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THURSDAY, APRIL 22, 1999

Nelson, Koziol lead NU despite injuries

BY JOHN GASKINS
Staff writer

It is almost scary to imagine how good the No. 5 Nebraska gymnastics team would be this season if all of its members were healthy.

Instead, the Huskers must live with the harsh reality that they are merely good enough to contend for a ninth national title this week at the Bob Devaney Sports Center, instead of possibly running away with it.

Such is the reality Marshall Nelson and Jim Koziol have had to live with every day this season. The senior co-captains, All-Americans and media guide cover boys have had little to do with the team's success on paper this season due to nagging injuries. Nelson who has been out all season, has had nothing to do with it.

Instead, sophomore Jason Hardabura, the No. 1 gymnast in the nation, junior Derek Leiter, the nation's fifth-best, and Martin Fournier, who's cracked the Top 20 as a freshman, have carried the load.

Injuries have plagued the Huskers as a team each of the last three seasons, in which despite being "good enough to win it all," according to NU Coach Francis Allen, all three seasons, they failed to qualify for nationals.

This season has been especially painful for Nelson, both physically and mentally. He'll have to watch his team go for the crown from the bench.

In the two seasons before, he won three NCAA event titles, including two straight on the parallel bars. But despite the individual accolades, the team's failure to qualify in each of his first three years left an emptiness inside him.

"My freshman year (1996), I got hurt and had to have surgery on my knee, as well, but I came back at the end of the season," Nelson said.

"We had regionals here (in Lincoln) and we missed qualifying by seven-tenths of a point," Nelson said. "Jason Christie and Ryan McEwen were in tears. I couldn't understand it. I hadn't been a part of team gymnastics that long.

"But when we missed nationals again last year," Nelson said, then looked up and paused, eyes widening, "I was the one that felt like crying. I understood how much it meant to know we were the best and didn't make it. It was horrible."

Three straight seasons of team disappointment left Nelson starved to get back on the floor. It never happened. On Nov. 10, he tore the Achilles' tendon in his left foot, and he decided to take a

medical redshirt before the Huskers' March 14 meet against Penn State.

"It was hard because (before the injury) I was in the best shape I had been in a long time. I was on track," Nelson said.

"The first month was the hardest. I had put so much work in this fall and now I was at the bottom of the hill. My mom stayed with me out here for a month. I couldn't drive. I couldn't walk. I couldn't do anything. If she wouldn't have been there for me, I don't know what I would've done."

But Nelson's teammates said despite his struggle, he still has had a tremendous influence in the gym.

"He's just a great guy, always keeps a positive attitude," Allen said. "He's still got that air about him when he walks in the room. You always will when you're a national champion. All the guys look up to him."

"This guy deserves a lot of praise," Hardabura said earlier in the season.

"To be able to come into the gym and sit through four hours a day without doing gymnastics just because you know the guys need you there is incredible."

It was evident that at Tuesday's Devaney Center workouts for the event that has eluded his team his first three years that Nelson had a tough time just watching.

"It will be a mixed bag of emotions this weekend," Nelson said. "I will be supportive of the team 100 percent. It's the NCAAs. At home. This is what your career is all about.

"But of course it will be hard to watch. I want to be out there with them. What keeps me going is looking forward to next year. We'll be awesome. I

Please see SENIORS on 11

Huskers hope to pull upset at Championships in Utah

NU Coach Kendig says team must hit routines to topple favorite Bulldogs

BY JOHN GASKINS
Staff writer

Running around the gym and throwing pies in each other's faces is not exactly how you would expect a team to prepare for a run at the national championship.

But that's exactly what the No. 7 Nebraska women's team was doing Monday, the day before it took off for Salt Lake City to compete in their 10th NCAA Championships meet, their fourth in five seasons.

The meet will take place Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights at the Huntsman Center. Thursday night will be qualifying night for the Friday team championships and the Saturday individual championships.

On Monday, while junior Laura Ohlendorf was conducting an interview, she was also helping freshman Bree Dority to prepare to give senior Jess Swift, who was celebrating her 22nd birthday, a surprise pie-in-the-face. The prank is a tradition the team has on birthdays.

And as Dority and Ohlendorf went after Swift, the gym erupted in laughter. It was evident that the team was not nervous at the time about the big event.

"This group just doesn't get worked up when a big meet comes around," Nebraska Coach Dan Kendig said. "I've been saying it all year - we just work on hitting our routines."

"We have an acronym for our attitude - K.I.S.S. - Keep It Simple, Stupid. We can't worry about things we don't have any control over."

