

Gamedays filled with triumphs, trials for athletes

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And for 10,000 fans awash in red, their eyes are popping out of their heads. Nebraska, somehow, has squandered a 27-3 lead to Colorado. Good Lord – just 20 minutes ago, a snowball fight between the mascots was Folsom Field's main attraction.

And now, a mad CU dash to the finish.

On the sideline, Nebraska defenders suck in air. They're tired, out of their groove, on their heels. And NU's offense isn't helping.

Opposite is Colorado's bench, jubilant at its sudden fortune and a 27-27 tie. Volatile CU quarterback Mike Moschetti bounces up and down the sidelines, screaming all the words Mama told us never to scream.

Moschetti can feel this victory; he's suddenly hot, and just in time to save the Buffaloes' so-so season. CU Coach Gary Barnett fiddles with his headset; he barks orders out, awaiting another Husker drive.

Her clap serves as a metronome for the crowd. Normally, it's the crowd that starts the clap, the three-second beat that marks the big jumps into sandy pit down the runway.

But today is a smaller meet. So triple jumper Dalhia Ingram will have to do it all on her own.

It sounds like an aviary in the Bob Devaney Sports Center's swimming pool. Nebraska only hosts a few meets a year, and quite likely they all sound like the adidas shoot-out does: hoots, whoops and hollers from teammates, coaches and fans.

The aviary effect comes from the limited attention span of swimmers in the water. Maybe, at best, they're above water for a second or two every few seconds.

So, in terms of encouragement, only the shortest phrases or catcalls need apply.

"Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Gooo! Goooooo! Gooooooooooo!" one coach from North Carolina State screams.

"Yee, yee yee, yee, yee, yee, yee, yeeeeeeeeeeeeee," another from UC-Santa Barbara shrieks.

Most of the fans – mostly swimming aficionados – don't say much.

On this particular night, members of the Omaha Westside High School team are nearby.

"What a turn," one girl says to another.

"Oh, she's good," says another, referring to two-time Big 12 swimmer of the year Shandra Johnson.

Johnson does well on this night, as she usually does, and directly after she touches the finish wall, she shoots around to glance at the clock – at her time.

Swimming, like track, is a sport where numbers speak volumes. There is winning, and there is speed. The term world record holder has a place here, unlike football or other team sports.

Timex must love these people.

All the coaches wear watches, and they have a big scoreboard timer to look at in addition. Some have a stopwatch in their hands on top of that.

Johnson's facial expression tells the time, too. It doesn't change much when she glances – probably what she expected. She waits for the time that will be transcendent.

Erin Aldrich inspects her arm as if something has gone drastically wrong.

The senior outside hitter for the Texas volleyball team isn't having quite the night she had in Austin a month before, when the Longhorns upset Nebraska in five games.

Tonight, with the Big 12 Championship on the line, things are not going quite as well.

She looks at her arm, rotating it around and around. Then she pulls up

her sleeves, tucks the hair behind her ear and begins to witness a UT breakdown that's not entirely her fault, but it happens nonetheless.

Nebraska was forced to punt, again, when the football gods gave them a gift – a good bounce, pinning Colorado near its end zone. Then CU and Moschetti, his guns still blazing, trot out on to the field and promptly give the game away. Buffs running back Cortlen Johnson fumbles; and NU recovers at the 16-yard line.

"Shit!" Johnson yells loud enough to hear 30 to 35 yards away. He tugs at his facemask.

NU rover Mike Brown, who had most of the big defensive plays all season for the Huskers, recovers the ball. He doesn't celebrate too much, but the game should be in hand. All Nebraska has to do is run the clock down and finish it off.

Danny Nee is standing, slightly crouched, exhorting his team in a place that has normally been a den of death for the Nebraska coach. Phog Allen Fieldhouse is a place NU has won at only once in Nee's career, and that was last season, a year that featured the worst Kansas team in a good, long time. This time, the Jayhawks are better. And the Huskers are not as good.

But they're hanging in, thanks to a Jamaican beanpole whose name looks like a misprint, and who moves quicker than a pretty lady in rain. Kimani Ffriend, this super-gifted enigma of a player, has found a mighty fine time to have his breakout game.

He's twisting and turning around KU players. His blocks are more like snatches out of midair.

But he's having problems with the free throws. The KU fans wave their keys wildly as an attempt rolls off the rim. Ffriend turns around in disgust before making the next one.

But still, NU trails by only two with 4:20 left in the first half. Nee's into it, the crowd is subdued and every KU fan hates this dirty No. 31, this guy whose name must be misprinted in the program because there's two F's.

