

Huskers look to avenge 1998's loss to Baylor

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squad that finished the season 17-4-1 and captured the Big 12 Tournament title.

The Huskers also regain the services of two-time All-Big 12 midfielder Jenny Benson, who sat out last season with a torn anterior cruciate ligament in her right knee.

One player the Huskers won't have against Texas Tech is All-Big 12 midfielder Amy Walsh, who must serve a one-game suspension for her red card in the 2-1 loss to Notre Dame in last year's NCAA Tournament. But she will be back for Baylor.

Walker isn't sure who will fill in for Walsh against Tech, but there are many options.

Walsh doesn't see it being a problem. "We have so much depth on our

team that we should be able to have someone fill in," said Walsh, who played for Canada during the 1999 World Cup.

With 15 returning letter winners and seven talented freshmen, Morneau said she has high expectations for her final season.

Playing together and incorporating the freshmen into the lineup will be important, Morneau said.

Another key to the weekend will be getting the freshman to realize the importance of conference games and the fact that Baylor beat NU last year, Walsh said.

"(The loss) will make us hungrier for a win," Walsh said. "We can try to get vindication Sunday and prove to ourselves and the conference that we are going to be a team to contend with."

Cook adds energy to NU

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energy in the Coliseum in the first place. Under his guidance, the Huskers have won 20 conference titles, been to six NCAA Final Fours and achieved 667 victories. The program wasn't exactly lacking pep.

Cook didn't exactly need a new job, either. After helping guide Pettit to two Final Fours as an assistant for the Huskers from 1988-91, he became the Head Coach at Wisconsin and guided the Badgers to a 161-73 record, a Big 10 Championship and national prominence in seven years.

But when Pettit saw the opportunity to hire Cook from his head coach position at Wisconsin not long after the 1998 season, when longtime assistant Cathy Noth resigned, he couldn't resist. And neither could his good friend Cook.

"I have Husker in my blood," Cook said. "It was difficult to leave what we built at Wisconsin, but the opportunity at Nebraska, for me and my family, is something we've always dreamed about."

A turning point came on the night of Dec. 12, 1998, in the Pacific Regional Championships at the Coliseum.

It was there where Cook had the opportunity of a coaching lifetime at Wisconsin. His Badgers faced Nebraska — on his old stomping grounds and one of the shrines of college volleyball tradition — for a chance to go to the NCAA Final Four, which just happened to be on Wisconsin's home turf in Madison.

"If Wisconsin had beaten us, John would have become the king of Madison," Pettit said. "He'd have been

playing in the Final Four, in his hometown. I think maybe John wouldn't be here today had that happened."

NU won in five sets. And *voila*, eight months later, there Cook stood in the Coliseum at NU's practice, zeroing in with his eyes and ready to blow the whistle, wearing Husker red instead of Badger red.

Cook said he has had no problem adjusting to coaching at Nebraska or adjusting from head coach to associate head coach.

"I feel very comfortable here," said Cook last spring, when he was only a month into his job.

He looked around the empty Coliseum, at the banners that signify all those championships.

"I've been here before. I know the system. It doesn't feel unusual. I'm just getting to know the players."

And while they have gotten to know him, the players have respected Cook and the change he has brought to the gym since arriving.

"When we heard he was the new assistant, we were surprised, but we had a lot of trust in him," Henk said. "He had been here before and knew the system, and we knew he was a good coach."

"He's really competitive and expects nothing but the best. He takes his job very seriously."

But Nebraska players have been used to playing under a coach who takes his job very seriously through playing under Pettit. It's not just hard work and drive that have the Huskers in better shape and spirit when they get done with practice.

What Cook has added to the program, to the players' lives, they say, is a human element that Pettit, a famous-

"I feel great about him being a part of this program 24 hours a day."

TERRY PETTIT
NU head volleyball coach

ly intense, methodical and stoic figure, doesn't.

"Coach Pettit comes in and tells you to just get the job done," junior outside hitter Nancy Meendering said. "Coach Cook is a positive reinforcer. He tells you why you did something wrong and reminds you when you're doing something right."

"He makes jokes and kind of spices up practice," Crandall said. "He gets into people's lives. He asks you how you're doing. He makes you feel good."

But though Cook and Pettit's personalities clash, the athletes say such a clash has been nothing but good for the team. In fact, it could be the very reason why they are smiling.

"They feed off each other great," Henk said. "The atmosphere is more laid back. I think some of the stress that Coach Pettit has felt in the past has been taken away."

And Pettit himself will tell you that he can feel something extra special being in the gym with his old friend and coach again.

"I feel great about him being a part of this program 24 hours a day," Pettit said. "It's getting better every day."

Difficulty awaits NU at classic

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bility last fall.

Pettit isn't concerned though.

"I have a lot of confidence in her," Pettit said. "I have a lot of confidence in all of them. But I have a lot of confidence in Jill. She's a good athlete, and she's been well trained. She has a lot of heart and the respect of her teammates."

Nebraska had mixed results against possible Saturday evening opponents last season. The Cornhuskers defeated the Gators 3-0

in the Nebraska U.S. Bank Tournament, but were upended by the Lions in the NCAA Semifinals 3-1.

Nebraska will have a tremendous advantage at the tournament in the form of the Nebraska Coliseum. NU has won 65 straight matches in the building, dating back to the inaugural State Farm Classic.

Aiding NU in its quest to continue the winning streak will be its tremendous depth. The depth may come in the form of its outstanding freshman class, particularly

Greichaly Cepero. Recruited as a setter, she may see time there, but Pettit said she would also play elsewhere.

It all adds up to an important first weekend.

"It's not like football, where you have to win your first match or you have no chance at the national championship," Pettit said. "It's a long season; we're going to end up playing between 35 and 40 matches. And, particularly this first month, we need to evaluate a lot of people. Go out and be competitive, but we'll refine things later."

Cook ready to take over

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situation become a distraction, and Cook is wise to simply fill the role right now as the most qualified assistant coach in America and wait for what will inevitably be his head coaching job.

But Cook won't say those words. What he does offer up is this:

"I think that, in terms of this program, I understand it better than any other coach in the country," Cook said. "Even better than some of the players."

"I've been here before under Coach Pettit, and then I left and went to Wisconsin and learned what Nebraska volleyball was about from outside the program. And I'm here again with a very good understanding of it now."

That's the best you'll get from John Cook in terms of him taking over, if he were to take over, nudge and wink. Really, it's a no-brainer. It wouldn't blow me away if it happened after this season. The players like Cook, and Cook loves the state of Nebraska.

But, somewhere in the cosmos, I suppose it's possible Cook could stay on the small stage for many years or take another main-stage offer that was too good to refuse. It could happen. After all, Man O' War did lose a race one time.

Just don't count on it.

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