

SPORTS

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LBs Kohl, Vedral emerge as starters heal

■ With Eric Johnson and Julius Jackson out, the two youngsters gain valuable playing time to improve the Huskers' depth at LB.

BY ADAM KLINKER
Senior staff writer

Trying to find the bright side of missing two key components in the Nebraska linebackers' corps hasn't been a difficult task this spring.

While Julius Jackson and Eric Johnson, both Will linebackers, are recovering from injuries, second-stringers at the position, Josh Kohl and Mark Vedral, have been stepping up to the table with big appetites.

Knowing how injuries surface in the season, Johnson said it had been great experience for the backups and a sigh of relief for the first-team veterans.

"With Julius Jackson and myself out, that gives a couple of other Wills a chance to get

ready," Johnson said. "These guys are going to get more opportunities and more readiness for a game situation."

So far, Kohl and Vedral are making the biggest impact at the Will — one of the deepest and most talented position on defense — this spring. Vedral has decided to play defense after being recruited as both a receiver and a linebacker.

Kohl, who had 10 tackles in 1998, especially turned some heads among his colleagues and his coaches, with consistent play in practice and contact situations.

"Josh Kohl is doing a real good job for us," Johnson said. "He's going to be big for us. But all of these guys on the backup squad are getting their chance to shine. They're just as good as us starters, they just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

With Kohl thrown into the mix at the Will spot and the rest of the depth and talent across the board, NU Linebackers Coach Craig Bohl said that the first, second and third teams should all produce names to note in the coming season.

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"Overall, it's a position where we have a lot of athleticism, and we have a lot of abilities," Bohl said. "We need to cash in on that. We've got some big-time playmakers this season."

The linebackers corps boasts returning Tony Ortiz and Brian Shaw at the Sam position, both of whom started last year and were key in the Husker defense.

Ortiz, who started the last nine games for NU, had 46 tackles, including nine tackles for loss and a sack. Starting in the first four games, Shaw had 39 tackles and a sack.

This spring, Ortiz and Shaw are listed as the co-No. 1 at Sam, and both are seeing quality time in practice, where all of the linebackers are making their mark.

"It's been very intense," Ortiz said. "Everybody's got one goal in mind, and that's

just to concentrate on the things that need to get done, focus on football and just have fun, too."

Mike linebacker Carlos Polk, a returning junior-to-be, will be the new starter among the corps, backed by second teamers Ben Buettenback and Jamie Burrow.

Polk played in all of the Huskers' contests last season and 12 of the games in 1997, but has never started. Last season, Polk had 22 tackles, five tackles for loss and one sack.

Following last season, Polk said, he and the rest of the linebackers were anxious to send this year's strong nucleus of seniors out as a winner.

"Last year was kind of a disappointment for us; we felt like we let our seniors down," Polk said. "We don't want that to hit us again. We're ready to go out and prove ourselves again."

And, Johnson said, that's exactly the way he'd like to go out with fellow seniors Ortiz, Shaw, Kohl and Jackson.

"We're going to look pretty good for the season," Johnson said. "Of course, right now it's a learning process for all of us, but everybody wants to go out on top, and we're moving towards that."

Polk steps into Foreman's role for NU in 1999

■ The junior-to-be has plenty of experience at the Mike linebacker position despite playing second string for two years.

BY JAKE BLEED
Staff writer

Used to living in Jay Foreman's shadow as the No. 2 middle linebacker, senior Carlos Polk now looks forward to filling Foreman's shoes.

"I feel like I've really put in my time," Polk said. "I'm feeling good about next year."

With Foreman's graduation after last season, Polk finds himself the latest in a long and distinguished line of Nebraska Mike linebackers.

Although, this season will be his first opportunity to start for the Huskers, Polk is not without strong playing experience. He saw action in all 12 regular season games in 1997

and 1998. Last season's performance picked up 22 tackles, 13 of which were solo stops and five for a loss.

KSU's Michael got a close look at Polk's hard hitting last season. The middle linebacker dropped Bishop for a ten-yard loss and fumble. Polk's quick hands picked a 16-yard interception late in the game against California that sealed the victory for the Huskers.

