

Nee career mixes triumph, tough times

Former Husker says nine players wanted coach gone

WALKOUT from page 16

NCAA Tournament success seemed inevitable. NU then lost to Kansas 88-73 on national television. Then came a loss to Kansas State, 77-68, three days later.

The start of February would bring loss after loss, bad on-court behavior and, ultimately, the practice boycott.

Nelson said many of the players on the team were frustrated with their lack of playing time or unfair treatment.

"For me, it was lack of playing time," Nelson said. "But every player had their own little individual beef with Coach Nee."

Many of the problems started with the team's leaders, guards Jaron Boone and Erick Strickland, who would later be the walkout "ringleaders," Nelson said. Neither of them, he said, got along with Nee very well.

Boone was often labeled as a player with a bad attitude, detrimental to the success of the team.

Not so, Nelson said.

"Bad attitude? Not at all," Nelson said. "Jaron was a complex personality, sure. But guys didn't have a problem with him. He was actually a pretty good leader for this team."

"He might have had a bad attitude toward the coaches, but none of us had any problems with him."

Boone was suspended for the second half of the loss to Kansas State, Nelson said, a game in which Boone and Nee repeatedly clashed.

The guard would sit out the next game against Iowa State, a 75-65 loss. In Boone's first game back, against Missouri, Strickland was ejected after two technical fouls. NU lost that game 99-98.

The rest of the team didn't exactly show much concern. Against Iowa State again on Feb. 10, newspaper stories reported it was evident that players were not paying attention in huddles. Following that 74-59 loss, Daily Nebraskan reporters heard team members shouting and singing in the locker room.

At the time, Nee said things could be fixed with a win.

"The problem is when you start losing," he said. "It's like a family when two brothers or sisters start fighting or disagreeing. That's what you heard in the locker room. That's the problem."

But the problems weren't going to be fixed before the walkout.

The boycott

Nelson calls it "the most traumatic four days of my college basketball career."

Notice four days, not two. Nelson said the walkout began after the loss to Iowa State Feb. 10. NU wouldn't play again for another week, so the nine Huskers hatched a plan to get Nee fired.

"We met every night during our rest period to find out what we were gonna do," he said. "It started right after that loss."

Current NU forward Larry Florence, who was a redshirt at the time, could see that problems would arise.

"I think guys just had something bottled up inside them," Florence said.

On the day before the meeting with Byrne, that bottled emotion burst. Only Lue and Garner showed up for a mandatory shoot-around, because other players had requested the day off.

The next day, the players met with Byrne.

The players met as a group, Nelson

"This stuff was so blown out of proportion. It's unbelievable. It was a problem for 24 hours, and that was it. That's not the real story of that season."

Danny Nee

NU basketball coach on 1995-96 player walkout

said, and offered up to Byrne a host of problems with Nee. Other players in the meeting, who asked not to be identified, backed up Nelson's claim that there were numerous complaints. They included:

- Dishonesty about playing time and/or roles on the team.

- Inequity between players, for various reasons.

- A higher standard for certain players on the team for no apparent reason. For example, Nelson said, some players weren't allowed to have facial hair. Others were.

"I always had to be clean-shaven," Nelson said. "I know that."

In the meeting with Byrne, Nelson said, the plan was to force Nee out. Plan, actually, might be too refined a word for those Huskers, he said, as the group "was so loosely organized" that there were no sticking points to the plan and "no set goals."

Nebraska Assistant Coach Bill Johnson showed up at the meeting to try and talk the team down, Nelson said. The players wouldn't listen. There were hopes that Nee would be gone and replaced with an assistant.

When asked which Husker assistant, Nelson named current Director of Compliance Gary Borgen as what would have been the team's probable choice. The 1995-96 Husker media guide lists Borgen as NU's Assistant Compliance Director.

"Everybody got along with Borgen," Nelson said.

So the Huskers lobbied. But Byrne caught them all by surprise.

The athletic director told the players he would not get rid of Nee. Nelson said. And then Byrne offered them an ultimatum that forced the nine players to back down and go back to practice that day.

"He said, 'We're going to field a team with or without you,'" Nelson said. "He told us we could stick around until the end of academic year and keep our scholarship, but that was it."

"Byrne was pretty aggressive about the whole thing. He said, 'We'll put five football players out there if we have to.' But there was going to be a team on the court, no matter what."

"We backed down after that. It took us by surprise."

The nine players returned to practice in an atmosphere that Nelson described as "surreal."

"Very strange," Nelson said. "It was like I was in the 'Twilight Zone.' But Coach Nee was really positive, really upbeat about the whole thing. That surprised me. I think he was happy to have everyone back."

At the end of the season, Nelson transferred to Washington State, where he finished the rest of his career. He is in his first season of professional basketball, currently in between stints in the International Basketball Association and the United States Basketball League.

Nelson said he harbors no ill feelings toward Nee now. His term at Nebraska "just didn't work out." Nee was not the sole reason, Nelson said.

Yet Nelson also said he has "no

regrets" about the walkout, no matter how difficult it might have been.

Neither does Nee.

The Coach

Nee reclines in the bleachers as practice begins on the court in front of him. It is some four years after the walkout. He is still Nebraska's coach. And, for the life of him, he cannot understand why the incident keeps getting brought up.

"This stuff was so blown out of proportion," he said. "It's unbelievable. It was a problem for 24 hours, and that was it. That's not the real story of that season."

The coach has a point. The Huskers' losing streak reached nine, but, after falling in the first round of the Big Eight Tournament, the team's path veered sharply again.

