

— SOFTBALL —

Huskers will start conference play against Tigers on Saturday

By Sean Callahan

Staff writer

When the Nebraska softball team begins Big 12 play this weekend against Missouri, the Huskers will be on a five-game winning streak.

The Cornhuskers extended their winning streak to five games earlier this week with a two-game sweep over in-state rival Creighton.

The Huskers (18-15) will open conference play with a pair of games against the Tigers (24-10) scheduled to start at 1 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at the Nebraska Softball Complex.

Saturday's game against UM will give No. 26 Nebraska some national

exposure with Fox Sports Net scheduled to cover the game live.

Junior pitcher Penny Cope said it is very important for NU to get off to a good start in the conference.

"Just because our record isn't like we want it to be, people aren't going to take us very seriously," Cope said. "If we can come out and start strong with a couple of wins, I think we'll get the respect we deserve."

The kind of respect Cope wants for Nebraska is evident in the schedule the Huskers have played this season.

In the 33 games NU has played, 10 have been against top-10 opponents. The Huskers have been able to pull out wins in only two of those games

—Oregon State and California.

Sophomore Heather Martin said even though NU has not had success against the nation's elite, the close losses will help them down the road.

"The season is a long road," Martin said. "We play a lot of tough teams to prepare us better. It is going to be a big advantage for us at the end of the season playing the kind of competition we face."

When Missouri comes into Lincoln it will be on an eight-game winning streak. The Tigers have won 15 of their last 17 games. One important note is that Missouri has played only two ranked teams all season, compared to the 11 NU has faced.

— VOLLEYBALL —

Puerto Rican vacation yields win for Huskers

By Mike Callahan Jr.

Staff writer

Fun, sun, the beach, spring break ... volleyball practice.

But what better way for a new coach to kick off his tenure at NU than to take his team to Puerto Rico to begin spring practice. That's how Nebraska Volleyball Coach John Cook began at NU last week.

It wasn't all just fun in the sun, of course. From 8 to 11 a.m., the team practiced Monday through Friday. But after 11 a.m., the women were free to relish spring break.

Coach Cook was happy with how everything went.

"It's great training on spring break, and the kids' spirits were high spending it in Puerto Rico," Cook said. "It was good for the people of Puerto Rico to see what we can do in Nebraska."

One particular player wanted very much to show the strength of NU volleyball.

Greichaly Cepero, a sophomore-to-be setter, is from Dorado, Puerto Rico. About 30 of her family members were around throughout the week.

It was an especially big deal for her because she took a lot of heat leaving

her home country, where she could have played for the national volleyball team, Cook said.

Cook said the reason for the trip was part of Cepero's recruitment.

"She was promised to go back on spring break with the team," Cook said. "It was a very cultural experience, and all of us were very impressed by her family's hospitality."

NU did play a little competitive volleyball on the trip.

The team battled a national team called, "Cagus." NU annihilated them, taking three of four games in a best-of-five rally series at American University.

Senior setter Jill McWilliams also had a great time and is excited about the potential of this team and the competition with Cepero for the setter position.

"We've been practicing the 5-1 set so far, and I think that really will be a good thing," said McWilliams. "Right now, it's between Greichaly and I for the setter position, so there's a lot to be decided before fall."

NU easily defeated what's considered to be the strongest team in Puerto Rico, despite probably spending five or more hours a day on the beach with not much practice under their belts.

Coach Cook may be creating a monster.

Leiter prepares to shine in Iowa

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expect him to do well.

"It's all about presentation," Leiter said. "It's showing the judge you know exactly what you're going to do. A great gymnast does any skill he wants to. It makes him look better than everyone else. Marshall was a great

gymnast like that. So was Jay. That's what I want to be like."

Leiter knows Hardabura's hot streak last year helped him finish his title run. He also knows Hardabura is known as last year's NCAA champion, not the guy who put together the hot streak.

It will be how Leiter performs in

the end, not his dynamite senior campaign, that will be remembered most once his career is history.

That's why his mind has been in Iowa City for so long.

"I don't feel like I've reached my peak yet," Leiter said. "I think that will come after the NCAAs. It's the only meet that counts."

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Baseball team tries for ranking

BASEBALL from page 20

Van Horn said despite Nebraska's need to start sweeping Big 12 teams, the team is on a good pace.

Last year, the team was 17-6 at this point and 5-4 after their first nine Big 12 games but finished the season by winning the Big 12 tournament.

"This year's team has a higher ceiling," he said. "Not everyone who can be a great hitter is hitting well. If we continue to get it together, this team can achieve great things."

Andy Bent, a junior relief pitcher, said the Husker players are feeling the pressure to start dominating Big 12 teams.

"We all know what it takes to get to the top of the conference," he said. "And we feel like it has to start with a sweep over Tech this weekend."

Bent said the team is confident it can make a move to sit atop the Big 12 standings at season's end, but he said the move must start soon.

"We can't win some and lose some," he said. "We need to start winning them all, and we need to do it before we dig ourselves too deep of a hole."

The players believe they are capable of winning the conference, Bent said.

"Both sides of the ball are playing well," he said. "Our hitters are on a hot streak, and it's a lot easier to be a pitcher when your hitters are hot."

After this weekend's series, the Huskers will have played 16 games in 22 days, but Bent said that has only helped the team.

"It's a lot better playing a bunch of games in a row," he said. "It's tough to get up for practices, but playing in so many games keeps hot streaks alive."

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