But this will all change.

"Chicago! Chicago! Chicago!" the big man yells.

He ain't Sinatra, and he ain't talking about his hometown.

Paul Sanderford leans against the basket support at the Bob Devaney Sports Center. The place is empty, save for about 15 women's basketball players and 14,200 unfilled seats. An empty arena can be almost as tough as a full one – all that emptiness and red bearing down on you.

"Chicago" is a play of some sort, a play you're not supposed to understand once the game rolls around.

You are supposed to smile and nod, appreciate a good shot and have little to no idea on how it's done. When a play's run right, that's how it looks. And on gameday, it ought to run perfectly. It is in practice where things occasionally stink.

Practice is what separates the spectator from the player, the sports-writer from the coach. Because, in the end, most laypeople only know a little about what's really going on out there – the strategy behind it.

And even though a lot of what athletes do in a game comes down to an educated guess (like everything else in life), some would make you think game strategy is akin to quantum physics.

"Now, what are you doing there?" Sanderford asks a freshman, Paige Sutton, after the play is over. Then he explains what she should have done. He speaks in low, confident tones, a lot unlike his hurried growl during games. Sanderford's style plays out a lot like other good coaches: defense, rebounding, good inside play.

His is a classic coaching style;

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he's no slickster, no insurance salesman. When something goes wrong, you know it.

Texas lost game one, but is coasting in game two, ahead 13-4, and Aldrich is doing it a t least a little bit.

Her athleticism is sort of confounding – she's the nation's best high jumper – so when she jumps to spike a ball, she simply rises and rises and rises. And she rises quicker than anybody else on the floor. At times she shoots off the ground for a kill, seemingly out of nowhere.

But Nebraska counters with a great player of its own, junior Nancy Meendering. Meendering can't jump as high as Aldrich – hardly anyone could. But she hits harder, like a Walter Johnson fastball, that makes a *thwmp* sound when she hits it. And Meendering can do everything else – defense, serving – as well as anyone in the nation.

Plus, Meendering has a better supporting cast, which Aldrich and Texas are about to find out.

In another world, at another time, Frank Solich would take back his call after Nebraska recovered the CU fumble.

But he called an option left. And it failed in the most drastic of ways.

Quarterback Eric Crouch ran to his left and simply waited too long. He should have eaten the ball, but it wouldn't have been Crouch's style to take a loss. So he tried a desperate pitch, which would have worked, had Dan Alexander not dropped it.

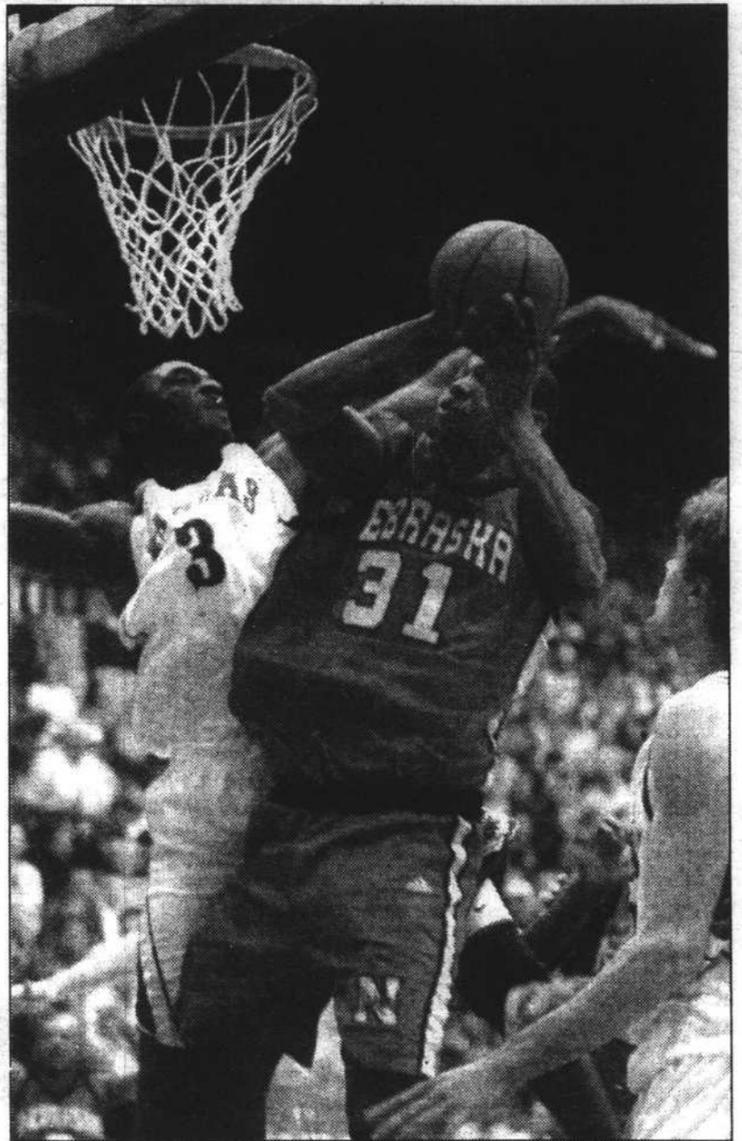
But he did. And Colorado recovered. And down the field, in the end zone, receiver Matt Davison looked back to survey the damage, turned back around and laid on the grass, looking skyward, knowing the fumble bug had just bitten Nebraska again.

