

McKewon: Observations of an NU sports culture gone glitzy

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It isn't going to shape up quite as simply as NU thinks it will next season. Losses are out there. The offensive line is massive, yes, but Nebraska is an Eric Crouch injury away from running the wrong offense for Newcombe to prosper in.

But Crouch probably won't get hurt. The odds, no matter what Nebraska coaches say, are on his side. Crouch played through every little hurt last year, as did Scott Frost in 1996 and 1997. Tommie Frazier missed one half in 1995. He missed three halves — though never a full game — in 1993. NU seems scared off by 1994 and 1998, horror years with freak injuries to both Frazier and Newcombe. But a better offensive line means more running back carries. Crouch won't always have to nose dive into the line on those trap options. And that's a good thing.

One more for Crouch: Scramble.
There are often fields of green open for Crouch to scamper away into, but he seems adamant to throw on the few chances he can. All fine and good, but one 15-yard scramble sets up the next three pass plays. If the line stays healthy, Crouch shouldn't get sacked more than five times all season. He can assure by tucking it down once a game.

If Thunder Collins is half what he's supposed to be, give his dice a couple rolls.
Crotchety old sportswriters cringe at the promotion of an unknown quantity. But haven't Correll Buckhalter and Dan Alexander had their chances? If Coach Frank Solich is serious about figuring the I-back situation out for the future, it's time to start.

Men's basketball: Danny Nee's legacy will live on for a few more years.
Boy, did Nee's reign get slim near the end. Just look at Kenny Booker.

Anyway, Barry Collier cannot get a perfect fix next year without a miracle. This team needs repairing. Get to the Big Dance and call it good.

Time for Cookie Belcher to talk.
The Steve Carlton routine is getting old. Belcher's a captain, and wouldn't give a word when Collier was hired. Time to talk. On anything. Or back it up with a triple-double average next year.

The atmosphere stinks.
The Devaney Center is the dead zone. The team entrance looks like it was invented by a fourth grader. In fact, there is no entrance.

And whoever decides such things: Shut off HuskerVision and let the band play. I beg of you. Shove those Husker highlights in the closet.

Figure out a way for the students to stand without tarping over the seats. Those B section folks are old toads, anyway.

Soccer: Get the team closer to campus.
After all the useless renovations, the Nebraska soccer team remains the bastard child of facilities, as the Abbott Sports Complex lies between a dog chow plant and two giant windmills. I know it's a fantastic facility for all involved. But the team is underexposed to the student population.

It'd draw 5,000-10,000, legitimately, if there were a field on campus. Abbott is nice, but it's too far away. There has to be a little money left in the war chest, doesn't there? Maybe five years down the road? You can't tell me soccer players enjoy driving out there every day for practice.

Women's basketball: Year one of the Paul Sanderford era really begins next year.

It's his team next year in full. Not to say that the holdovers from the Angela Beck era — Nicole Kubik, Brooke Schwartz and Charlie Rogers — were poor by any standards. But NU becomes a much more physical team in 2001. And Stephanie Jones, provided she's healthy, will be all-conference.

The Cyclones aren't going anywhere. The Huskers will have enough guards in 2001-2002, but Robinette is the franchise-type player you don't want to pass up.

The atmosphere doesn't stink, but junk the smoke and lights for the introduction.
That fad is ending. Jokey introductions are becoming lame. Retro is back in. Just get to the damn game.

Yellow-coated old-man ushers: Chill out.
Look, there's 4,000 people in the stands who'd rather have the best seats in the house and make some noise than sit in Finland. You're 70 years old. Either retire to the golf course or lay off 'em when they move down from the rafters. Have a Coke and smile, old man. You're getting paid to do nothing.

Track: Construct a Merlene Ottey shrine.

Whoever decides such things: Shut off HuskerVision and let the band play. I beg of you. Shove those Husker highlights in the closet.

Do it. A big one. It's that simple. Or name the indoor or outdoor track after her. Like Ed Weir really needs it.

Yellow-coated old men at track meets: Chill out even more than the regular yellow-coated old men.

Do not tell me that media members cannot sit in an entirely empty reserved section. And do not tell me that NU Coach Gary Pepin can't sit wherever the hell he wants on his own damn track. Again, a Coke and a smile.

Wrestling: Hire Mark Cody or Jason Kelber and get on with it.

The NU wrestlers have spoken. Need they be punished any further? And if Tim Neumann wants to stop by and watch a practice or two, the Athletic Department better let him. If 7-year-old batboys can dink around in the dugout, Neumann ought to have a spot on the bench whenever he wants. NU got rid of him; it doesn't mean he isn't still family.

