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NU players bring back World Cup experience

By JAY SAUNDERS
 Staff writer

In front of a sold out stadium and a national television audience, Karina LeBlanc stood in the shadow of the goal - just 20 yards from Mia Hamm, the world's most prolific goalscorer.

The dangerous right leg of Hamm, the U.S. striker, reared back to rip off a shot from point blank range. With 108 career goals, Hamm wasn't known to miss many good opportunities.

But LeBlanc stopped her cold. LeBlanc, Nebraska's starting goalie this fall, was playing for the Canadian national team in the first women's soccer game broadcast on U.S. national television.

The only problem, LeBlanc said, was that she didn't really know what was going on.

"During the game," LeBlanc said, "I didn't really pay attention to who was there. After the game, I realized, 'Woah, that was Mia Hamm.'"

The game against the United States was just part of a summer that saw four Cornhusker players in the Women's World Cup.

LeBlanc, along with fellow Huskers Isabelle Morneau, Sharolta Nonen and Amy Walsh, played for the Canadian national team.

The so-called "Cornhusker Connection" had the opportunity to play for their country in front of big crowds on the world's largest stage.

The first game Canada played in the World Cup was at Spartan Stadium in San Jose, Calif. The Canadians tied Japan, but Walsh said the experience stuck in her mind.

"The pitch was unbelievable," Walsh said. "Walking into there, the

noise was deafening."

With the event in the United States, many family and friends were able to watch the Canadians in person.

One of those friends was fellow Husker Jenny Benson, who saw a game at Giants Stadium.

"I was an avid watcher of the World Cup," Benson said. "It was neat to see my fellow teammates playing for their country."

Walsh, Morneau and Nonen each saw considerable playing time in each of the team's three first-round matches.

For LeBlanc, the U.S. exhibition was the only action she saw this summer. But she was able to put on a good enough show to receive praise from Hamm and members of the U.S. coaching staff.

"That was the biggest game I have ever played in," LeBlanc said. "You see those people on television, and at that moment they recognized you as a player equal to them."

As a defender, Nonen not only saw big names like Hamm and Cindy Parlow, but she also had to defend strikers from Japan, Russia and Norway, which finished third.

Despite all of the pomp and circumstance of the World Cup, Walsh said they were there to play - and to win.

But their goal of qualifying for the second round did not become a reality. The Canadian team ended up losing two games and tying once.

Canada gave up four goals to Russia, and seven to Norway. Morneau, who played defense, said the results were hard to stomach.

"It was a bit depressing," Morneau said. "It took me a while to watch the games on TV."

"... I didn't really pay attention to who was there. After the game, I realized, 'Woah, that was Mia Hamm.'"

KARINA LEBLANC
 Canadian World Cup team member

But Morneau and the others have watched those games, and are back in Lincoln to share what they have learned.

Even though the Canadian team didn't achieve the level of success they had hoped, each of the World Cup veterans say they brought back a great deal from the experience.

"We played the biggest teams in the world," Morneau said. "Obviously, when we came back, I was a more experienced player. It will have an impact on the way I play."

And the experiences these four players had this summer may have an impact on Nebraska's success this season.

NU is ranked in the top 10 in most preseason polls, and has one of the toughest schedules in the country.

If nothing else, Nonen said, the World Cup experience brought the Canadian players closer together off the field as well.

"(The World Cup) made me a better player," Nonen said. "But coming back here, it's good to know I have friends here that are really important."

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'Embarrassing' season leaves NU men hungry

Women seek return to NCAAs

By JOSHUA CAMENZIND
 Staff writer

To put it mildly, the 1999 Nebraska Men's Cross Country team is optimistic.

"We had a terrible year last year," NU Coach Jay Dirksen said. "It was the worst year since I have been here. It was embarrassing to me as a coach - so we will definitely be better than last year because we can't get much worse."

The Cornhusker men will be led by senior team captain Tony Smith and junior Marcus Witter.

Dirksen said he is excited to see how Witter performs after a summer of training.

"He is developing the potential to be a great runner," Dirksen said. "Finally the lights are coming on, and he is realizing you have to work hard to go with natural ability. I look for him to be one of the top runners in the conference."

The men are also benefiting from a group of incoming freshmen who will be forced to grow up quickly with the help of a tough schedule. Jed Barta

from Idaho Falls, Idaho, should be an immediate contributor to a team that needs a couple of underclassmen to step up, Dirksen said.

"This year, we have one of the best - if not the best - recruiting class since I have been here," Dirksen said.

The Nebraska women, Dirksen said, are also filled with potential and exceptional ability.

"They are going to be a real good team," Dirksen said. "How much of a good team is up to them and what they do with their talent."

Senior Jaime Pauli is the captain of a team looking to return to the NCAA championships after placing 23rd last year.

Transfer Michelle Brooks, from England, and sophomore Jeannette Zimmer will be the team's front-runners this season. Dirksen said he is very impressed with Zimmer's improvement from last year.

"Jeannette was our best runner last year as a freshman, and she has improved greatly," Dirksen said. "She is better than ever."

One question mark for the women's squad is Mirjana Glisovic. The Yugoslavian's status is still unknown, Dirksen said, but if she does make the team, it will only boost its talent.

The Huskers will open their season Sept. 4 at the Bearcat Distance Classic in Maryville, Mo.

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