Polk was also a member of NU's No. 1 kickoff, coverage and punt return teams.

Out of Rockford, Ill., Polk redshirted as a freshman in 1996. Linebacker coach Craig Bohl said he was pleased with Polk's performance in practice this spring and was looking for the Illinois native to move in as a leader on the field.

"I think he's stepped up as far as his leadership skills go," Bohl said. "He needs to be the guy to lean on."

Mike linebackers, Bohl said, are by nature leaders on the field. Their performance must set a precedent for teammates.

"You yourself have to be very consistent and give a great effort," Bohl said.

Until opening day next season, Bohl said he would like to see Polk's open field agility and his team leadership improve.

The 6-foot-3, 245-pound former USA Today high school All-American said he looked forward to starting and getting as much playing time as he could.

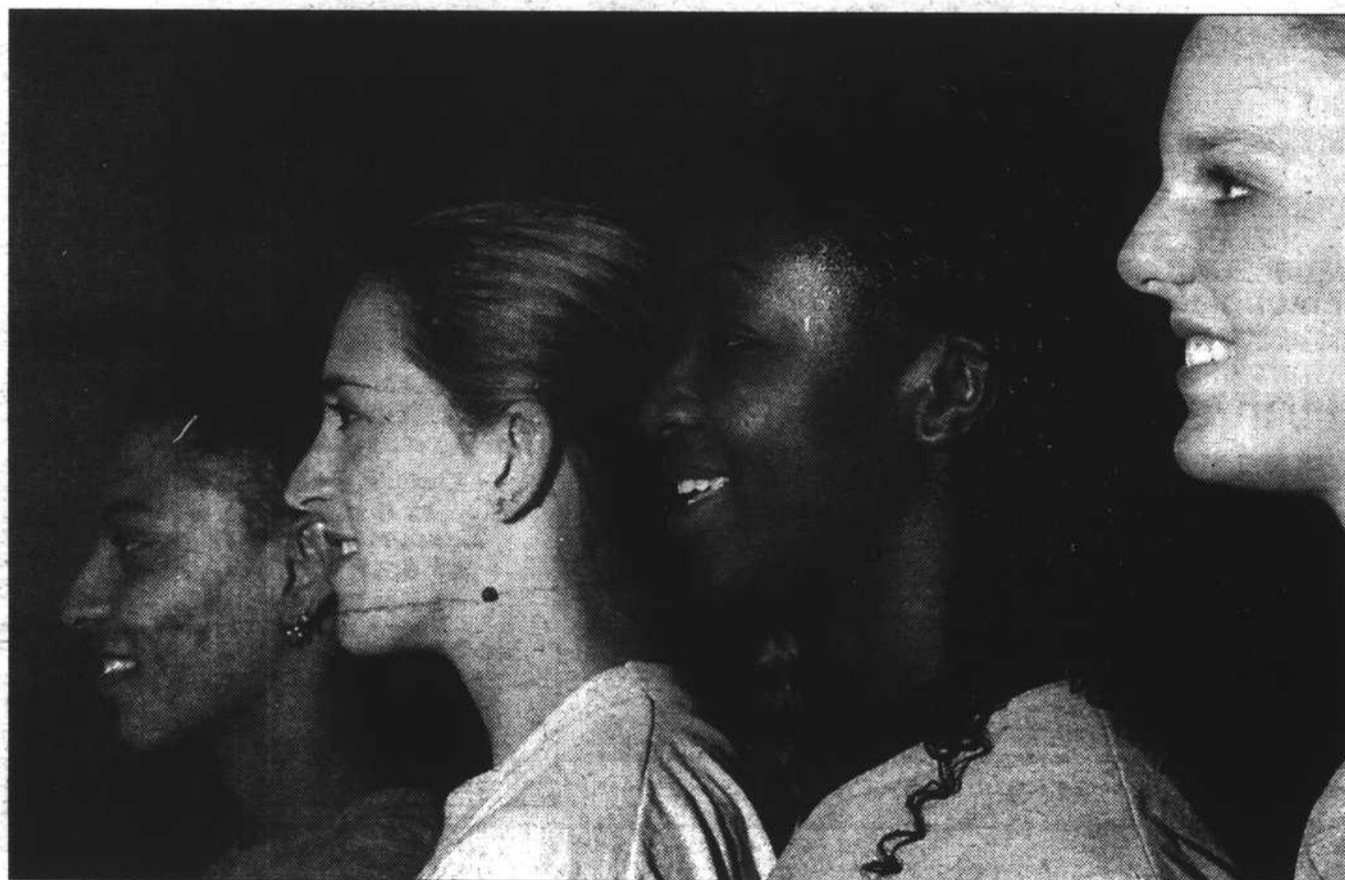
"I didn't get a lot of reps last season," Polk said. "(Starting) will be a new experience for me."