Softball: Keep up the loud, unnerving chants.

Yeah, they're annoying. If I were an opposing coach, I'd hate them. So they're perfect.

Actually why are they playing softball? Nebraska ought to become a pioneer and start women's collegiate baseball.

Baseball, played by men or women, is a strategically superior game to softball. I'm not sure a game can be entirely pure when it doesn't allow a runner to lead off.

Plus, if women quit the game of fast-pitch softball, it would force the end of men's fast-pitch softball, where every pitcher can be Nolan Ryan over and over again.

School is Cool Jam: Cease and desist.

NU is getting more out of saying they have one than the kids are getting out of seeing it. All you really need is that leadership awards ceremony that unquestionably had every boy and girl in rapture. Right after the rape victims, right before Rory, the life-sized dancing skunk balloon. You know, adversity. It smells.

Old men who play parking cops at Devaney: Chill out the most.

I can see eight empty metered spots. Do not tell me someone is going to park there in the next five minutes when they've been empty all day. What are they going to do, fire you?

Volleyball: Stay perfect.

This sport has it down, win or lose. The atmosphere, the players, all of it. College sports the way it ought to be.

HuskerVision: If you're going to be creative with those player videos, watch some real movie directors.

Here's what I'm thinking: Ingrid Bergman's "Persona." The beach scene with one continuous tracking shot. Plug Crouch and Newcombe in for Alma and Elisabeth, and you've got a real player video. I leave it to you. Remember, it's in Swedish. One of the swimmers can help you with translations.

As always, I believe you are the antithesis of all that is right with sports. But if you did it with artistic flair and visceral dramatics, well, at least it'd be a cool antithesis.

Frank Solich: The password is ... definitely.

Means pretty much the same thing as certainly. In coachspeak, anyway. Give it a 30-day trial. Make it your offspeed pitch.

Rich frat guys: Have I got an early betting tip for you!

Iowa, straight up, against Nebraska. Lay your dime down, swig that Busch Light and watch the money roll home.

Bill Byrne: Come a time when your bill runs due.

That line comes from my West Virginia mystic side.

It's a big pile of sand you're playing in right now, Bill.

Have fun with it.

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Gaskins: Scandals, surprises intrigue fans, sports pundits

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and I'm sure the people at HuskerVision will remind us that during every time out at every football game or Devaney Center event next season with highlights and music.

But seriously, it was an intriguing year. A year that every media slob like myself — who leeches off sports figures and events (and delicious pre-game media buffet food) for you leeching sports fans' information and amusement — go koo-koo for Cocoa Puffs for.

It was a year that made fans cheer — for Big 12 championships in football, volleyball, soccer and track and field. It was a year that made fans mourn — for Charlie McBride and Terry Pettit's retirements, for the heartbreaking soccer team's loss, for the scandal of Wrestling Coach Tim Neumann, one of the most popular coaches in the program.

There was plenty of early-season juicy football team gossip beyond what the players' pants should look like or how many touchdowns the Huskers would beat their Third-World non-conference opponents by.

There were players quitting, players threatening to quit, players driving back to Omaha to be rumored of threatening to quit, players talking smack about their teammates quitting. Oh, and then a decent 12-1 season followed.

There was a men's basketball season that can be summed up in one word — brick — and a coach who will be remembered not as much for his record-breaking win, but the infamous "Sons of Bitches" booster banquet speech. You can't get that kind of gravy at Kansas.

There was a women's basketball team that seemed to relish lodging a gun down its throat before removing it at the last second and living to see another day and a third-straight NCAA Tournament appearance.

Finally, there was the best women's gymnastics team and athlete (Heather Brink) in the history of the program and a baseball team that put together a conference-record 15-game winning streak, only to have it snapped by a team that my great-grandfather's nursing-home squad could beat.

So what will I remember most from the 1999-2000 year in Nebraska athletics?

It might be the looks of sheer confidence on the faces of the football players after their Fiesta Bowl victory over Tennessee, confidence that said, "look out next year."

It might be the poetic rhetoric — loaded with metaphor, analogy and anecdote that made great quotes for both sports pages and literary society newsletters — and condescending stare-downs from Renaissance Man Terry Pettit, who orchestrated his 23rd and final volleyball symphony and in the process gave a young and naive sports reporter the ultimate challenge: how to ask questions to which the answers won't make you feel very stupid.

