

SPORTS

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PAGE 9

Women earn bid to NCAA meet in Utah

Huskers rebound for a second-place finish

BY JOHN GASKINS
Staff writer

It was a bittersweet night Saturday for the No. 7 Nebraska women's gymnastics team.

Bitter because Nebraska native Sarah Cain and her No. 4 Michigan team ended the Huskers' nine-meet winning streak and became the first team since 1995 to beat NU at the Bob Devaney Sports Center.

Cain won the all-around with a 39.925 while the Wolverines captured the team title at the Region 3 Championships.

But it was sweet because NU's second-place finish in the six-team region will send the Huskers to Salt Lake City on April 22-24 to compete for the national championship as a team, something that eluded them last year.

"I'm proud of these girls," Nebraska Coach Dan Kendig said. "It was a total team effort. We did what we needed to do, and that was to get to nationals. But I think we have a whole lot more to offer."

Michigan took advantage of NU's fourth-worst uneven bars routine of the season and a shocking fall from junior All-American Heather Brink to outscore the Huskers 196.75-196.325.

Arizona finished third at 193.625, Oklahoma fourth at 193.525, Illinois fifth at 193.1 and Illinois-Chicago sixth at 192.4.

Brink's fall set both her and the team back. But after a solid comeback on the balance beam, the Huskers took advantage of a home crowd of 2,317 and center stage on the floor exercise in their last event with a season-high 49.35 and netted their 10th trip to the NCAAs, their first since 1997.

Four Huskers scored 9.875 or higher and had their career-best performances on the floor to lift the team from a state of panic and almost grab UM from behind.

Included in that group were freshman Bree Dority (9.875), sophomore Amy Ringo (who's 9.9 won second place) and junior Laura Ohlendorf (who tied Dority for fourth). Senior All-American Misty Oxford capped off the night with a career-high 9.925 to win the event.

Kendig and his gymnasts kept up their usual confident composure at the post-meet press conference, but there was a hint of both disappointment and frustration on their straight faces.

Assistant Coach Rob Drass sang a different tune. After the bars disaster and beam recovery, Drass, heading to the locker room, said: "They're not looking pretty tonight, but they're getting the job done."

After the meet, Drass said of the gymnasts: "They're pissed. They're happy about going to nationals, but I think they're really going to be extra motivated to get back into the gym and work on what they did wrong tonight."

Not that Nebraska didn't do anything right. And not that the Huskers didn't show a flair for the dramatic. The meet itself was one nerve-wracking melodrama.