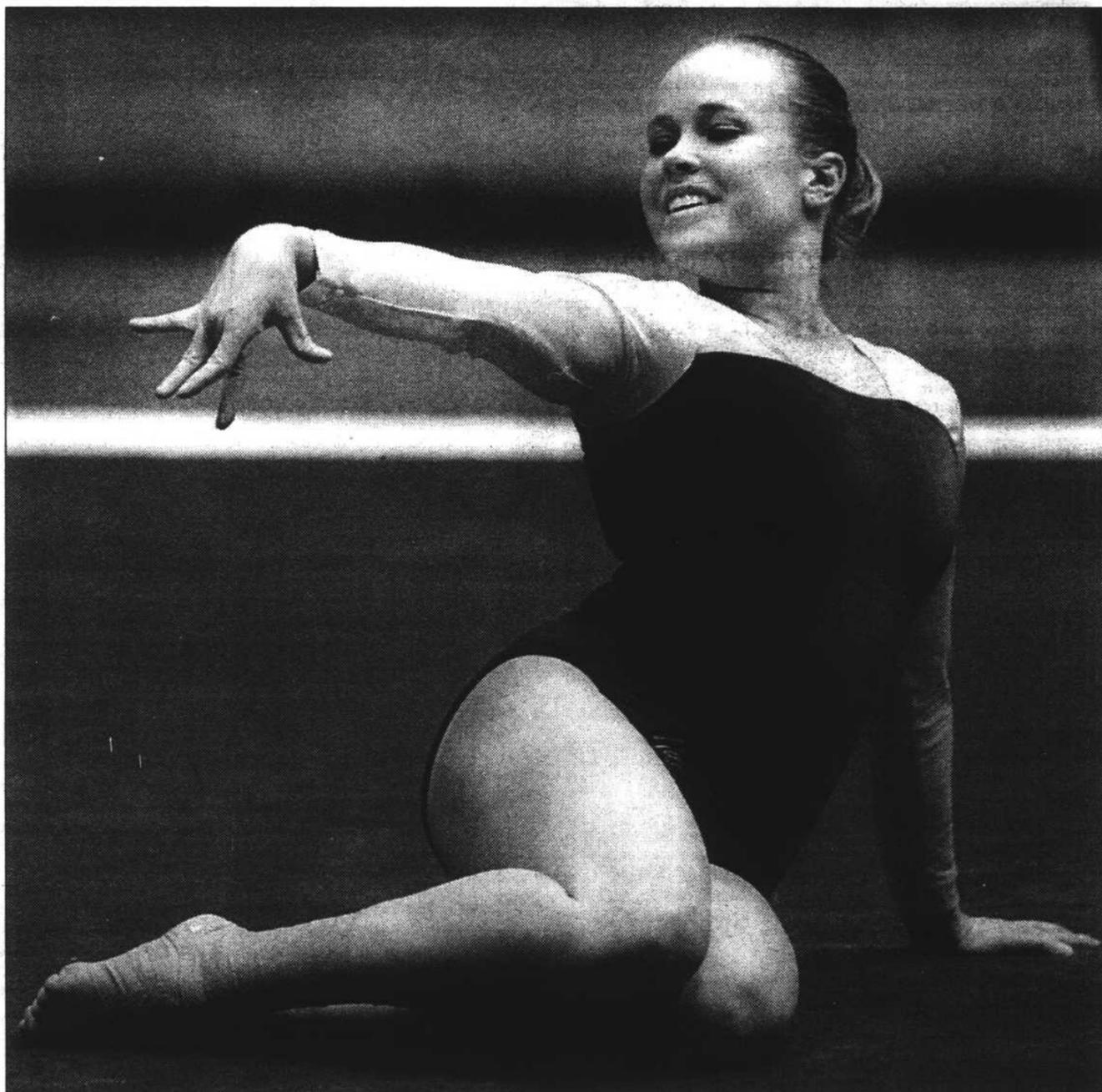
Indeed, Nebraska has little control over the scores of the 11 other teams competing for the title. The 12 teams are divided into two six-team groups, one of which will compete in the afternoon session and the other in the evening session.

The top three teams in each session will qualify for the Super Six, the team finals, Friday night. NU is in the evening session, which on paper proves to be by far the tougher draw. Included in it are defending national champion and favorite, Georgia, along with the host team, Utah.

The Utes lead the nation in attendance at over 10,000 per meet at the Huntsman Center and Kendig expects a hostile atmosphere. But Kendig likes having to climb such a wall.

"We definitely have the tougher draw," Kendig said. "You look at Georgia, who's the favorite, and Utah, which will be tough to beat at home. But having that kind of competition will only mean these girls will have to do better."

Along with Georgia and Utah, Nebraska must face No. 4 Michigan, the third-highest qualifying team. The Wolverines defeated the Huskers two weeks ago in Lincoln for the Region



MATT MILLER/DN

NU'S AMY RINGO and the rest of the Husker squad hope to advance past the semifinals tonight in Salt Lake City. If the Huskers finish in the top six, they will compete in the finals Saturday night.

3 crown, the first NU loss in the Devaney Center in four years.

Although Kendig rides on the "team over self" concept constantly, he couldn't help but admit the possibilities some of his individuals have in winning their own national titles.

Senior Courtney Brown comes into the meet having won titles in three of the four different events this season. Senior Laurie McLaughlin has set school records in both events she competes in. And all-arounders Heather Brink and Misty

Oxford, both All-Americans, shared the Big 12 title and finished in the top six at regionals.

When asked if it was out of line to say if either Brink or Oxford could become NU's first individual all-around national champion, Kendig confidently shook his head.

But he did so reluctantly because he wanted to talk about the team's chances.

"The hard part will be Thursday night," Kendig said. "If we can get past Thursday and make it to the Super Six on Friday, anything can

happen. I don't think we're out of it."

If the Huskers do qualify, it will be the second time in three seasons that they would have made it to the Super Six. Brink, the only NU gymnast to compete at nationals last season, was able to see up close the top competition when she competed as part of Georgia's national championship team.

"I was right there with them and I wasn't overly impressed with them," Brink said. "I thought we were every bit as good as they were, and I think we are now, too."