

# Meendering helps turn rough start around

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have to look at your failure in the face. That's what I was feeling. 'What if I fail? What if I try, and I can't do it?'"

No, she's not perfect. Yes, she's human. Yes, sometimes she's afraid things won't work out.

It's hard to believe it, judging by her performance over the past three years. It's a good thing Meendering convinced herself to take the big step because she has exceeded those lofty expectations.

She made first-team All-American as a sophomore and is a shoo-in to do it again. She's the newly crowned Big 12 Player of the Year. She reached 1,000 kills faster than any player in NU history. She even graced the cover of Volleyball magazine.

And it's hard to believe Meendering's anxiety judging by her physical presence on the court.

Nebraska setter and fellow junior Jill McWilliams knows that presence better than anyone. McWilliams, also from Iowa, who sets many of Meendering's earth-shattering kills, roomed with Meendering their freshman year and laughed when asked about the first time she realized the hitter's power.

"I remember in our senior all-star game, she played on the team against me," McWilliams said. "And all I

remember is her coming from the outside and swinging with her left hand, and she hit down inside the 10-foot line on the other side of the net, and everyone was just like, 'Whoa, she's awesome.'"

"She's just a very powerful player, very dominating and intimidating on the other side of the court. I was always hoping she would come here. I was excited about her being on my side of the net, instead of trying to defend her."

Things are much different for Meendering now than they were in 1997, when she and McWilliams arrived.

"She's really developed as far as decision-making," McWilliams said. "When she first came in, she could hit really hard, and that's all she did. She didn't have any shots. She's developed off-speed shots. Her passing and defense has improved a ton since she came in as a freshman."

"She's matured as a person, too. She understands her role on the team now. It's a huge responsibility and takes a lot of giving."

So, what exactly is that role? Said McWilliams: "Keeping everyone fired up. Keeping everyone encouraged. Some big-time players get on people hard when they're not playing well. She does that, but she's very good at positive feedback."

It sounds like the role of a leader, a court general, something you would not expect Meendering to be when talking to her. It's not that she is shy or passive, she just seems too nice, too generous, too down-to-earth to take on that role on the court, where she's

an intimidator.

And although it's not her favorite thing in the world to be the team's media darling and spokeswoman after matches and practices, she understands that is just what comes along with being the go-to player on the team.

"The coaches told me (before the season started) what they expect of me, and they expect a lot," Meendering said. "They wanted me to be a leader. But I wanted to take that role. They told me the team needs me to be consistent when we're having a bad match."

It is a role Meendering said she couldn't have handled two years ago. That season, the Huskers, as they always do, had their fair share of dominating players and leaders — especially in first-team All-Americans, setter Fiona Nepo and Meendering's predecessor and "hero," Reitsma.

Meendering was OK with that. She played in the back row and showed signs of future greatness. But she also got her first taste of Big Red pressure.

That included living up to her All-American potential, living up to Reitsma's legacy and, on some days, the pressure of having to deal with not being the world beater she was used to being.

"When I was a freshman, I thought I had to be perfect," Meendering said. "And it didn't matter what people told me. And I think that's because I saw Lisa succeeding so much on the court, and I so badly wanted to do the same thing. It was hard. But by the end of my freshman year, I grew out of that."

What helped Meendering grow out of it was help from the team leaders, including Reitsma.

"I can remember on those days when I kept saying, 'What am I doing here? I suck.' We played the same position. In drills, we'd take turns with each other, and she'd be the one that would come over and shake my shoulder and be like, 'Hey, you're all right. Just relax,' and keep me in perspective."

Reitsma graduated after 1997, leaving Meendering to fill her shoes. Did she ever.

Meendering broke the school record for kills in a five-game post-season match (32) in leading the Huskers to a win over Pepperdine.

"It was frustrating for me when Coach Pettit said, 'These freshmen are going to be great in two years.' For us upperclassmen, we looked at him and said, 'Hi, we're still here, you know. Give us a shot.'"

**NANCY MEENDERING**  
NU volleyball player

She broke the school record for attacks in NU's Regional Championship win over Wisconsin (78), then did it again in a final four loss to Penn State, with 80.

Meendering did not have the extra burden of leading the team, or of being the motivator when things were going wrong. That role belonged to Nepo. At the end of the season, both players earned first-team All-American honors, and Meendering became only the third player at Nebraska, behind Nepo and Reitsma, to do so as a sophomore.

With Nepo gone, coaches told Meendering she would not only be the go-to player but the on-court firecracker this season. She was not expected to show discouragement in front of the younger players.

If she had, Meendering said, her teammates would get down.

