is also no stranger to the NU Coliseum.

Despite the coliseum’s sometimes intimidating surroundings, Morgan said her team’s preparation, namely a tough nonconference schedule, has prepared the Redbirds for matches in Lincoln.

The Redbirds played seven tournament teams during out-of-conference play this season.

Utah is new to the NCAA. In her ninth season, Utah Coach

Beth Launiere finally made it to where she wanted to be when she took the job in Salt Lake City.

“This was my No. 1 goal, and now I couldn’t be happier,” Launiere said.

After consecutive 20-win seasons in the ultra-competitive Western Athletic Conference, Launiere’s Utes are on their way to Lincoln for the school’s first appearance in the NCAA tournament.

“I love Lincoln, Nebraska,” Launiere said. “It didn’t matter where we went. I’m just excited about Lincoln because of the great volleyball environment up there.”

Launiere, who is a longtime friend of Morgan’s, also said nonconference wins over teams like Louisville and Notre Dame helped her team earn an at-large selection.

“We feel we’re battle-tested,” Launiere said.

Friday’s meeting will be the first time Utah and Illinois State have met since 1990 and the fifth meeting overall. The winner will meet the Morgan State/Nebraska winner Saturday.

Pettit, Nepo win All-Big 12 honors

■ Megan Korver and Nancy Meendering make first team; Jaime Krondak is honorable mention.

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
Senior staff writer

Big 12 Conference volleyball coaches tabbed Nebraska Volleyball Coach Terry Pettit as league coach and NU setter Fiona Nepo as player of the year Tuesday.

NU middle blocker Megan Korver and right-side hitter Nancy Meendering also are on the first team. Both were unanimous selections.

Senior outside hitter Jaime Krondak earned honorable-mention honors.

The recognition pleased Pettit. “The only difference on my ballot was that I had Jaime on the first

team,” Pettit said. “She is playing at an All-Big 12 level, and she really deserved to make the first team.”

“But I’m very happy that Fiona was named the MVP because she is very deserving of it. And Megan and Nancy have played well, too, so I’m happy with it.”

But Pettit said he was surprised to win coach-of-the-year honors.

“I voted for Lori Corbelli at A&M,” Pettit said. “They have done a wonderful job this season. But the award is a reflection on our entire staff and team.”

The Cornhuskers own a 28-1 overall record and 19-1 conference mark. No. 3 NU earned a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament Pacific Region and begins tournament play Friday against Morgan State at the NU Coliseum. NU will play the winner of the Utah-Illinois State match if it defeats the Honey Bears.

Please see AWARDS on 10

Williams more vocal, effective in NU attack

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
Senior staff writer

Nicole Kubik shakes her head and smiles when she thinks about one of the few times her normally quiet teammate Monet Williams has yelled at her on the basketball court.

“It was kind of weird,” Kubik said.

An audible sound from Williams qualifies as an atypical event to many of the outspoken Cornhuskers. Williams often sits by herself on the team bus, her ears covered by the headphones she constantly wears.

But the senior guard broke out of her silent role with a bang during NU’s 2-1 run through the Rainbow Wahine Classic from

Nov. 27 to 29 in Hawaii. Starting the first game of her career in a 85-66 win over St. John’s, Williams scored 10 points and had 13 rebounds. Even more important, Husker Coach Paul Sanderford said, was Williams’ stabilizing influence and uncharacteristic vocal leadership.

“Monet’s experience really showed, and I was impressed with her ability to keep things under control for us,” Sanderford said. “She’s still too quiet. But she’s been pushing herself to get past that.”

Williams, who calls herself the quietest person on the team, has struggled to find her voice since coming to Nebraska prior to the 1997 season. Recruited by former NU Coach Angela Beck after two years at Norfolk’s Northeast Community College, Williams was left in limbo during the coach’s departure and Sanderford’s extended hiring process. The Brooklyn, N.Y., native played sparingly during the 1997 season.

“It was hard to feel part of the team when I wasn’t playing that much,” Williams said.

Then, halfway through the season, Williams experienced one of the most difficult times in her life when her roommate and best friend on the team, freshman center Amanda Cleveland, was diagnosed with aplastic anemia, a rare and life-threatening

disease.

Cleveland, who has since returned to Lincoln, spent the rest of the season at home in Lancaster, Texas, while Williams tried to fit in without her friend.

“I was so shocked when I heard what had happened to Amanda,” Williams said. “We were really close, and it was really hard. I wanted to be there to support her. And I needed her here to support me. It hurt me pretty bad.”

It also helped to spark a change in Williams’ attitude.

“I realized that I had to take everything in my life more seriously,” Williams said. “Every day is a chance for me to play basketball, but what if I was in a car accident tomorrow and injured my leg? I have learned a lot from Amanda and what happened to her.”

One month later, as the Huskers were ending the season, Sanderford told Williams she could play more as a senior if she stayed in Lincoln and improved her overall skills. Williams did and her dedication has paid off.