Already a veteran of three years at NU and having played in 24 games, one could wonder how much of the game he hasn't seen. Is he excited to start for the Huskers?

"Like you wouldn't believe," Polk said. "I've had dreams about walking down that tunnel on opening day."



Polk



SENEIK SAAVERDA (left), STELLA KLASSEN, LESLEY OWUSU AND CHERYL HARMON make up the women's 4x400 meter relay team.

4x400 team set to begin season

BY JOSH CAMENZIND
Staff writer

Potential, youth and dedication are three words that come to mind when describing the women's 4x400 meter relay team at Nebraska.

The team of junior Stella Klassen, sophomore Lesley Owusu, redshirt freshman Seneik Saavedra and freshman Cheryl Harmon have surpassed expectations before even competing in an outdoor meet together.

They made the NCAA Indoor Championships with the nation's fifth-fastest qualifying time at 3 minutes, 34.46 seconds. Disappointment ensued when the team ran a 3:37.33 for a ninth-place finish. A top eight finish would have brought the Huskers All-America status.

Head Coach Gary Pepin was proud of the way the women competed but disappointed with the finish.

"I was not disappointed at them, I was disappointed for them," Pepin said. "I thought they would do a little bit better than what they did, but at the same time they ran hard, and it just turned out the way it did."

After he lost two seniors, Meka Rembert and La'Tisha Croom, to gradua-

tion last year, Coach Steve Smith never imagined the success that this year's team has seen so far with the addition of Saavedra and Harmon to the relay.

"They have potential to be All-Americans," Smith said. "They are young and train hard while working well together."

The decisive factor in the group's success in such a short period of time is each is dedicated to the team concept.

Klassen, who runs the anchor, and Owusu, who runs the second leg, have provided the two freshman members of the team with role models to look up to. The experience and knowledge both have brought to the table has allowed Saavedra, who leads off, and Harmon, NU's third leg, to grow as individual competitors as well.

"As soon as Seneik and I came in, they totally accepted us and did not act like they were above us," said Harmon. "They trust us and have confidence in us, which is good for me because it makes me run better."

Said Saavedra: "Every person is running for the next. You are not running for yourself."

All four women show camaraderie and have bonded as a group. They pray before and after every race while sticking to a

warm-up routine that they have confidence in.

The team realizes that practice is where they will reach their goals, and they feed off the pressure that they put on each other in competition.

"I do feel pressure while running the anchor leg of the relay," said Klassen. "But at the same time I like it and feed off of it."

This past weekend brought a good start to the outdoor season for the team, as NU won the Jim Click Shootout in its first-ever competition outdoors together. They beat Pac-Ten members Arizona and Washington State while running a NCAA provisional qualifying mark of 3:38.98. Klassen also notched a first-place finish in the individual 400 meters with a time of 53.38.

The team has a bad taste in its mouth from missing out on Indoor All-American status and it has some unfinished business to take care of. As one of the top teams in the Big 12 they are hungry, not only for conference, but also for national recognition.

"We are capable of running faster than we did last year," Owusu said. "We have so much potential because of how young we are. One of our goals is to win the Big 12 Championships and regain the title back from Texas."