(In all seriousness, I learned a lot and gained a lot of respect for both Pettit and the volleyball program. It is everything an athletic program should be — the athletes are intelligent, courteous, dignified and come out of it successful people. And the games involve nothing but the action, the fans and the band — no frills, no distractions, just pure atmosphere.)

It might be the silence in the Devaney Center for men's basketball games. The fans were acting more like they were watching a funeral, or a pig slaughtering, than they were cheering at a basketball game, and for good reason. Cheer for the team, and the team might be inspired to win. Team wins, coach might stay. Nobody wanted that, so the place stayed silent, and the team kept losing.

But, no, my most memorable moment would be a toss-up. Let's see, was it the exhilaration I felt when I first laid eyes on the Mexican-style buffet before the Nebraska-Texas game at Austin, or was it the Thanksgiving-style smorgasbord at the Fiesta Bowl? Oh, that stuffing was to die for!

Now, for the quiz. Before I start, I'm happy to report that this quiz will not include any:

- Danny Nee hair jokes
- Frank Solich midget jokes
- Paul Sanderford temper jokes
- Gary Pepin fashion jokes*
- Craig Bohl bald jokes
- Joe Walker jewelry jokes*
- George Darlington Elmer Fudd jokes

On with the quiz...

1. To correct his running backs' fumbling problems from last season (NU led the nation with 49 fumbles, 25 of them lost.), Football Coach Frank Solich has decided to:

- a. Have team psychologist Jack Stark hypnotize them into eliminating the thought of a

- fumble from their minds
- b. Crazy Glue their hands
- c. Enlist the help of Tim Neumann and former members of the wrestling team, who, until April, seemed to have the art of smooth hand-offs down pat

2. What fired Basketball Coach Danny meant to say at a mid-season Omaha boosters meeting was:

- a. "All you sons of bitches who want me outta here, I get news for you — I'm not quitting. I'm getting fired!"
- b. "All you sons-of-bitches who think I'm outta here, whoops, wait a second, is this thing on? It is? Oh, shit!"
- c. "Which one of you sons-of-bitches wants to go? Right now! I mean it. I scared almost a whole team away once!"

3. New Men's Basketball Coach Barry Collier will model Women's Coach Paul Sanderford's success most by:

- a. Recruiting in-state talent
- b. Ticket giveaways
- c. Developing an actual offensive scheme

4. Bill Byrne's next major facility upgrade will be:

- a. Placing HuskerVision screens in the Nebraska Coliseum, effectively destroying the atmosphere of college volleyball
- b. Placing HuskerVision screens on Firehorn Country Club, effectively destroying the atmosphere of college golf
- c. Placing HuskerVision screens in his office and cameras in the wrestling facilities, effectively destroying the atmosphere of NU wrestling

5. In a home-opening ceremony at the Coliseum next fall, the Nebraska volleyball team will honor retired coaching legend Terry Pettit by:

- a. Retiring his clipboard
- b. Retiring one of his sweaters
- c. Retiring the word "sense," which, by virtue of his record-breaking usage of it in press conferences, should legally be his

6. The Nebraska women's soccer team will fall short of the Final Four next year by virtue of:

- a. Another heartbreaking loss to Notre Dame
- b. Another penalty kick shoot-out loss
- c. Technical knockout in an overtime bench-clearing brawl

7. Riddled with so many injuries, the Nebraska men's gymnastics team had to resort to:

- a. Using scores of inexperienced underclassmen
- b. Asking Coach Francis Allen to suit up
- c. Offering wrestlers "a little something extra" to suit up

8. DeAngelo Evans exited the football team with all the class and dignity of a:

- a. Thug
- b. Disgruntled postal worker
- c. Prima donna athlete

9. What will the baseball team members and fans miss most about Buck Beltzer Field?

- a. That whole AstroTurf infield, grass outfield thing
- b. The gorgeous view of the energy plant and trains behind the outfield.
- c. The outfield, which was also used as a football team practice field, which made it as safe to run around in as a land mine

10. My favorite overused sports cliché this year was:

- a. "I'm just trying to do what's best for the team."
- b. "We're taking it one game at a time."
- c. "We're not overlooking (place your Third-World, easy-win, padding-the-schedule, cream-puff team here). They're a good team, and it's going to take a solid performance to beat them."

11. What we learned most about the Athletic Department in 1999-2000 was:

- a. Winning is everything
- b. Money is everything
- c. It's not how you win the game, it's how the Athletic Department spends the money it makes off your wins

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