

Parity shapes Big 12 baseball teams

NU coach says southern schools have advantage of outdoor play, warmer weather

By **BRANDON SCHULTE**
Staff writer

In baseball, where the difference between a win and loss can come down to one swing of the bat or a great defensive play, little separates the winners from the losers.

The same is true for the baseball teams in the Big 12 Conference as it kicks off the 1999 conference schedule.

NU Coach Dave Van Horn, for one, can't wait to get the conference schedule under way.

"I'm excited and so are the players," Van Horn said. "Whenever we play our conference teams, the games are a little more exciting. The players start to pick up their intensity and concentration because of the level of competition."

Last season the competition was fierce - a mere 11 games separated first-place Texas A&M from last-place Kansas. Seven of the 11 teams

in the conference posted winning records in 1998, while five, A&M, Baylor, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and Texas Tech, made the NCAA Regional Tournament.

Kansas State Coach Mike Clark sees parity in a strong conference nationally.

"Our league is very balanced; I don't see a 'weak sister' in the bunch," Clark said. "Schools have won tough non-league games and right now our power rating is very good (third nationally behind the SEC and Pac-10)."

The conference is led by the four Texas schools, which are all ranked. No. 8 Texas A&M leads the group. It came within one game of the College World Series last year and has started out hot this year (12-2 overall and 3-0 in the Big 12 Conference).

No. 10 Texas has been quite a surprise this year after struggling to an 11-18 conference record last spring. The young Texas squad (11-6, 3-0) is trying to be the 43rd NCAA Regional team in school history.

No. 13 Texas Tech is off to a 13-4, 3-0 conference start. It's trying to make its fifth straight NCAA baseball tournament appearance.

No. 21 Baylor has been fast out of

the gate compiling a 12-4 overall and 3-0 conference record respectively. They also participated in the NCAA tournament last season.

In the early part of the season Van Horn says the southern schools in the Big 12 have an advantage.

"The southern schools get to practice and play outside all year round," Van Horn said, "whereas we have to battle the weather in the early part of the season."

"There definitely is (a gap between the southern and northern schools) early in the season. They usually get off to a lot better start and we have to make it up in the second half of the season."

In order for the northern schools to make up the gap, they must have quality repetitions indoors and hope for good enough weather to engage in outdoor workouts.

Because of that, the southern teams again look to be favored by a long shot.

But in a preseason informal coaches poll, Van Horn said, coaches were divided on whether defending champion Texas A&M or Texas Tech would be the toast of the conference come May. And after that, the rest of the spots were unknown.

"When it's all said and done," Van Horn said, "two or three teams will pull away, but spots three through eight should be up for grabs."

For Nebraska to improve on their seventh place finish in the conference and 10-13 conference record, it will need to play better on the road, as it

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NU head coach

was 4-14 overall and 2-10 in conference road games last year. NU needs good defense and better hitting than the team has had in past campaigns.

Other schools going for the three through eight positions include Oklahoma State, Oklahoma, Missouri, Iowa State, Kansas and Kansas State.

Iowa State (5-5, 0-0) after finishing just behind Nebraska at 20-27, 10-18 hopes to be above .500 this year.

Kansas has the best opportunity to improve after going a dismal 22-29 overall and 7-20 in conference last year. So far the team has a way to go, judging by its 2-8, 0-3 record.

Kansas State has faced several early difficult tasks and a record of 6-8, 0-3 confirms these early season battles.

Missouri (6-5, 0-3) narrowly missed an NCAA bid last spring and will try to make their third consecutive trip to the Big 12 tournament.

Oklahoma (9-6, 0-0) will open its

Big 12 slate this weekend against Nebraska, used a 42-20 record last year to earn a trip to the NCAA tournament.

Perennial power Oklahoma State is on the fringes of the top 25 ranking thanks to an 8-4, 0-3 record to date. A sixth place conference finish last season propelled them to an NCAA berth.

A top-five conference finish would allow NU to compete in the Big 12 conference tournament for the first time in school history and most likely garner a place in the NCAA Regional tourney - somewhere the Cornhuskers haven't been since 1985.

Then there is the most important aspect of the game that Clark says will separate who finishes in the top or bottom of the conference.

"Pitching," he said. "It's the whole name of the game. Quality starters and relievers will separate the top echelon from the rest of the teams in the conference and in the nation."

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