

Hamilton on Big 12 1st team

Senior joins Belcher on All-defense team; Johnson honored

BY ADAM KLINKER
Senior staff writer

In the midst of preparing for a conference tournament and turning all thoughts to their team, three Nebraska basketball players received individual Big 12 Conference honors on Monday.

Cookie Belcher, Venson Hamilton and Chad Johnson all notched spots on one of the six Big 12 specialty teams which include the All-Newcomer team, the All-Freshman team, the All-Underrated team, the All-Improved team, the All-Bench team and the All-Defense team.

Hamilton, in addition to being named to the All-Improved team, was also selected to the All-Big 12 first team. He was joined by Chris Mihm and Gabe Muoneke of Texas, Marcus Fizer of Iowa State and Adrian Peterson of Oklahoma State. But Hamilton said it was no time to take a break from focusing on the team.

"It hasn't really hit me yet," Hamilton said. "It probably won't until we get down to playing the tournament."

The 6-foot-10 inch center from Forest City, N.C., finished the regular season averaging 16 points and 10.5 rebounds per game, and averaged 18.3 ppg and 11 rpg in league play, figures that are first and second in the conference, respectively.

NU Coach Danny Nee said there was never any question that Hamilton was among the best in the league this season, and he said it's been a culmination of things as well.

"Look at his numbers," Nee said. "1,000 points, 1,000 rebounds, 200 block shots. That's tough to do. Nobody's put up those kind of numbers at Nebraska. It's really special."

In addition to Hamilton, Belcher, who led the conference in steals with 87, was named to the Big 12 All-Defense team for the second straight season.

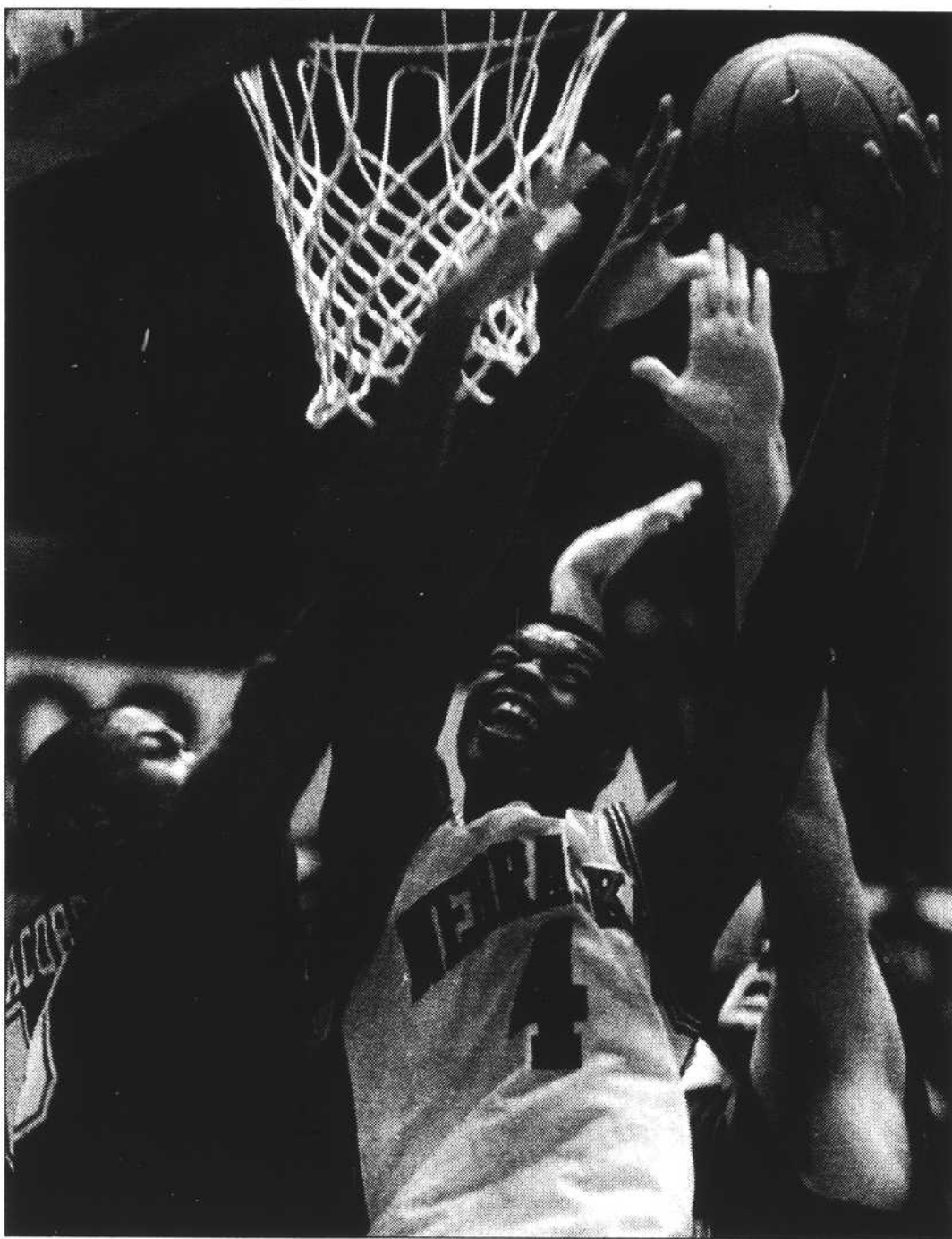
"He's one of the premier defenders in the nation, of course," Nee said. "What I've seen him do on the court is phenomenal."

As a junior, Belcher, with 249 career steals is just eight shy of Erick Strickland's career mark.

He is also among the conference's leaders in assists this season with 125 and is tenth on the all-time NU charts with 317.

