



Mike Warren/DN

ROB CHILDRRESS, Nebraska pitching coach, has helped change the baseball team's philosophy. Childress' staff set a school record for strikeouts last season and lowered the team ERA by more than one point from two years before.

Coach's style helps turn pitchers around

By **Dane Stickney**
Senior editor

When Nebraska Pitching Coach Rob Childress got his first coaching job in 1991, he was fresh out of college.

He knew he wanted to coach, but the most probable way to become a coach was to be a graduate assistant for a couple years. This meant hitting fungo and putting baseballs in buckets.

But Childress caught a break. Through his pitching coach at Northwood University in Dallas, Texas, Childress was united with Dave Van Horn, then the coach at Texarkana (Texas) Community College.

Van Horn offered Childress the pitching coach job at Texarkana, which kindled a close-knit relationship between the two.

Now the pair has led a Nebraska baseball renaissance.

In 1998, Van Horn was hired to coach the Cornhuskers, leaving an opening at Northwestern State (La.). Childress was offered the opportunity to replace Van Horn, but he chose instead to follow him to Nebraska.

Van Horn said he also owes the 31-year-old Childress a lot for following him to Nebraska.

"If I had to hire another pitching coach when I came up here, it would have been tough," Van Horn said. "But I knew Rob, and I trusted him, and that made things a lot easier."

Childress said there wasn't much of a choice between following Van Horn or staying in Louisiana.

"(Van Horn) is very important to me," he said. "He's given lots of great opportunities and responsibilities. And having the choice to follow him to a place like Nebraska, where we compete against the best teams in the country, is great."

"I think I made the right choice." That choice has not gone unnoticed. In 1997, the Huskers, coached by

John Sanders, went 27-35 with a 6.68 ERA.

In 1998, Childress' first year, Nebraska went 24-20 with a 5.70 ERA. Last year, the Huskers were 42-18 with a 5.55 ERA. The team also set a school record of 438 strikeouts.

This year, the pitching staff has carried the Huskers (7-5) with an ERA around 3.20.

The main difference in Childress' pitching staff is a change in philosophy, he said.

"Before we got here, the Nebraska coaches focused on offense," he said. "Now we stress throwing strikes and playing good defense."

"Pitching is an aggressive thing. You've got to compete with the hitter. Throwing strikes is key, but having a sharp, competitive mentality is the biggest thing," Childress said.

Van Horn said Childress understood the mechanical and mental aspects of pitching.

"Somehow he always gets pitchers to reach their potential," he said. "He teaches them and motivates them, so when they get in a game, they almost always get the job done."

Childress carries a sharp coaching mentality himself, Van Horn said.

"He brings a lot of enthusiasm," Van Horn said. "He loves what he's doing, and he's passionate about it, and the players pick up on that."

R.D. Spiehs, a sophomore relief pitcher, said he's fit into Childress' mindset.

"He demands 100 percent out of us, but we know he'll give 100 percent back," Spiehs said. "We'd go to war for him, and he'd do the same for us."

Spiehs initially came to Nebraska as a catcher. Childress quickly transformed him into a pitcher by developing a nasty slider.

"I'd never had a pitching coach before," Spiehs said. "He's helped me so much. I owe him a lot."

Kubik's 32 helps NU rally to tourney victory over KU

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shot in her game. In the final 5:13, Kubik scored eight points to fuel a 16-6 run that put NU within four at the half.

She then spearheaded an early second-half charge that gave the Huskers a 45-43 lead with 17:14 left to play.

That's when Kubik's teammates got into the action.

Guard Melody Peterson had a key three-point play to give NU a 65-59 lead with 8:12 remaining. Senior Cisco Gilmore came off the bench to score 10 points and draw critical fouls that helped NU pull away.

"I knew it would be a tough game," said KU Coach Marian Washington. "There are some teams you match up with well and some teams that are a real

challenge. Nebraska is a real challenge for us. They had too much size and speed."

Sanderford excitedly told his players right after the game that "we're going dancing," and afterwards said that if the Huskers didn't receive an at-large bid to the NCAA Tournament, nobody should.

But the coach and players also said they won't feel comfortable until they win Saturday night's championship game.

"I want to beat Iowa State so badly I can taste it," Gilmore said. "Nobody in the world gave us a chance in this game. Games like these are the ones you play for. It's why you get up at 6:00 every morning to work out. This is what it's all about."

Freshmen score big for Nebraska

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got the body lines," Kendig said. "She looks good doing what she is doing."

Houk, the Hamilton, Ohio, native has made her mark on the team with her electrifying uneven bars routine. During the Masters Classic, one judge gave Houk a 10, the best score possible. Houk ended up winning the individual bars event in the classic with an impressive 9.95, which is also a

school-record-tying score.

Wertz, the Lebanon, Ohio, native, has been a consistent and adaptable member of this year's squad. Wertz is capable of filling in any event without missing a beat.

"Jess is very versatile for us," Kendig said.

French, a Greensboro, N.C., native, has been consistent for Nebraska. French has competed in every meet except for the Master's

Classic, in every event but the uneven bars.

"I just love competing in college," French said.

The four gymnasts have learned quickly that college is more team-oriented than club gymnastics.

"There is a different coaching philosophy," French said. "The coaches and all the gymnasts work as a group. Everyone supports each other."

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