Ingram rocks back, like a fencer, the crowd taking over the clap for her. She'll do this three times, after which she will sprint down the runway toward a length not yet determined by her legs.

It has been said the triple jump is one of the most physically demanding of all sports. It puts tremendous stress on one leg, then the other leg, then the first leg again, then both legs when you land. And every inch of Ingram's body thrusts toward the board, the starting point of her jump. She's timed out her steps and can only hope she stays behind the scratch line.

Ingram rocks back a third time. And then she takes off.

It's not lightning so much as it is one of the patented Kansas Jayhawk



DN File Photo

NEBRASKA CENTER Kimani Ffriend drives for the basket over Kansas' Lester Earl. Ffriend finished the game as the leading scorer with 23 points.

runs, the kind that starts with a steal, ends with a 3-pointer and has nifty passes in between.

Nebraska has battled against it all half. But now, the Huskers are tired, and Danny Nee is left with Danny Walker and Matt Davison, two guys who have never played at Allen Fieldhouse, on the floor when the run starts.

Once it starts, the points rain in. KU guard Kenny Gregory nails a floating jump shot in the lane, forward Luke Axtell pounds home a 3. And with each basket, Allen Fieldhouse rumbles. It is, in fact, smaller than Devaney Sports Center in size, but seats more, has no video screen, no sponsored chants and more noise than Devaney has ever heard.

The run ends with a 3-pointer right at the half-time buzzer from Axtell. The score: 49-32. The carnage: a 17-2 run. The game is over. All that's left for NU is to watch Ffriend prove himself some more.

After practice, Sanderford might watch them shoot. He might go back to his office. He might check up on the recruits he's after. He might get a drink of water. The possibilities are limitless when no one is your boss.

It was once written by Pulitzer Prize-winning sports columnist Jim Murray that the coach is the last of the true dictators – their word is law. And so it is true: Sanderford speaks, his team listens. They don't question. And to be sure – because Sanderford is human – he is occasionally wrong. But, at all times, his word is accepted as right.

All coaches assume the same role, until they're fired, which seems an affirmation that all those times a coach was right, they were actually wrong. But Sanderford, well, it is unlikely he will ever be fired.

He stands now, around midcourt, sweats on, gray adidas shirt hugging his body, a coach who has paid his dues, taking two teams to the Final Four after starting out at a dinky junior college in North Carolina.

Sanderford has proven his worth

IN NEBRASKA A LOOK AT THE CORNHUSKER EMPIRE

DAY ONE	The System
DAY TWO	The All-Americans
DAY THREE	Athletes and their tutors
DAY FOUR	Learning Disabilities
DAY FIVE	The Sports Major
DAY SIX	Corruption in the System
DAY SEVEN	Isolation and Its Counterparts Athletes After Graduation The Social Scene for Athletes Athletes as Role Models A Day in the Life
DAY EIGHT	The Academic/Athletic Tradeoff
DAY NINE	Gameday

"agin and agin," as he would draw. And it comes from these practice moments, away from the game, where the skills are honed.

"Git there, git there!" he yells in no particular direction, his target any number of women in ponytails. Then he tells them to "Hoed up." And then he explains, "Chicago agin." And they run it, "agin."

Until they get it right.

The subs come in, and that begins the run.

Nebraska doesn't normally go this deep into the volleyball bench – its offense prevents it from doing it. But tonight, Coach Terry Pettit pulls the trigger on reserve Katie Jahnke. And not long after she's in there, NU begins to turn the 13-4 game two deficit around. A few balls go NU's way. And suddenly, Aldrich is arguing a call.

She's right with her complaint – a serve by the Huskers was long. But as so often in a sports world without instant replay, the call can only stand. So frustrating for the raging bull