

NU's Florence top casualty in rough year



Samuel McKewon

Larry Florence half-hugged his way through Senior Day introductions Saturday before Nebraska's 69-64 win over Colorado.

Florence has never been particularly showy, even in times of joy. Once, he made a half-court shot to beat the halftime buzzer against Oklahoma and responded by simply running off the court.

So Saturday, it was impossible to tell how much a proper exit meant to Florence. A proper exit is what he got, scoring 23 points and playing some of his best basketball of the season in the second half, all while breaking a six-game losing streak. It was a momentary pause in an otherwise miserable season.

Very little went right for the Phenix City, Ala., native this year, largely because nothing went according to plan.

Cookie Belcher, whose injury has been unfairly blamed for all problems this season, wasn't there, as he had been in three previous seasons, to play beside Florence.

The rest of team, talented as it might have been, didn't get along. Florence saw the team going south before it ever played a game this year, during preseason workouts.

"Guys were getting in fights, doing crazy stuff," Florence said. "We had all this talent, and they were doing that."

Belcher could only do so much from the bench, which left Florence with the role he never, ever wanted: the leader.

It's not a job he was born to do. What Florence was born with is the world's greatest poker face. And one of the world's softest voices. Leaders are not usually molded out of such qualities.

"Naw," said Florence when asked if he liked a leadership role. "I'm more of the laid-back kind of guy, let my play do the talking."

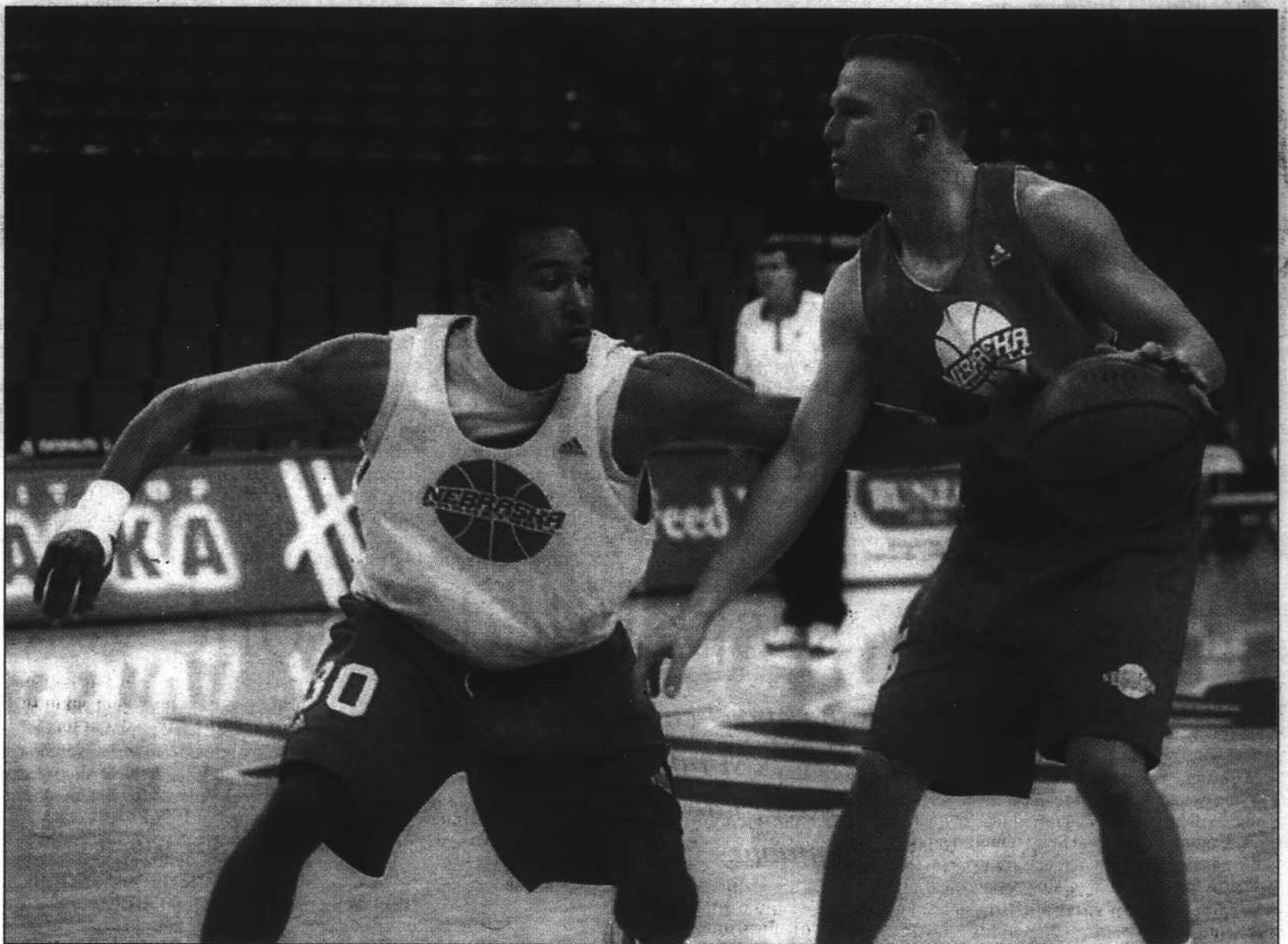
Which would be fine if NU had a strong court leader, or if the team chemistry had been there. The Huskers had neither — no Tyrone Lue or Cookie Belcher to exhort the team, not even a Venson Hamilton, who borrowed the "Come On!" mantra from former assistant Jimmy Williams.

Florence, without a lot of the players he played with here, got isolated from the team. He lives alone. He does his pre-game rituals alone. He has seen very few positives through the season.

