

NU women open play

By JOHN GASKINS
Staff writer

Pardon some of the Nebraska women's basketball players if they've been a little antsy lately.

The 24th-ranked Huskers have plenty of reasons why they are anxious to start the regular season tonight in the Time Warner Cable Classic at the Bob Devaney Sports Center.

After beating exhibition opponents from Lithuania and Sweden by an average of 34.5 points, NU will take on Georgia Southern at 8:05 p.m., following Southern Illinois' battle with Wisconsin. The tournament will resume Sunday with the consolation game at 12:35 p.m. and the two winners meeting in the championship game at 3:05 p.m.

"I know I'm excited," NU forward Charlie Rogers said. "It's been a long month. We need a real game for our mental state."

Head Coach Paul Sanderford's excitement comes in knowing that he will have his potentially best team at NU taking the floor tonight. Looking to build off of two consecutive 20-win seasons, the third-year coach said it's time for his talented group of seniors to take its play to the next level.

The Huskers are ranked in the pre-season AP Top 25 poll for the first time

in school history.

"I'm excited about being in the Top 25," Sanderford said, "but my goal is to be in the Top 25 at the end of the season. What people remember about your teams is how you played in March."

"I still remember (last season's first round NCAA Tournament 98-92 loss to) Kentucky, how we were leading at 30 minutes and lost the game. We're getting ready for March. This is by far the most talented team I've had at Nebraska. We have a lot to prove."

Sanderford hasn't been known to be a coach who takes the start of the season lightly, either. In his first two years, the Huskers have come out of the gates with huge wins.

NU knocked off No. 11 Alabama 74-66 in the second game of Sanderford's first season two years ago and demolished No. 21 Arizona 72-48 in last year's second game. Both games were at the Devaney Center.

And Sanderford's not backing away from tough early competition this year. Assuming NU gets past Georgia Southern today and Wisconsin beats Southern Illinois, the Huskers' matchup with the Badgers - unranked in the AP poll but rated 24th by two other major publications - could be intriguing.

A young Wisconsin team went 18-14 last season and made it to the finals of the NIT Tournament. This year, they return 1999's Big Ten Freshman of the

Year, forward Jessie Stomski, and guard LaTonya Simms - last year's leading scorer at 18 points-per-game.

"We want to play the very best teams we can play and establish ourselves early," Sanderford said. "Wisconsin's a tremendous basketball team. They're going to be tough on the inside boards to match up with."

That's because the Badgers added power with last year's Parade Magazine and Naismith Prep Player of the Year, Nina Smith, to their frontcourt punch. The 6-foot-4 center from Iowa averaged 28.5 points, 11.3 rebounds and 3.3 blocks-per-game as a senior at West High School and should make an immediate presence.

And that only adds to Rogers' excitement to play Wisconsin. She might not have felt the same way last season when as a 6-2 center she and the Huskers had problems in the frontcourt with defense and rebounding.

But thanks to the addition of 6-foot-5 junior Illinois transfer Casey Leonhardt and freshman Omaha Benson standout Stephanie Jones, Rogers has moved to forward and feels a lot more confident in shutting down Smith.

"We're as deep in the post as we've ever been," Rogers said. "Casey's just a presence. You can't guard her. So we figure we're just going to wear (Smith) down a little bit."

Former NU players will be honored

VOLLEYBALL from 11

"We like to do this because it's very tough to get tickets to matches in the Coliseum 'cause we're basically sold out," Pettit said.

More than anything though, Pettit wants Saturday night to be a thank you to those who laid the foundation for the program, many of whom will be in attendance.

"I think it will be fun for the players," Pettit said. "They've seen the pictures on the wall, but they've never met them."

Nebraska setter Lindsay Wischmeier backs up Pettit's excitement toward the game.

"It's a chance to play in front of the alumni, and it's exciting to know that your playing in front of people that played at the Olympic level," Wischmeier said.

"I grew up watching Nebraska volleyball and watching those girls play," she said.

Conner out for NU

By DAVID DIEHL
Staff writer

Nebraska's wrestling team, which had two regulars missing from its starting lineup for last week's dual versus Lock Haven, has a cupboard that is even more bare this weekend for the Black & Decker Corneli Classic in Ithaca, N.Y.

Junior 174-pounder Ati Conner will sit out Saturday's matches nursing a stretched ligament in his left knee. Sophomore Ray Kivi will start in his place.

Conner will be on the bench with regular starters Paul Gomez and Justin Flores. Gomez is out until the beginning of the second semester, and Flores hopes to return from knee surgery in time for the Missouri dual Dec. 12.

Head Coach Tim Neumann said that Conner is physically able to wrestle Saturday, but he is resting Conner to save him for the future.

"I would like to take a whole healthy team to Lehigh on Dec. 4 and wrestle in that tournament healthy," Neumann said. "I would like to wrestle Missouri with a whole healthy team. To do that we're going to have to sacrifice a little bit."

