

— BASEBALL —

# NU baseball ready to shed some Okie blood

■ Tensions arose after last year's OSU home defeat in two of three games.

By Dane Stickney

Senior editor

When it comes to Big 12 baseball, there's bad blood between Nebraska and Oklahoma State.

Friday, the Cornhuskers (6-3) will open up their Big 12 play against the Cowboys (7-6) in Stillwater, Okla.

NU Coach Dave Van Horn said there's no problem getting motivated to play OSU.

"We don't get along too well," Van Horn said. "We beat them two out of three at home last year when they were on a roll, and we knocked them out of the Big 12 Tournament, so we know they'll be fired-up to see us."

Said senior outfielder Adam Shabala: "We get after all Big 12 teams, but Oklahoma State gets us more fired up. They're always one of the best teams in the country, and (they) let you know it."

However, OSU may not be as strong this year as it has been in the recent past, Van Horn said. The

Cowboys are coming off a 14-9 loss to Division II foe Missouri Southern. The loss was OSU's first in their home-opener since 1984.



Van Horn

"They're not as offensive as they have been," Van Horn said. "They've lost a lot of quality hitters, but they're still a good team, and we'll have to play well to beat

them."

Even outside the rivalry, this weekend is important for the Huskers, Van Horn said.

"We'd really like to start conference play by winning a couple games," he said. "But there are 30 conference games, so the first weekend doesn't make or break you."

"If we get off to a good start on Friday, we could use that momentum to sweep the series," he said.

The task of getting the Huskers off to a good start falls on freshman pitcher Jamie Rodrigue, who will start on Friday. Rodrigue, 1-1 with a 2.45 ERA, will pitch against OSU's ace, lefty Mark Smith.

Smith, a preseason All American,

is 2-1 with a 3.68 ERA this year.

"He's a tough one to beat," Van Horn said. "But we like the way Rodrigue matches up with him, and hopefully we can knock (Smith) out by the sixth or seventh."

Saturday, Shane Komine, 2-0 with a 2.25 ERA, will take the hill, fresh off a complete-game victory over Texas-San Antonio.

Chad Wiles, 2-0 with a 2.21 ERA, will pitch on Sunday.

The pitching staff has been nothing short of stellar, Shabala said. The team's combined 2.62 ERA is less than half of last year's 5.55 ERA.

"The pitchers have been carrying us," Shabala said. "The offense really needs to come out and play well this weekend, because we're ready to get our half going."

Van Horn said he expects his pitchers to keep throwing well, but he hopes his offense will gain some consistency.

The team has a combined .281 batting average, which Van Horn called mediocre. The Huskers have been aggressive on the base paths, stealing 23 bases in nine games.

"The pitching has been outstanding, and the defense has been pretty good," he said. "But the hitting has been up and down."

— SOFTBALL —

# Husker softball faces top teams

■ The Lead Off Classic in Columbus, Ga. includes 15 top-25 teams.

By Sean Callahan

Staff Writer

The Nebraska softball team has never backed away from playing a tough non-conference schedule.

When the 23<sup>rd</sup>-ranked Cornhuskers open play today in the Lead Off Classic in Columbus, Ga., they will be competing in a field that includes 15 top-25 teams.

The Huskers will open pool play against 15<sup>th</sup>-ranked Louisiana-Lafayette, then finish the day against No. 24 Hofstra.

On Saturday NU faces No. 39 Cal. State-Northridge before being placed into a tournament based on its record in pool play.

The top team from each of the six pools, along with two wild-card teams, will be placed into the gold bracket. The remaining teams in the tournament will be placed into silver and bronze brackets based on their overall records.

"Our pool play is against all top-40 teams," Nebraska Coach Rhonda Revelle said. "We're used to that. Four of our 11 games this season have been

against top-10 opponents. So as far as our schedule, it's just business as usual."

After starting the season out 1-5 in the Fiesta Bowl Tournament in Phoenix, the Huskers have bounced back to win four out of their last five games.

In the UNLV Classic, NU dominated its opponents by outscoring them 26-5.

Senior All-American Jennifer Lizama said Nebraska must continue to play at a high level.

"I thought we ended last tournament on a really good note," Lizama said. "We need to keep on the road we've been on and continue to stay mentally focused."

In the span of victories, the 5-6 Huskers knocked off current No. 10 Oregon State 2-1.

