

Penn State wears down Cornhuskers in Final Four

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
Senior staff writer

MADISON, Wis. — Faced with the thunderous finality of Lauren Cacciamani's match-winning kill at the end of the Nebraska volleyball team's NCAA Final Four loss to Penn State on Dec. 17, Megan Korver could think only of the beginning.

For Korver, 1996 marked the beginning — the year when the middle blocker arrived at NU as a sophomore after transferring from George Washington. The year when she vowed to concentrate only on aiding the Cornhuskers on a national championship journey, an experience her classmates Fiona Nepo and Jaime Krondak had claimed as freshmen before she arrived in 1995.

And Korver had felt earlier this fall that this was it. Nebraska boasted its strongest senior class in three years. NU Coach Terry Pettit couldn't remember ever coaching a team with more depth. The Huskers listed three potential All-Americans on their roster, including Korver herself.

The Huskers even appeared to have luck on their side after surviving five-game matches against Pepperdine and Wisconsin in the week preceding the Final Four.

It was her last chance.

But despite the perfect scenario, even Korver agreed that the finale to the Huskers' season almost seemed scripted. Ironically, the members of NU's senior class — who played a huge part in thwarting Penn State's post-season hopes in a five-game match in 1996 — finished their careers with a 15-11, 15-8, 8-15, 15-11 loss to the No. 2 Nittany Lions.

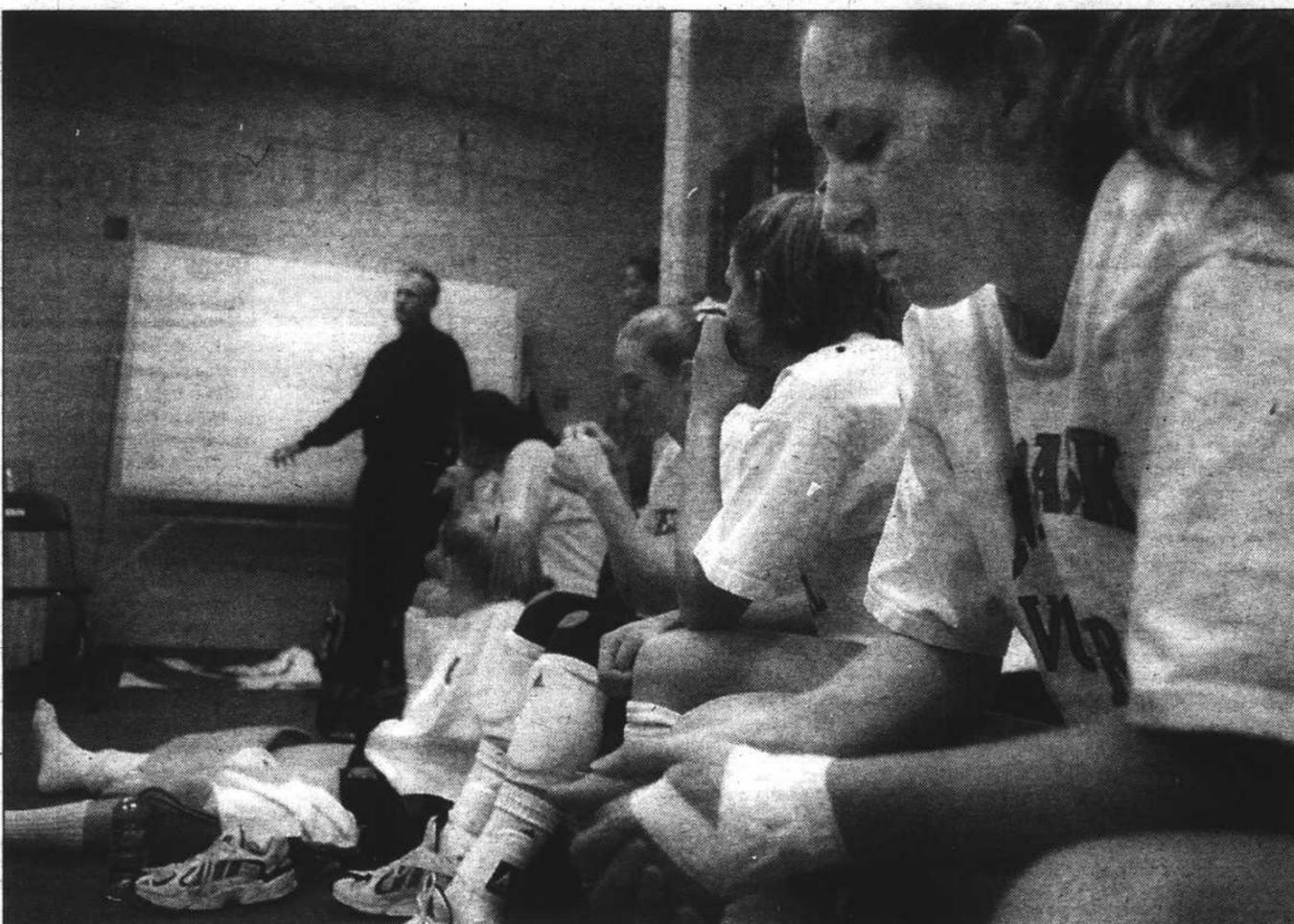
Penn State's win — witnessed by an NCAA-record crowd of 12,327 at the Kohl Center — marked just the second time in eight tries that PSU has stolen a match from the Huskers during post-season play, a disappointing thought to NU's seniors.