True freshman Joe Malia wrestled at 125 pounds in Gomez's place last weekend versus Lock Haven and will do so again Saturday. Adam Kastl will wrestle at 141 for Flores.

Malia's first collegiate match found him wrestling Lock Haven's 15th-ranked Trap McCormack. Malia lost a major decision 20-10, but he felt he wrestled better than the score indicated.

Neumann said Malia grew up a lot during the match.

"He wrestled the first four and a half minutes as a freshman and the last two and a half as a junior," Neumann said.

Malia said he was nervous wrestling for the first time at the Division I level, but those nerves may be calmer this weekend.

"I don't think they'll be there as much because we're not at home," Malia said. "It's a tournament, so I'll be able to wrestle more than one match. I think I just had to get that first one out of the way."

With the situation NU is in, Neumann said, the team is putting more emphasis on what it gets out of the tournament and less at where it comes out.

"Stuff we've been concentrating on all week - if that stuff happens, then we'll be fine," Neumann said.

A&M deja vu: Husker women prep to play Aggies

A&M from 11

few bruises coming from Wilson in the goal box.

"When she says it's her goal box, it's her goal box," Eddleman said. "I've gotten injured quite a few times in her goal box, so I believe it."

Nebraska counters with the second highest scoring offense in the country, averaging 4.6 goals per game. NU has scored 106 goals this season and has four players on the roster with more than 10 goals.

The winner of the Nebraska and

A&M game will meet the winner of the Notre Dame and Stanford match.

But Walker said NU's focus was on the game Sunday.

"We're just happy to be playing, and the other 15 teams would say the same thing."

Sports Opinion

Joshua Camenzind

Give the Huskers time to develop

College basketball is a funny sport.

The game is unique in that, unlike football, teams can play poorly early on and lose games without the loss affecting their hopes of having a winning season.

Three of last year's Final Four teams have already lost a game. Connecticut got beat by Iowa; Ohio State was stunned by Notre Dame and Duke lost twice in the Coaches vs. Cancer Classic.

But that doesn't mean immediate disaster for them. The NCAA is set up to allow losses early and reward teams for improvement by March.

This applies to the Nebraska basketball team in every possible way. On Wednesday night, NU dropped its first exhibition game in the last 11 years to a team from Russia that had only previously beaten known-powerhouse Montana State.

Many around the program will begin to throw up the white flag, much like some of the fans at the Devaney Center did as they watched the turnovers build and the frustration mount on the player's faces.

One fan yelled to starting center Kimani Ffriend, "And you are supposed to be going to the Final Four?" after a string of bad decisions that marred an unbearable first half. Ffriend said in the Daily Nebraskan Winter Sports Preview that the Huskers were a Final Four team.

But Nebraska is young. They started one returning player from last year - Cary Cochran. Freshman Kenny Booker started in place of senior Larry Florence, and Rodney Fields made his second-straight start in place of the injured Cookie Belcher.

Belcher could be seen during time-outs outside the huddle explaining to various players what they were doing wrong and how to do it right. He could be doing the same thing on the court, but his wrist won't allow it for now. His absence has forced players like Fields and Booker into a "learn-as-you-go" situation.

NU was without its starting point guard for a half, and it showed. The guard play was horrendous at times, and the team did not seem in sync for more than two minutes at a time.

All this for a team that is trying to learn a new offense, several defenses and a press that will be instrumental in NU's running game philosophy.

Patience is the key word around Husker hoops, because it will take time to get the ball rolling. Those who paid attention noticed that the second half against Russia looked different. Danny Walker's biology professor let him out of his grasp, and the transfer from Compton (Calif.) Community College proceeded to calm NU down and slowly bring them back.

That alone says all you need to know about the importance of leadership. Nebraska looked asleep in the first half. No Belcher and Florence on the floor meant there was nobody there to wake the team up.

Two players that seem to be playing well together despite their differences are Ffriend and power forward Steffon Bradford. Both averaged double-doubles throughout the pre-season, and both experienced rough times. But like the rest of the team, they are playing together for the first time after coming to NU from opposite ends of the country. Ffriend hails from Jamaica, and Bradford went to Compton C.C. in California.

After the game, Coach Danny Nee said he was pleased with the play of his two starting big men.

"You can't ask them to do more than that," Nee said after the two combined for 45 points and 32 rebounds. "Those two guys can't do more than that. You know who played and didn't play. The other guys just have to start getting better."

The Huskers will only get better by gaining experience and playing together. Bradford sees it developing much like his days at junior college.

"It reminds me of back when I was in Compton," Bradford said. "Start off slow in the beginning, then once the season starts it will kick in."

Bradford said the time is now for other members to pick it up.

"It's like, welcome to the big leagues," Bradford said. "This is the way it is going to be. You know you win some and lose some, and I would rather lose it now than when it counts."

With four days left until NU does play its first real game, urgency is not an issue. The Huskers must take their time and learn how to play together while finding ways to win like they did in their first exhibition win.

Joshua Camenzind is a sophomore news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan staff writer.

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