It wasn't easy, considering the start NU got off to in its first 20 matches, losing five close matches to top-ranked opponents and sinking lower in the Big 12 standings. It was not the 32-2 joyride Nepo got to lead the 1998 team on.

Team failure, more than at any other time, finally stared Meendering in the eyes.

Meendering, along with some of the older players, found motivation and a way to lead. She saw that some of NU's freshmen, the recruiting class Pettit called his best ever, were already acting like Nebraska was just a team of the future and not a title contender now.

"It made us really mad," Meendering said. "It was frustrating for me when Coach Pettit said, 'These freshmen are going to be great in two years.' For us upperclassmen, we looked at him and said, 'Hi, we're still

here, you know. Give us a shot.'"

"We just wanted him to let us have a successful year this year and to quit talking about next year. We don't care about next year yet. We're thinking about this year."

Now, Meendering's the one that fires everyone up. She's the one who goes to the young phenoms, like Big 12 Freshman of the Year Greichaly Cepero, to tell them to relax.

And since NU's fifth loss, at Texas on Oct. 23, the team, like Meendering, has continued to grow. NU's numbers reflect her numbers. She smashed 5.53 kills per game in the last 10 matches and provided the big plays at the right time to help the Huskers to 10 straight wins and the Big 12 Championship.

How's that for leadership?

"She has the ability to take over a gym, not just a team," Pettit said. "If we're not alert as a team, she's the one that will make us alert. Things get real sharp, real quick. It's hard not to be alert when someone is pounding the ball that hard."

"She's all of a sudden raised her level of play. That's how she leads — with her play."

Meendering still fears failure. She still has bad days on the court. She still feels pressure about leading the team.

But now she has played to the level everyone said she could. Just watching her play and watching how the team reacts shows that.

"Coach Pettit said to me, 'If you start getting tentative, your whole team senses it and does things the same way.' They expect me to do things 70 percent right. I expect myself to do it 35 percent more right. I expect to be perfect."

The difference now is she can relax when she's not.

## NU looks to turn up heat on Drake

**By BRANDON SCHULTE**  
Staff writer

The Nebraska women's basketball team hopes the revamped Devaney Sports Center will be good to them once more.

Home has been good to the Cornhuskers since Paul Sanderford came to NU three years ago.

Since he became coach, NU is 29-3 in the building. But after losing its last home game to Wisconsin on Nov. 21, NU will be trying to avoid its first two-game home losing streak under Sanderford on tonight as it starts a four-game homestand against Drake at 7:05.

Sanderford said it is important for his team nationally to start a new home winning streak.

"We fell out of the top 25 with the loss to Wisconsin," Sanderford said. "I think it's important to establish that we are a good basketball team."

"I don't think we're at a critical stage yet, but I'm a little disappointed that we lost at home. I've always said you have to win at home. We have four straight at home and all of them are against pretty good teams. We have our work cut out for us."

Drake, which enters the match at 1-3, might seem to be the ideal opponent on which to start a new home winning streak. But the Bulldogs

"I think it's important to establish that we are a good basketball team."

**PAUL SANDERFORD**  
women's basketball coach

played NU tight last year before losing 75-72 in Des Moines, Iowa, and are picked to win the Missouri Valley title.

Sanderford said he'd like to press the Bulldogs some because he thinks the Huskers (2-1) have superior depth. Nebraska hasn't pressed too much this season, as Sanderford teaches four freshmen the entire defensive package.

NU's Nicole Kubik said the team wants to set the tone at the beginning of the game this year. Typically, Nebraska has been able to jump on teams at Devaney with a barrage of steals and points in the first five minutes of the contest.

"We definitely don't want to play like we did last year," Kubik said. "We want to put them away early instead of waiting until the last two minutes of the game. We have them at our place this year, so I'm sure they're going to want to come out and try to knock us off."

Three Drake players have an added

incentive to play well against Nebraska, because they came from Nebraska high schools. Freshman center Carla Bennett from Omaha has averaged 7.5 points per game and 4.5 rebounds per game as a starter.

Bennett will be countered by NU center Casey Leonhardt, who is averaging 13.7 points per game and 9 rebounds per game. She had 21 points and 17 rebounds in a 70-58 win over Montana.

Sanderford hopes Leonhardt's play against Montana last Saturday was a sign of good things to come from her.

"Casey Leonhardt really played well at Montana," Sanderford said. "We haven't had those kind of numbers from a post player since I've been at Nebraska."

"I hope that was a breakthrough game for her. I guess we'll find out (today) because Drake is big and strong inside. She'll have to perform at a high level if we expect to win."

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