

Junior college transfer Ati Conner adjusts to Huskers

■ Coach Neumann says there's a chasm between wrestling divisions.

By David Diehl
Staff writer

A wrestler like Ati Conner is rare, a one in 10,000 discovery, NU Coach Tim Neumann said, like finding a Picasso among a collection of kindergarten water-color paintings.

Conner was a diamond waiting to be plucked from the rough of the California junior college wrestling system when Neumann discovered him at the state's junior college tournament. Neumann has since brought Conner halfway across the country and now Conner is paying dividends.

"He was a huge find for us," Neumann said.

The 174-pound junior was dismantling opponents at Moorpark (Calif.) Community College, a college that certainly doesn't have the credentials of NU.

But after high school, Conner said he wasn't sure he wanted to wrestle. He said his grades would have prevented him from going to a Division I school anyway. It was his mother, he said, who encouraged him to wrestle.

And now he is showing the Division-I world that he is on the brink of becoming a serious force here, too.

"Every match was a tech fall," said Conner, who lost only once in his two years in junior college. "I only had one tough match and that was in semi-finals of the state tournament."

Conner, currently ranked 19th, broke into the national rankings on Dec. 20, when he was rated 16th. He has compiled a 21-7 record, including a sparkling 5-1 record at the National Duals, where he notched a pin and a technical fall.

Wherever he's been, Conner said he's always had the confidence to be successful.

"It's a different mindset. A year ago I always knew I was going to win, and I know I should still have that feeling here."

Ati Conner
NU wrestler

"It doesn't matter what level you're at," Conner said, "you should always think that you should win."

The new pressures of D-1 wrestling are an adaptation Conner has to learn. He's not always the top seed, and he comes across the occasional loss, something he's not accustomed to.

"It's a different mindset," Conner said. "A year ago I always knew I was going to win, and I know I should still have that feeling here."

It is that little uncertainty that is holding Conner back, Neumann said.

"He wrestles in different levels," Neumann said. "When he's at his best level, he's as good as (Oklahoma's No. 1) Byron Tucker. Sometimes he doesn't wrestle at that level, and he's not even in the ballpark."

Conner gave NU wrestling fans a taste of what he can do in the three open meets he competed in this season. He placed third at the Billy Sheridan Invitational on Dec. 4 and at the Great Plains Open on Jan. 2. He was even runner-up at the Reno challenge.

Despite this, Conner said he knows he won't be at his best until he shakes the mental part of the game that has slowed him down.

Thinking too much becomes his enemy when he faces a ranked opponent. That translates into poor performances, and it shows in the statistics. Conner is only 2-4 vs. ranked foes this year, including two losses to the top-ranked Tucker by a combined 25-4.

"You see rankings and you're like 'Dang, am I supposed to win this?'"

Conner said. "That's the thing I got to get over. I'm supposed to win every match."

"I still think rankings mean nothing," Conner said. "But in a way when I see them it kind of affects how I attack the other person. I've noticed that I get a little more cautious and don't use my offense as much."

The chasm that separates the levels of Division I and junior college wrestling is to blame for that, Neumann said.

"Ati has come from a different world in wrestling," he said, "where in California the junior college was a little higher than good high school wrestling."

The focus that is needed in Conner's mental preparation wouldn't hurt in the physical aspect of his ability either.

Neumann said Conner is the most athletic person he's had in his 15 years at Nebraska. He may even be too athletic.

"He has such a large repertoire of things that he can do," Neumann said. "Technically and athletically if he could just limit himself and spend all his time working on two or three things, he'd be a little more solid when he wrestles a guy like Byron Tucker."

If Conner uses the same work ethic at NU that he did in JUCO, he said it won't be a problem improving.

"I knew in junior college no one was working harder than I was," Conner said. "I still try to keep my work ethic the same. So I'm just going to keep working harder than everyone else."

Colorado game may get team on track

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Sanderford said. "But it's a different game. We have to work hard on the game plan and do the little things."

"Last year we beat them by 40 points at home and then lost by 17 up there."

In the January game between the schools, Nebraska used staunch defense to prevail, which included seven steals by NU's Nicole Kubik. Already NU's all-time theft leader with 372 steals, Kubik is currently

ranked 20th for career steals in NCAA history.

Mandy Nightingale scored 15 points in the first game to lead Colorado, but she also committed a team-high 11-of-26 turnovers.

Sanderford said rebounding, defenses and turnovers would all be key in the game that was important for NU to win.

"They're all must-win games," he said. "I think calling this game a 'must win' is a little strong. But it's a game we need to win."

Peterson finds her solace in Husker women's hoops

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Team in the Olympics," Peterson said. "I think it was hard for her to go from that to coaching 17-year-olds. Her level of experience was so much different. It wasn't something I liked."

"Our personalities were on opposite ends of the spectrum. She always acted like it was 'my way or the highway.' I don't think she liked me, because I wasn't someone she could just break down and turn into the little robot she turned most of her players into. I'm a pretty strong person."

Peterson decided to transfer, but stayed in Stanford for a year to earn her degrees. Her dream of playing college basketball never died, and she found her savior in Nebraska, of all places.

Sanderford saw in Peterson the perfect fit to his up-tempo style of play.

At times throughout Peterson's short stint at NU, Sanderford has seen why VanDerveer may have not cared for the guard's style and attitude. Her quick instincts sometimes lead to risky ball-handling and inevitable turnovers. The coach has

at times called the player a "pain in the butt."

Which brings up the question: how could Peterson, who couldn't put up with VanDerveer's demands — stand Sanderford, who is famous for his demanding and sometimes grueling style of in-your-face coaching and shouting?

Simple. Sanderford, although a native Kentuckian, possesses the same down-home and "nice people" qualities that has made Peterson fall in love with Nebraska.

No, dreams aren't always what they are cracked up to be. but in Peterson's case harsh reality led to more fulfilling results.

"It's been awesome," Peterson said.

"It's been five times better than I thought it would be. I'm not just playing basketball. At Stanford, it felt like that's all they focused on."

"I feel like Paul cares about each of us as a person first, and for the first time, I feel like I'm learning about basketball. I've never had to do that because I got through with my athleticism in high school ... then at Stanford you were just expected to know everything. Paul has taken me through my ABCs."

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