

NU optimistic about season

New coach, leaders don't dampen team's hopes

By JOHN GASKINS
Staff writer

Not much changes in the world of the Nebraska volleyball — not the philosophy, not the goals the players set, and certainly not the results.

But plenty has changed since the Huskers finished their 32-2, Final Four-qualifying 1998 season, namely its personnel. Nebraska will have plenty of gaps to fill offensively, defensively and in the coaching department.

The banners representing NU's dominance in volleyball, 21 of them representing Big 8 or Big 12 Championships, one of them being the 1995 NCAA Championship, will always hang over the team's home court at the NU Coliseum.

But gone from the arena and the 1999 spring practices, which started March 7, are the three senior leaders from the 1998 team — Megan Korver, Jaime Krondak and three-time All-American Fiona Nepo.

And gone is 10-year Assistant Coach Cathy Noth, a former All-American under Coach Terry Pettit.

"One thing we definitely lost was some leadership," Pettit said. "That's one thing we're working on in practice. It's a different team, but a good team."

But if you notice anything at their spring practices, new leaders are emerging. One obvious leader is new Associate Head Coach John Cook.

Cook, who was named as Noth's replacement Feb. 23, brings seven years of head coaching experience to the Huskers. He compiled a 161-73 record at Wisconsin, including berths in the regional finals each of the past two years.

But Cook is not new to the NU program. He was an assistant with Noth under Pettit from 1988-91.

"No one misses Cathy as much as

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TERRY PETTIT
NU volleyball coach

I do," Pettit said.

"(Fourth-year Assistant Coach) Nikki (Best) and John have assumed responsibility very well.

"John is doing a lot of our defensive training. He's a great coach and he brings a lot to this team."

And the players have already felt Cook's impact within the first three weeks of practice, especially considering they must step up in light of middle blocker Korver's departure.

"We can really see our team improving in defense everyday," junior outside hitter Nancy Meendering said.

"(Cook) gets on us for defense even if we're not working on defensive drills. He's really intense."

Cook said his transition from UW to NU has been an easy one and he has very much enjoyed working with the Huskers so far.

"There are a lot of issues for us to work through and we're still learning a lot," Cook said. "We're still figuring out who will be on the court and interchanging a lot of players."

Losing Nepo, the team's commanding setter and court leader, is enough to send a coach reeling in spring practice. But junior Jill McWilliams, Nepo's replacement, has emerged as one of the team's new leaders and is breaking the court's silence that was left when Nepo left.

McWilliams said she was ready

fill Nepo's gargantuan shoes.

Pettit, Meendering and Cook all singled McWilliams out when speaking about Nebraska's performance over spring break at a scrimmage tournament in Malibu, Calif. The Huskers easily defeated San Diego, Fresno State and host team Pepperdine, which took NU to five games in last season's regional.

"I was very pleased with Jill's play," Pettit said. "She was very consistent. The setter leads by setting hittable balls, and Jill's doing that right now."

Another expected leader is Meendering, who led the team in kills last season.

"We sat down this winter and discussed what are goals are for this season," Meendering said.

"We pretty much made the same goals as last year — win the Big 12 championship, win our regional in the NCAA tournament, and win the national championship. There's no reason why they should be any different."

And although the season officially gets under way more than five months from now, both Pettit and Cook agree.

"I haven't seen anything so far to believe that this team can't compete for the national championship," Cook said.

Soccer team short on bench depth

Huskers are still looking forward to spring games.

By JAY SAUNDERS
Staff writer

Three months ago, the Nebraska soccer team had one of the deepest benches in the Big 12 Conference.

But five graduating seniors, one player departure and a host of injuries have almost made for a spring of discontent.

The Cornhuskers played their first two spring exhibition games against Florida and Alabama with a minimum 11 players.

"It's frustrating because you don't have your whole squad," NU Coach John Walker said. "We are hampered by numbers. We have trained with 11 or 10 players."

The foundation laid by five seniors for last season's 17-4-1 record is gone. Going with the seniors is sophomore Julie Greco, who decided not to return to the team.

Those six players accounted for 41 percent of the team's scoring in the fall.

On top of that, five players are injured and have not played so far this spring. Despite not having a bench to go to at all, Walker is finding a silver lining.

"It doesn't faze me that much," he said. "There isn't a day I can think back and say, 'That was a poor

practice.'"

But Walker did say it would be nice to have the injured players competing in a season where individual improvement is stressed.

Junior Jenny Benson and sophomore Jackie Erdkamp are still recovering from knee injuries suffered in the fall.

Recurring knee injuries have also kept sophomore Lauren Tatum and junior Isabelle Morneau out.

"It is frustrating so many people have gotten hurt," freshman Kelly Rheem said, "but we have enough to get good practice sessions. We are getting everything we can out of it."

Rheem is one of six freshmen that are reaping the benefits of a depleted Husker squad. The younger athletes that were role players in the fall are now being looked to for offensive production.

"It's nice your younger players get minutes," Walker said. "We are watching them evolve into veteran players."

The Huskers used the bare minimum in their games so far this spring. NU is 1-1, with a loss to Florida and a win against Alabama.

On the horizon are games against two of the top teams in the country. NU travels to North Carolina for a game April 11.

The one home match of the spring will be April 17 against Santa Clara, which Walker said would probably be the No. 1 team when the fall preseason rankings are released.

"That will be a fun weekend," Walker said. "We will get a good picture of where we are."

Answers to '99 football's most pressing questions

QUESTIONS from page 9

All-Americans in cornerback Ralph Brown and rover Mike Brown. Ralph Brown was a third team All-American last season and was All-Big 12 in 1997 and 1998.

Mike Brown led the squad in tackles last year with 102.

Also returning are Clint Finley and Erwin Swiney, listed as starters in the free safety and left cornerback slots, respectively.

Right behind Finley is Dion Booker and Swiney's backup is

Keyuo Craver, who made appearances in all of NU's games last year and intercepted a pass off Kansas State's Michael Bishop. Craver shared first-team duties with Swiney.

Craver will battle Swiney for the starting left cornerback job. Not to be forgotten is Joe Walker, a roverback who is recovering from a torn anterior cruciate ligament. There are also redshirt freshmen Mike Demps and DeJuan Groce, who, if not for injuries, might have played as true freshmen.

So, yes, the secondary is loaded.

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