

# last Dance to March

Story By John Gaskins

Photo By Liz Meacham



BROOKE SCHWARTZ (front) and Nicole Kubik lead the Nebraska women's basketball team in the 1999-2000 season.

## Schwartz, Kubik to cherish final run

The concept dumbfounded Brooke Schwartz.

The simple words left the senior guard so dumbfounded that, for a rare couple of seconds, the "outgoing" personality of Paul Sanderford's women's basketball team couldn't find the right words to respond to them.

And you could tell then it hit her.

All she was told was that this will be her last year playing competitively with fellow guard Nicole Kubik.

"That's the first time I've been told that," Schwartz said. "That's sad to hear. We've been playing together for so long, it's hard to think our careers will end together after this season. I can't see playing basketball without Nicole."

It's easy to understand Schwartz's amazement. She and long-time friend Kubik have been playing in the same backcourt for seven years now — three on their championship Nebraska AAU teams in high school and four as Cornhuskers.

Schwartz said Kubik's signing with the program was a big reason why she decided to sign. Not only do the two share the same backcourt, they share the same pride in playing for their home-state team. Both are from western Nebraska — Kubik from Cambridge, Schwartz from Gering.

And after helping Sanderford establish NU as an up-and-coming power — the Huskers cracked the top 20 for a portion of last season,

went 21-12 and clinched their second consecutive NCAA Tournament berth — Kubik and Schwartz are heavily motivated to make the most of their last dance with each other.

"(Playing with each other for the last season) makes us want to win even more," Schwartz said. "We don't want to lose in the NCAA tournament, because that will be our last game together."

It's easy to understand the motivation. At times in 1998-99, it seemed as though the dynamic duo carried a team short on rebounding and front-court muscle on their backs in tight games, especially at the end of the season. The two guards combined for 45 percent of NU's scoring, 53 percent of its steals, 58 percent of its assists (186) and, by averaging 19.8 points-per-game, busted into ninth place on the Huskers' all-time scoring list as a junior.

Kubik earned honorable mention All-America honors, broke the all-time NU season (136) and career (310) steals record, led the team in assists (186) and, by averaging 19.8 points-per-game, busted into ninth place on the Huskers' all-time scoring list as a junior.

Schwartz was the team's second-leading scorer, with 13.2 points per game, and leading rebounder as a 5-foot-9 guard, with 5.9 per game. She also fed off Kubik's knack for creating turnovers — grabbing 72 steals of her own — and points — dishing out 106 assists.

But it's not what they've done on their own that makes the Husker duo so dangerous. It's how they feed off each other.

"When we were freshmen, we were clicking well," Kubik said. "Now, we click more and more. I just know exactly what she's going to do. It seems like anytime I'm in trouble, there's Brooke to bail me out."

"It's hard to describe the respect we have for each other. There's sometimes problems on

teams with two players sharing starring roles. But we're happy when the other person does good. We've gotten to the point where we can learn a lot about the game of basketball from each other."

Said Schwartz: "Every year, we read each others' minds more and more. I can now see Nicole going for a steal, and I'll release (for a fast break). We have this connection on the court."

With those kind of numbers and chemistry come lofty expectations from their head coach, and Sanderford hasn't been afraid to apply the pressure to Kubik and Schwartz.

"I think they're ready to lead," Sanderford said. "They understand what I think is important, they understand how to win, how to work hard. Having two senior guards will make me a much better coach. Leadership pressure is always going to be on our seniors."

Anyone involved in Nebraska women's basketball will say that Schwartz and Kubik are two different kinds of people, two different kinds of leaders. Sanderford said that's a good thing.

"Nicole is a very steady person, very serious about everything and leads by example," Sanderford said. "Brooke is light-hearted and wants to joke, likes to play around a lot."

"But watching them on the floor — those two complement each other very well. The passes they make, the way they cover each other up on defense. Those are things that you can't teach. It comes from playing for three years. I'm excited about that."

Now, with the addition of a talent-loaded supporting class that includes 6-foot-5 center and Illinois transfer Casey Leonhardt, freshman Omaha Benson standout Stephanie Jones and

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BROOKE SCHWARTZ

NU guard

three other returning seniors, the two are shooting higher in their last run together.

Kubik and Schwartz weren't satisfied with finishing fifth in the Big 12 last year. They weren't satisfied with just making it to the NCAAs, where Kentucky beat them in a 98-92 shootout they swore they should have won.

They want more. And this desire is not a new concept to them. Now is their time — their last chance at whatever they've been aiming for since they got here. Kubik said the goal is to make it to the Sweet 16, and after that, anything can happen. Schwartz wasn't too shy to say the words Final Four.

"Ever since we were freshmen, we've been talking about how good we wanted to be when we were seniors," Kubik said.

"One of these days, with the direction this program is going in, with the kind of coach Coach Sanderford is, it might not be long before Nebraska wins a national championship. It might not be us, but this senior class will feel like we helped start that when we came here."