"After that third game, things looked so good for us," Korver said. "But when that last point came in the fourth, it was just devastating. We were so close. When I walked off the floor, I was in shock. I think I still am. I really thought we could do it."

No. 3 Nebraska came close to earning a spot in the title match after it nearly pushed PSU to a fifth game. After slow starts in games No. 1 and 2, the Huskers led the entire third game and jumped to a 6-2 lead in the fourth.

"You could see in at times during (the fourth game), Penn State was scared," said Krondak, who posted 10 kills. "They really were. They were scared and fatigued."

But the Nittany Lions went on a 9-0 run led by Cacciamani, who smashed eight of her match-high 20 kills during the final frame. Nebraska cut the lead to 11-10 after a service ace from Mandy Monson, but PSU's Christy Cochran recorded



Penn State	15	15	8	15
Nebraska	11	8	15	11

three kills during the Lions' match-ending 4-1 surge.

Two days later, No. 1 Long Beach State swept Penn State (35-1) in the national championship match.

Despite the Huskers' loss, Pettit applauded their effort.

"I am very proud of our team," Pettit said. "We followed the game plan, we did what we had planned to do. I felt good with our situation toward the end of game four. I felt like we really had them on the ropes at one time."

"But I want to credit Lauren Cacciamani. She willed their team. The difference was, she was finishing plays at the end of the game and we weren't. And it wasn't that we weren't trying, we just couldn't get it done."

For one of the few times in 1998, the Huskers' offensive firepower abandoned them. Nebraska hit a season-low .135 against the Lions. Meendering, NU's top hitter, needed 80 swings to produce 19 kills. Penn State gave an impressive defensive effort in the back row. At one point in the second game, PSU dug Meendering on three consecutive swings.

"I can't remember ever being dug like that before," Meendering said. "I should have made a better decision. There's no excuse. I just didn't adjust very well."

Krondak disagreed.

"Nancy really stepped up and she was a little too hard on herself," Krondak said. "I felt that it was we three seniors who needed to be the ones to take

things upon ourselves, and I'm upset that I didn't do that."

Nebraska's senior class ended an impressive four-year run with the loss. Krondak and Nepo aided the Huskers to a national title, three Final Four appearances and three conference championships. The three seniors also posted a 52-1 home record as starters.

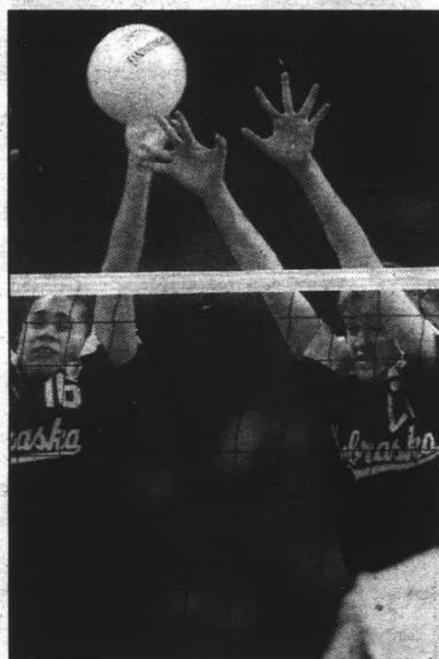
Nepo became only the fifth three-time All-American setter in NCAA history and earned 1998 Big 12 Player of the Year honors. The Hawaii native smashed NU's all-time career assist record in October. Korver also etched her name on the Huskers' all-time blocking charts, recording 442 block assists (third) and 75 solo blocks (fifth).

Korver predicts Nebraska's underclassmen will fill the void left by the trio. Juniors Mandy Monson and Tonia Tauke — Nebraska's top blocker — will return, as will part-time starters Angie Oxley and Nikki Henk. Meendering, who earned first-team All-America honors this season, will anchor the Huskers' offensive efforts.

"I think the future is bright for this team," Korver said.

And the middle blocker even sees a bright side to the end of her career. Although she will sometimes wonder about what might have been, Korver said, she looks forward to living the life of a "normal" college student.

"I had to give up a lot to play on this team," Korver said. "It will be so strange not to go to practice every afternoon and spend four hours a day with this team. But even though I never played for a national championship, I do not have any regrets. I loved playing here, and I have made good friends — best friends — on this team. I'm thankful for the experience."



MATT MILLER/DN
ABOVE: NEBRASKA SETTER FIONA NEPO, left, and middle blocker Tonia Tauke set up a block against Penn State.

TOP: DENISE KOZIOL MENTALLY PREPARES for her final volleyball match as Coach Terry Pettit goes over strategy in the team's locker room.

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