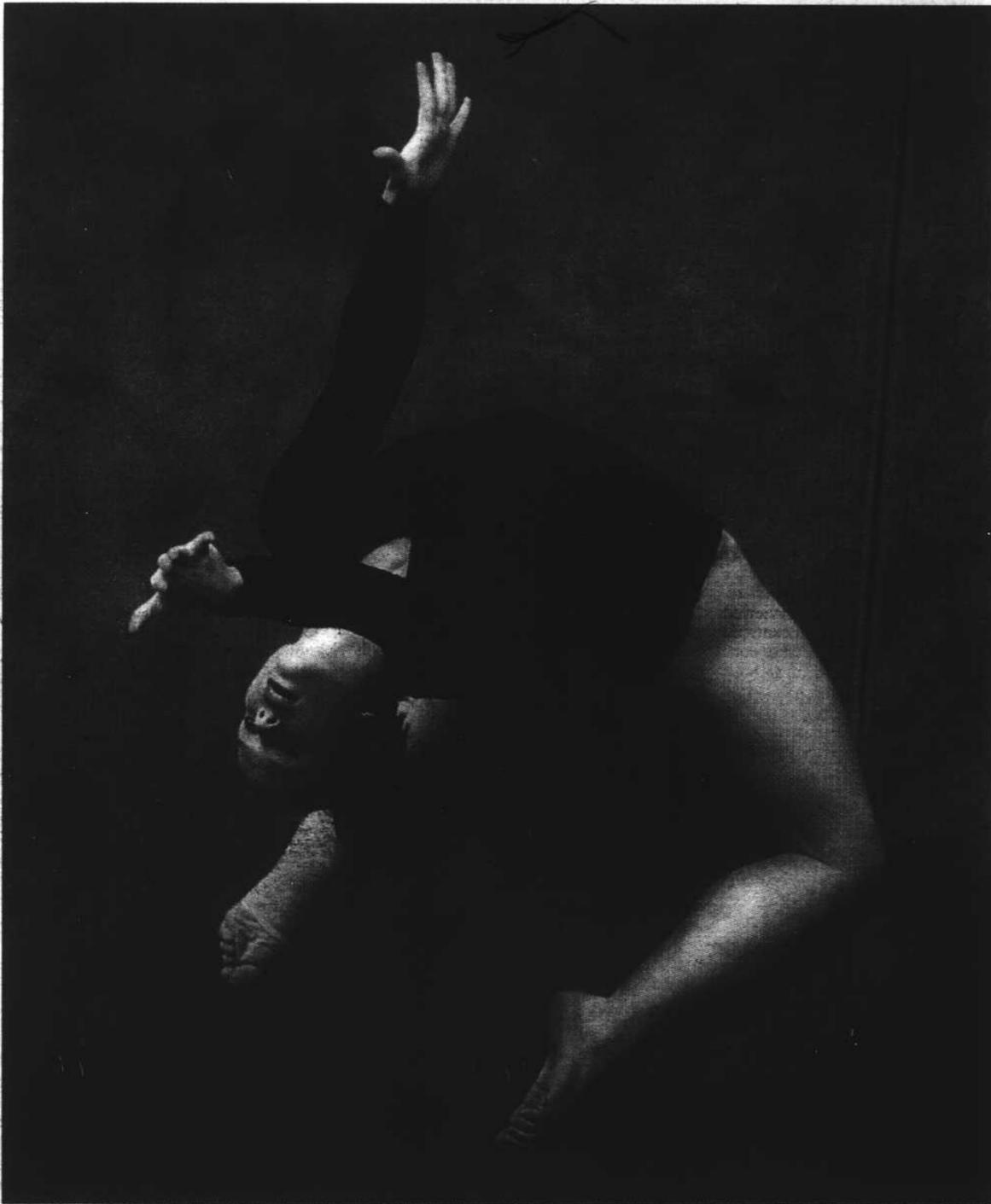
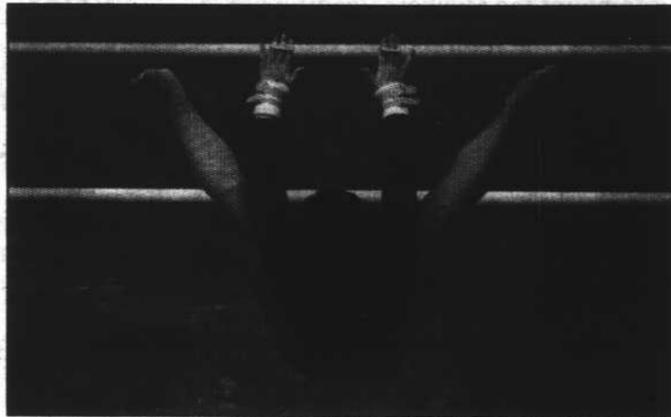
And aside from Cain (a junior from Grand Island who left Kendig sick to his stomach when she signed with Michigan instead of NU last year) plenty of Huskers were queens of drama.

Oxford could have won an Oscar for her floor routine. Earlier in the week, she was barely able to walk and Kendig was unsure if she would even suit up after she pulled an abdominal muscle in practice on Monday.

In her final home meet, in the final event of the evening, as the final competitor for her team, the senior from Kelso, Wash., pulled off the electrifying career-best performance, clinched fourth place in the all-around and roused the Devaney Center crowd of 2,317 to its feet.

"I'm extremely proud of Misty," Kendig said. "To come

Please see **WOMEN** on



HEATHER BRINK HIGH-FIVES her teammates after she finished her floor routine. Although Brink did not repeat as the top all-arounder of the region, she will get her wish to compete with her team at the national championships. Last season, Brink competed at the national meet alone because the Huskers failed to qualify as a team.

MATT MILLER/DN
ABOVE: NU SENIOR COURTNEY BROWN performs her floor exercise Saturday night during the NCAA Region III Championships. The Huskers placed second and earned a chance to compete for the team national championships in Salt Lake City on April 22-24.

TOP: NICOLE WILKINSON reaches for the bar during her release move on the uneven bars. Wilkinson was one of the few Huskers to hit her uneven bars routine.

FAR LEFT: THE HUSKERS LEFT MORE on the floor exercise than just their hand prints. Four out of the top five scores belonged to Huskers.

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