Following up Hamilton and Belcher, sophomore guard Chad Johnson was yet another Husker addition to the All-Big 12 teams. Johnson was named to the All-Bench team.

Averaging 7.0 points and 3.1 rebounds, Johnson just recently began his stint as NU's starting point



LANE HICKENBOTTOM/DN
VENSON HAMILTON takes it to the hoop Saturday against Texas A&M. Hamilton was named to the first-team All Big 12 team on Monday by the Associated Press.

guard, but was a perpetual fixture off the bench for the Huskers.

"It's a great honor to me," Johnson said. "It shows me that maybe next year I can become a starter and try to make first or second team All-Big 12."

On the whole, Nee said it was good to see his players netting the respect and honor that they deserve, as well as bringing in some accolades for the team as a whole.

"I'm really happy for them," he said. "It's good for the team."

Huskers to shut down Texas A&M

BY JAY SAUNDERS
Staff writer

Before the Nebraska women's basketball team traveled to Stillwater, Okla., to face Oklahoma State on Saturday, almost everyone assumed the Cornhuskers and Cowgirls would meet again in the first round of the Big 12 Tournament.

The results of Saturday's regular

season games taught people why they shouldn't assume.

Because of Nebraska's 60-57 win, coupled with Missouri's 73-64 upset victory at Oklahoma, the Huskers were awarded the No. 5 seed, which means NU will open the tournament this afternoon at 2:20 against Texas A&M.

"There is going to be a lot of surprises," Sanderford said. "Hopefully one of them won't be Texas A&M beating us."

Nebraska earned the fifth seed thanks to a complicated tiebreaker system. NU (19-10 overall and 8-8 in the Big 12 Conference) finished with the same conference record as Baylor and Oklahoma.

Baylor owned the head-to-head tiebreaker. But because the Bears and Oklahoma, who had the advantage over Baylor, are in the same division, the conference looks at that first.

If the Huskers lost in Stillwater, they would have drawn the No. 7 seed, which could have meant a second-round date with No. 2-seeded Iowa State.

Instead of playing Iowa State in the second round, the Huskers have a possible matchup with Texas, the No. 4 seed.

"It's a good time to win," NU Coach Paul Sanderford said. "Our kids grew up a little bit."

The Longhorns beat Nebraska 80-75 earlier this season. Sanderford said the loss still is a pain in his side because his team was in a position to win.

"I sure hope the kids get up for A&M," Sanderford said, "but I want to play Texas one more time."

Before NU can think about a rematch, the Huskers must win a first game, which didn't happen last season.

Nebraska had a bye in the first round of the tournament, and was upset by Oklahoma State in the quarterfinals.

"I haven't been reminded of it much," Sanderford said. "But hopefully this is where the system works. We stress peaking at tournament time."

Nebraska beat Texas A&M 62-54 in

"Our confidence is sky-high right now. We are going to prepare to win as a team."

NICOLE KUBIK
NU guard

the teams' only matchup this season. The Feb. 17 game ended the Huskers' seven-game road losing streak.

Since then, junior Nicole Kubik was switched from point guard to shooting guard. After that, the Huskers have seemed to go through a revival.

"Our confidence is sky-high right now," Kubik said. "We are going to prepare to win as a team. We are going to be focused on A&M."

The win over Oklahoma State got the Huskers to .500 in conference play, which Sanderford said was a key to making to the NCAA tournament.

Beating OSU means the Huskers don't have to rely on winning a certain number of games in Kansas City.

"We got that off our back," Sanderford said. "Now we can go down there and play."

Sports Opinion



Darren Ivy

Senior day showcase for Huskers

Senior day is always an emotional time for both players and parents.

Saturday, 11,294 Bob Devaney Sports Center fans bid farewell to this year's group of seniors.

An individual column probably could be written about each player's unique twist to the day, but I felt a highlight reel of each player's story was most interesting.

We start with Andy Markowski, the courageous warrior from Ord. All season he played through pain. But Saturday, it appeared that he had finally met a severe ankle sprain he couldn't overcome. Think again. He willed his way onto the court.

"Andy basically told me he was going to play," Nee said. "When he warmed up the first time, I told him it wasn't good enough. I told him, 'If you don't warm up better than that, you aren't going to play.' He said, 'I'll be ready to play. The adrenaline will kick in. The emotion will kick in and I'll be ready to play.'"

Markowski scored just 4 points, but he was an emotional spark plug.

Then there's Venson Hamilton, whose mother had never attended a college game. Heck, she had never even flown in an airplane before. Listening to Venson tell the story of her first flight was quite humorous.

"She prayed the whole time. It took off and she was so scared. She looked at one of my brothers and said, 'What's going on?'"

You could tell that winning this game meant a lot to Hamilton.

"I told the underclassmen, 'Just win this game for me. Please!' I don't want to be walking around with a loss, having my family be all mad."

Hamilton got his wish - one of them at least. He didn't get to shoot a 3-point attempt, but that's about all the Big 12 Conference player of the year candidate didn't do this year.

For Troy Piatkowski, the game was a chance to show the fans and his father that he still had some bullets left in his long-range pistol.

"I always look up (into the stands) when I'm warming up. If I miss a shot, I can see the look in my father's eye. He's sitting there, saying follow through or put more arc on the ball. I've seen it my whole life. I didn't see the look tonight."

That's probably because Piatkowski scored a season-high 17 points and made 7 of 9 shots.

For Florence, this year's ceremony was a warm-up for next year. He will return next season.

The other three will be missed. It was fitting that they went out winners in their last home game. They are crowd favorites and likable guys.

Hopefully, they will go out on top and be the group to win an NCAA Tournament game.

Darren Ivy is a junior news-editorial major and a senior staff writer.

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