

spring sports preview

the season of changers



▲ jennifer lizama the thief

When All-American Jennifer Lizama steps onto the softball field, Nebraska Softball Coach Rhonda Revelle said she is more focused than anyone she has ever seen before.

"She is a complete package," Revelle said. "She is offensively anything you'd ever want in a hitter. She is not only the best base runner I've ever coached, she's the best one I've ever seen."

Lizama, a senior from San Lorenzo, Calif., has started at second base all three years she has worn a Cornhusker uniform.

In her career at Nebraska, Lizama has definitely taken care of business. Last year, she was named to the All-American team, and she has also been named to the All-Big-12 team three times in her career.

Her list of accomplishments includes being the sixth-overall pick to the Akron Racers in the Women's Professional Softball League Draft.

The WPSL is a four-team league, with two teams located in Ohio and two in Florida, and consists of a 64-game regular season schedule running from June to

August. Lizama said the league minimum salary last year was \$800 per month.

"This gives me an opportunity to further my softball career," Lizama said. "I'm looking forward to it. I really don't know a whole lot about it, and I really don't know what to expect, but I just expect to compete."

Lizama calls the league more of a summer job. She hopes playing in the WPSL will lead to her ultimate goal of being an Olympic tryout.

"I was hoping it would be for this coming Olympics, but I didn't get asked to try out," Lizama said. "With the Olympic committee being there when we play the Olympic team, hopefully they try to look at me for 2004."

A spot on the Olympic team is what Lizama calls an "opportunity of a lifetime."

After the WPSL season, Lizama plans to come back to NU and finish up her degree. Revelle said she has offered Lizama a spot on the Nebraska coaching staff for next year.

"I would really like for her to come back," Revelle said. "She's very articulate, she understands the game very well, she's very heady and also understands the technical knowledge and she's a great clinician."

stories/photos

a.j. lamb: jason merrihew/mike warren jennifer lizama: sean callahan/heather glenboski eric eshbach: jamie suhr/mike warren



◀ eric eshbach the talent

In seventh grade, Eric Eshbach was at a basketball game when a friend of his told Eshbach he was going to try the pole vault.

Eshbach decided to tag along and try it with him. Afterwards, the track coach approached him and said he wanted Eshbach to keep jumping.

Now, Eshbach is the national high school record-holder with a vault of 18 feet, 2 1/4 inches.

And Jan. 30, Eshbach set the NU record and qualified for nationals by vaulting 18 feet, 1/2 inches.

"The thing about track is that a lot of people try it, but not a lot of people do it," Eshbach said.

Eshbach credits his high school coach, Joe Hester, for helping him succeed.

Hester was recently named 1999 High School Coach of the Year in Texas.

Eshbach still keeps in touch with Hester; he worked out with Hester over the semester break.

When Nebraska began recruiting Eshbach, he said he remembered watching Husker football teams play for national championships in his childhood.

The football team garnered his interest, but he said the facilities and nice people made the decision to come to NU easy.

After Eshbach committed to NU, high school teammate

with the prodigy

Lincoln is quickly gaining a reputation of producing great athletes. And Nebraska women's gymnastics Coach Dan Keadig has coached his best talent in Nebraska in a long time.

It is the most of their daughters to compete for Nebraska. The All-American who has helped coach A.J.'s older sisters. A.J. was the first this year, while Alicia competed from 1997 to 1999. Alicia is now a head manager.

"I'm not just the coach," Alicia said. "It's nice to be able to get her life and be around to watch her progress."

Lincoln's gymnast and sister Erica has also witnessed Keadig's passion firsthand over the past few years.

She has always been an overachiever and a go-getter," Erica said. "We got that in common."

Last weekend during her first career home meet, A.J. won her first all-around event as a collegiate athlete. A.J. posted a score of 39.425 in the all-around against Missouri, the fifth best score in school history and the best score in the Big 12 this season.

"It was exciting," A.J. said. "I didn't know it could really happen. Because of her performance, A.J. was named the Big 12 gymnast of the week three. Lamb joins teammate Heather Brink, who won last meet the first week.

A.J. is known for her strong work habits.

She knows what to work on to make herself better," Coach Keadig said. "She is very meticulous, on top of that, she is a perfectionist."

A.J. has the potential to be one of the best gymnasts to come out of NU programs, Keadig said.

Heather (Brink) is the most decorated gymnast we've ever had," Keadig said. "The neatest thing is, the two of them are Lincoln girls, and here they could be the finest ever."

A.J. was highly recruited by major universities across the United States. The three-time Junior Olympic National Champion chose the University of Nebraska. Lincoln over Michigan, Arkansas and Utah. It was a toss-up between Nebraska and Utah, but the strength of the program and the opportunity to compete at the highest level were the deciding factors.

Jonathan Henley also committed to the Huskers.

Eshbach said having Henley around during his first few months on campus helped him adjust to college.

Eshbach said it was tough for him coming from a small school with a graduating class of 96 people.

"I go into some class like sociology, and there's twice the amount of people I graduated with," Eshbach said.

Eshbach said the biggest difference, however, was training methods.

"Training has changed a lot," Eshbach said. "In high school, we pole vaulted. That's what we did."

Tom Williams, NU pole-vault coach, said Eshbach pole vaulted so much in high school that he had no time to strength train.

Williams also said Eshbach was the most talented athlete he's ever coached.

"You see a lot of athletes jump up and hoopla. With Eric, he receives a lot of his satisfaction internally," Williams said.

Williams added that Eshbach's humble personality set him apart from most athletes.

"Last year he broke the high school record, and that jump looked like any other jump. He landed. He got up and walked down the runway," Williams said.

And after he broke the NU record, he did just as his coach said. Eshbach landed, got up and walked back down the runway to attempt the next height.