One day before the CU game, Florence offered up an eerie response when asked what positives he found in a 11-16 campaign:

"That I'm living," Florence said. "That I'm playing, you know. I'm glad I got another chance to play."

Florence will probably get three more shots in his college career, four tops. This Nebraska team is not making a serious run in the Big 12 Tournament or for teams already assured a spot to strengthen the seeding, and better their chances for the final boogie.



Heather Glenboski/DN

COOKIE BELCHER is sitting out the 2000 season with a wrist injury. Meanwhile, Nebraska suffers through a losing season.

Belcher waits for his 2001 Odyssey

NU senior finds it's lonely -- and quiet -- on injury list

By **Matthew Hansen**

Staff writer

Nebraska's best player is in street clothes, clapping along with the rest of the observers. A season-high Devaney Center crowd is in attendance to watch the Cornhuskers battle the Kansas Jayhawks, and to hope the home team can pull off an upset.

Cookie Belcher will have little part in the outcome. He will not lead the fast break tonight. He won't crouch into the defensive stance that has helped make him a two-time member of the All-Big 12 Defensive Team: body low, palms up, legs tense, ready at any instant to spring on a lazy pass or slow dribble and turn it into a lay-up.

Instead, he slaps Larry Florence on the back. He gives Kimani Ffriend a high-five.

And then Nebraska's best player finds his customary seat near the end

of the bench, and watches.

Five months ago, as the Huskers' season began, Coach Danny Nee didn't expect Belcher to see much bench time in his senior season.

At the press conference to kick off the year, Nee said Belcher's injured wrist wasn't yet 100 percent, but he would be ready to lead the inexperienced NU team through the non-conference and Big 12 schedules.

Nee was sure of his senior guard's return. Belcher wasn't.

"I don't know, man, I don't know," Belcher said at the Big 12's media day, shaking his head at a question about his wrist. "It's just a day-to-day thing."

Belcher, who originally injured his right wrist in high school, re-injured it during the 1998-99 season. The junior from Mexico, Mo., delayed surgery until after the season,

gritting through the pain.

According to Lori Ingram, Belcher's mother, the thinking was that the off-season surgery performed at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., on May 5 wouldn't prevent him from playing his junior season. Then, the wrist would heal before his senior year.

It didn't work out that way.

Ingram said she knew things weren't going according to plan when her son came home for the summer.

"I wasn't worried at first, but when I saw him after he got out of school, I started to doubt that he would be able to play," she said. "He couldn't do anything with it, couldn't shoot. I started to think that maybe he should sit out a year."

Nebraska's best player practices with the scout team. From the moment the players start to scrimmage, though, it is clear he is still

Nebraska's best player. The 6-foot-4-inch, 205-pound guard harasses Husker guards Rodney Fields and Cary Cochran into a handful of turnovers. He drives with force past would-be defenders and finds open teammates inside.

Made up of four players who see the floor only in blowouts and Belcher, the scout team seems to be beating the starting five. Nee screams at the first team. The slightest of grins comes across Belcher's face as he watches the scene. It is gone as quickly as it has come.

Larry Florence, who wasn't supposed to be the lone Husker senior, said days later: "Anybody can see it with Cookie at practice. He's just awesome at times. No one can stop him."

Please see **BELCHER** on 14

Big 12 squads jockey for position in final week

By **Jason Merrihew**

Staff writer

The regular season is winding down. Now is the time for teams to try on their blue suede shoes and dance.

Like many other conference tournaments, the Big 12 tournament offers one last chance for the underachievers to get into the NCAA Tournament or for teams already assured a spot to strengthen the seeding, and better their chances for the final boogie.

"Once you get to the conference tournament, it's a whole new season," Kansas State Coach Tom Asbury said.

Although the brackets for the

tournament, which will be held at Kemper Arena in Kansas City, Mo., on March 9-12, aren't yet made, it seems Iowa State will be the first seed.

The Cyclones, currently ranked 10th in the AP poll, sit alone at the top of the conference with a 12-2 record in league play. ISU propelled itself upward last week with two victories over conference and top-25 foes, Texas and Oklahoma State.

With two remaining games (at Texas Tech and at Baylor), one victory will assure Iowa State the share of the regular season crown and the No. 1 seed in the tournament.

The second through sixth seeds are still up for grabs. Texas, Oklahoma State, Oklahoma, Kansas

and Missouri are battling for position.

Texas and Oklahoma State are tied for second with a 11-3 conference record. UT played at home vs. 23rd-ranked Kansas on Monday and rounds out its season against conference doormat, Kansas State.

Oklahoma State must rebound from its recent tough loss to Iowa State by playing a tough Colorado team in Stillwater. The Cowboys finish the season against 21st-ranked Oklahoma.

Oklahoma, 10-4 in Big 12 play, travels to Texas A&M before it goes to Stillwater, Colo. OU's schedule puts it in better shape than Kansas's schedule does. The Jayhawks travel to Texas, then finish against the very tough Missouri team in Lawrence.

Colorado is the only team to cement its seeding. With the recent loss to Nebraska, CU is unable to catch up with Missouri, and it will have to settle for the seventh seed. The Buffaloes will play the 10th seed in the first round of the conference tournament.

Nebraska, Baylor, Texas A&M, Texas Tech and Kansas State find themselves at the bottom of the barrel.

"I don't think there is any bad team in the conference," Nebraska Coach Danny Nee said. "All of these teams have positive assets."

The Cornhuskers, with a 4-10 record, need a win either at Missouri or at Texas A&M to lock up the eighth seed.

Please see **FLORENCE** on 14