“I said at the first press conference of the year that she might be the most improved player on the team this season,” Sanderford said. “Monet worked very hard this summer. Her work ethic is very much improved – she always had the talent. And her knowledge of the system has grown.”

Sanderford now relies on Williams – who averaged 2.2 points and 1.3 boards per game last year – to stop opponents’ best offensive guard and provide floor leadership.

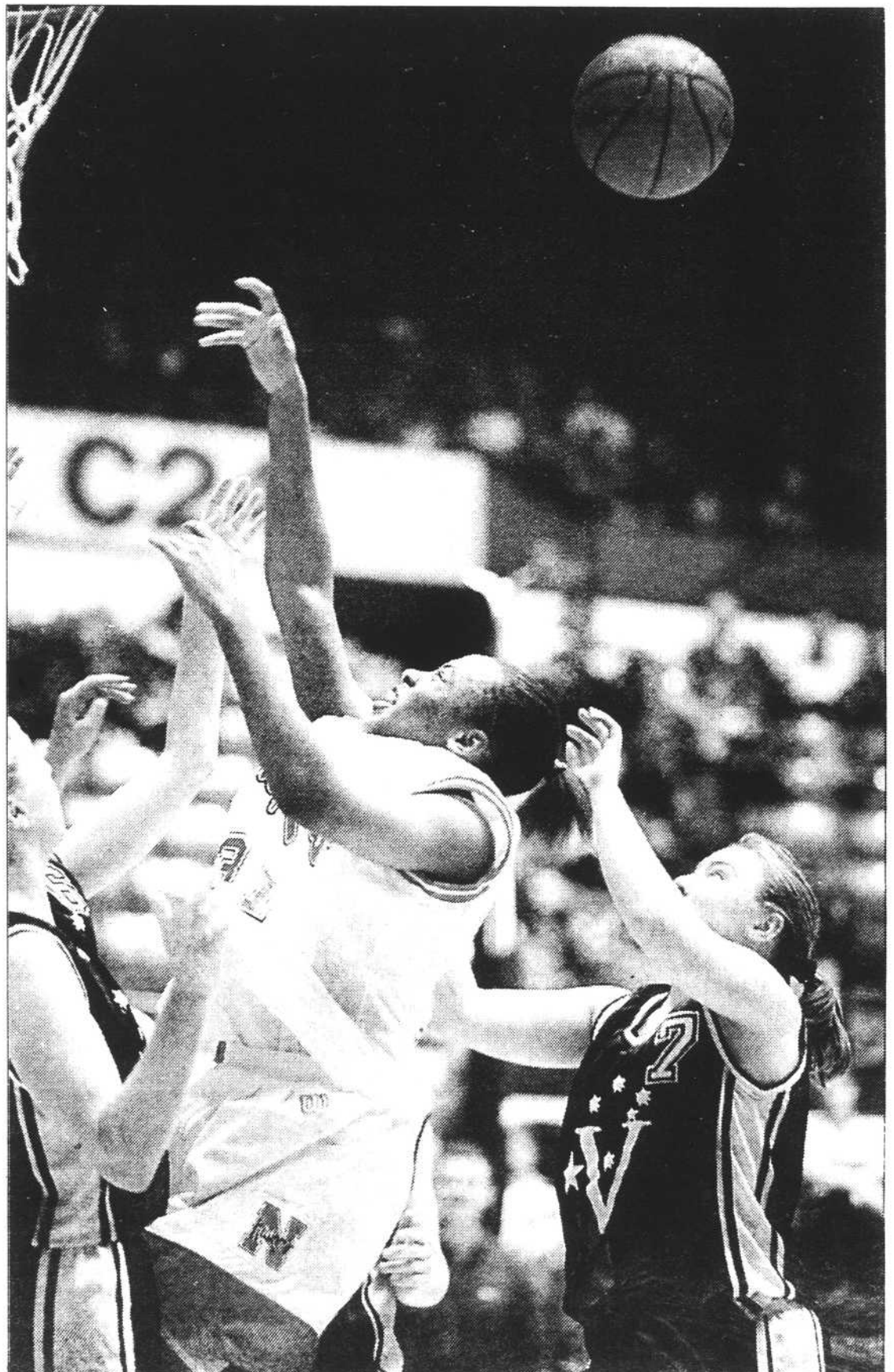
Williams credits Sanderford for helping her game improve. She feels more comfortable on the court because he shows confidence in her.

The coach has only one complaint about the much-improved Williams.

“She’s a little too quiet,” he said.

Williams said she’s working on it, but she doesn’t want to take things too far.

“I talk so softly that when I yell, everyone’s pretty surprised,” Williams said. “If I talk much more, I think people might be in shock.”



DN FILE PHOTO
NEBRASKA GUARD MONET WILLIAMS fights for a rebound against two Victorian All-Stars opponents in an exhibition game last season. Williams had her first career double-double against St. John’s on Saturday.