The forum for the turnaround was the National Invitation Tournament. The Huskers began winning and didn't stop until they were cutting down the nets in Madison Square Garden.

At 21-14 overall, they were NIT champions. And while Nee said the team's regular season was disappointing, he said the post-season was amazing.

It wasn't until the end of the season, Nee said, that Nebraska turned into the team it could have been all along.

"The walkout was not a low point for us because of what happened after it," Nee said. "It was a story of triumph, a story of triumph over adversity. It really was."

While Nee thought the championship would bury the problems from earlier in the season, they did not go away.

He blames the media.

"I don't get it. I really don't," he said. "I mean, when you keep repeating the same thing over and over, does that make it important?"

Nee mentioned a local writer as being particularly hard on the Huskers during their NIT run.

"These guys hammered and hammered away on us. When we won the NIT, we got called No. 65, and (the writer) got hammered for that by his readers. I just really don't understand it, this need to stir up controversy."

Moving Forward

Time moves on. And Nee, who said he has recently talked to players who participated in the walkout, including Strickland, Boone and 1995-96 guard Tom Wald, said time heals old wounds.

"I have a better understanding now, and they have a better understanding now. It was a momentary lapse of judgment, and it's over."

But Florence, the lone current player who was around during the walkout, said that doesn't make the matter trivial.

"It was a very serious situation," he said. "Anytime you have players walking out on a coach and going to the athletic director, it's important. And I think Coach Nee changed because of it. He's much more approachable now, a much better communicator."

"But it was a big deal. That's for sure."

Nelson agreed.

"I can see why people remember it," Nelson said. "I've been shut off to it for so long now, but I still know what happened for those couple days. I don't think I'll forget it."

Big 12 foes jump to Nee's defense

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"I don't know all the facts, but I've coached against him twice, and I do know that he's a good basketball coach," Barnes said. "You have to go back and look at what he's done there and what was done before he got there."

Nee has 360 wins in all, 106 of which came during his six seasons at Ohio University. He has had seven 20-win seasons at NU and four at Ohio. His peak for wins came in 1991, when the Huskers won 26 games. The lowest win total a Nee-coached team has produced is seven, during his first year at Ohio.

He has had only two losing seasons at NU thus far, the 1988 and 1990 campaigns, but barring a miracle — a successful sweep of the Big 12 Tournament and a trip to the Final Four — the 2000 season will be his third.

But one fact stands out among all others — zero wins in five NCAA Tournament opportunities at Nebraska.

Will he be judged by that one standard?

"I would think so," fifth-year senior Larry Florence said. "Just as anyone would. But I don't think he will let that dictate his success as a coach here. That is something that will always be held against him, that he never took his team past the first round of the tournament."

"That is unfortunate but that is just how society is. People want people who will win championships."

Nee has one conference championship under his belt, and it just happens to be the only one ever at NU — the 1994 Big 8 Conference Tournament. It led to an NCAA loss to Pennsylvania.

Nee is 1-7 in his career in the Big Dance, the one win coming in 1983 at Ohio, as the Bobcats defeated Illinois State 51-49. Between 1991 and 1994, he led the Huskers to four straight appearances but bowed out in the first round all four times. Nee's last NCAA bid came in 1998 and NU again lost in the first round to Arkansas, 74-65.

Nee's teams have five of NU's six all-time NCAA appearances and 11 of its 19 postseason bids.

While Nee has struggled to find success in the NCAAs, the National Invitation Tournament has been rather kind to him.

"You have to go back and look at what he's done there and what was done before he got there."

Rick Barnes

Texas basketball coach

He has compiled an impressive 14-6 record in the NIT. His team won the 1996 NIT after finishing seventh in the Big 8 Conference with a 4-10 conference mark. Nee's first team at NU went 4-1 in the NIT and nearly won it, losing to Arkansas-Little Rock in overtime. The NIT has vaulted NU over the 20-win hump three times in Nee's career.

"He gets a lot of bad publicity," Florence said. "That doesn't say much about him as a coach or a person. He should get more credit than he does."

"Any time you get a coach that wins 20 games for as many seasons as he has, he has to be doing something right."

While Nee has the wins, the postseason appearances and the tenure to stand by, he also has an impressive stack of NBA talent.

In his time as an assistant at Notre Dame and at the helm at NU and Ohio, Nee has produced 19 players who have played in the NBA. Names, including Lue, Piatkowski, Hamilton and Farmer pop up on the list, and in the end, NU has produced the second-most NBA players in the Big 12, with first place going to Kansas.

Florence said Nee gradually has gotten better at relating to his players.

"He's done a good job of getting talented players in here and has given players a little breathing room to play their game," Florence said. "He has changed over the time I have been here."

"When I first got here he was a hard person to talk to outside of basketball, but over the last couple of years, he has changed as a coach and is now somebody you can talk to off the court."

Golfers hold own in Texas

From staff reports

Nebraska's women's golf team was in fourth place after the first day of the GTE "Mo" Morial on Monday in Houston, Texas, only six strokes away from overall leader and Big 12 Conference foe Baylor.

The Cornhuskers shot an overall score of 623. BU shot 617, Missouri was 619, and Texas Tech shot a 620.

"Overall, I'm pleased with our play," NU Coach Robin Krapfl said. "We didn't play perfect, but we played two solid rounds of golf. Once the wind picked up in the second round, we struggled and seemed to play tired."

"There are a bunch of teams within a few strokes of winning, so we just have to see what we can do."

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