Before the OSU game, Nebraska was 0-4 against teams ranked in the top 25.

Lizama called the win over the top-10 Beavers NU's best victory of the young season.

"The fight was there," Lizama said. "We kept fighting, and that is what we're going to need. Once we get to conference and postseason those are the type of games we are going to have."

# Hardubura is out for the year

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and floor exercise champion said the surgery will involve repairing a tendon in his bicep and cartilage in his shoulder. Doctors told him he will be out three to six months.

Hardubura opened the season by competing in just two events — the pommel horse and still rings — at the Rocky Mountain Open Jan. 21. He then missed the next two meets because of back trouble.

When he tried to mount a comeback in NU's Feb. 19 dual at California-Santa Barbara, Hardubura strained the injuries even more after competing on the pommel horse, vault and high bar. After the meet, Hardubura and his coaches agreed they had tried to thrust him back into the line-up too fast.

The 24-year-old Oakville, Ontario, native went on a much more deliberate training program with Assistant Coach Jim Howard and had hoped to make a late-season

recovery.

Such a recovery would hopefully have helped the injury-plagued Huskers back to the form that brought them the NCAA's third place trophy last season without Nelson, who missed all of 1999 with a torn anterior cruciate ligament. Nelson tore the same ACL at Oklahoma on Feb. 4, ending his career.

Hardubura said his season-ending injury is tough to swallow considering Nelson's injury and a slew of others that NU's top gymnasts have suffered this year.

The injuries have forced Allen to use four out of six gymnasts on three of the events in each of the last two meets. This has forced the Huskers to count scores of inexperienced freshmen and sophomores.

The product of this has been the two worst scores in school history since the NCAA moved to its current format in 1995 in blowout losses to Iowa and Oklahoma last week.

"We weren't exactly in the great-

est position in the first place, with these record lows," Hardubura said. "The ship was sinking. I just wish I could do something, anything to help. I feel like I've let down some of the greatest leaders this gym has seen."

Fortunately, NU does have something to cheer about. Senior Derek Leiter, who started the season with a slight hand injury of his own, is ranked No. 1 in the nation in the all-around and also on the vault.

In his six meets this season, Leiter has won the all-around four times and broken the 57-point barrier five times. With his fellow All-Americans out, the former Lincoln Southeast standout realizes the load he will have to carry for NU.

"(The injuries) may have switched my role in here," Leiter said. "We've lost our national champions. I feel like when I step out there now, I want to have the guys confident in me. There is still some pride here, still stuff we need to do."

# Big 12 tournament creates competition

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in the nation and possibly in recent memory.

The talent level should be around for a while, Neumann said.

"It's exciting to have that wrestling going on in Lincoln," Neumann said. "But it's also exciting because they are all fairly young."

Vering's weight class seems to be the most loaded of the 10, including top-ranked Vering.

Other 197-pounders in action Sunday will be No. 2 Mark Munoz from Oklahoma State, Iowa State's third-ranked Zach Thompson and No. 5 Orville Palmer from Oklahoma.

Vering, who is 34-2, only has lost to Munoz this year, and he said he expects a dogfight.

"Whoever wins that tournament isn't necessarily going to be the winner at nationals," Vering said. "There are so many factors, but this is a good place to get a good seed at nationals."

*"With all those teams ranked so high, it's definitely one of the tougher Big 12 tourneys I've seen."*

Brad Vering  
NU wrestler

Byran Snyder is a definite favorite in the 157-pound division with his 34-1 season and his 18-0 dual record, which is only the third perfect dual record in NU history. Snyder's closest competition this weekend is Oklahoma's No. 6 David Kjeldgaard, who Snyder has beaten twice already.

To qualify for the National Tournament in St. Louis, as team captains Vering and Snyder seem likely to do, a top-three finish is needed to gain an automatic bid. The five Big 12 coaches then collaborate to determine the six remaining wild-card spots.

To qualify eight Husker wrestlers, Neumann said, would be fabulous, but it would require some upsets at certain weight classes, but nothing that's out of NU's reach, Neumann said.

Other wrestlers, besides the consistently dominant Vering and Snyder, will have to be at their peak, Neumann said.

"I think they will be at their best," Neumann said. "I feel the best about the team as I have all year. They've practiced well and have been working hard on their match strategies, and I think they're believing in themselves."



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