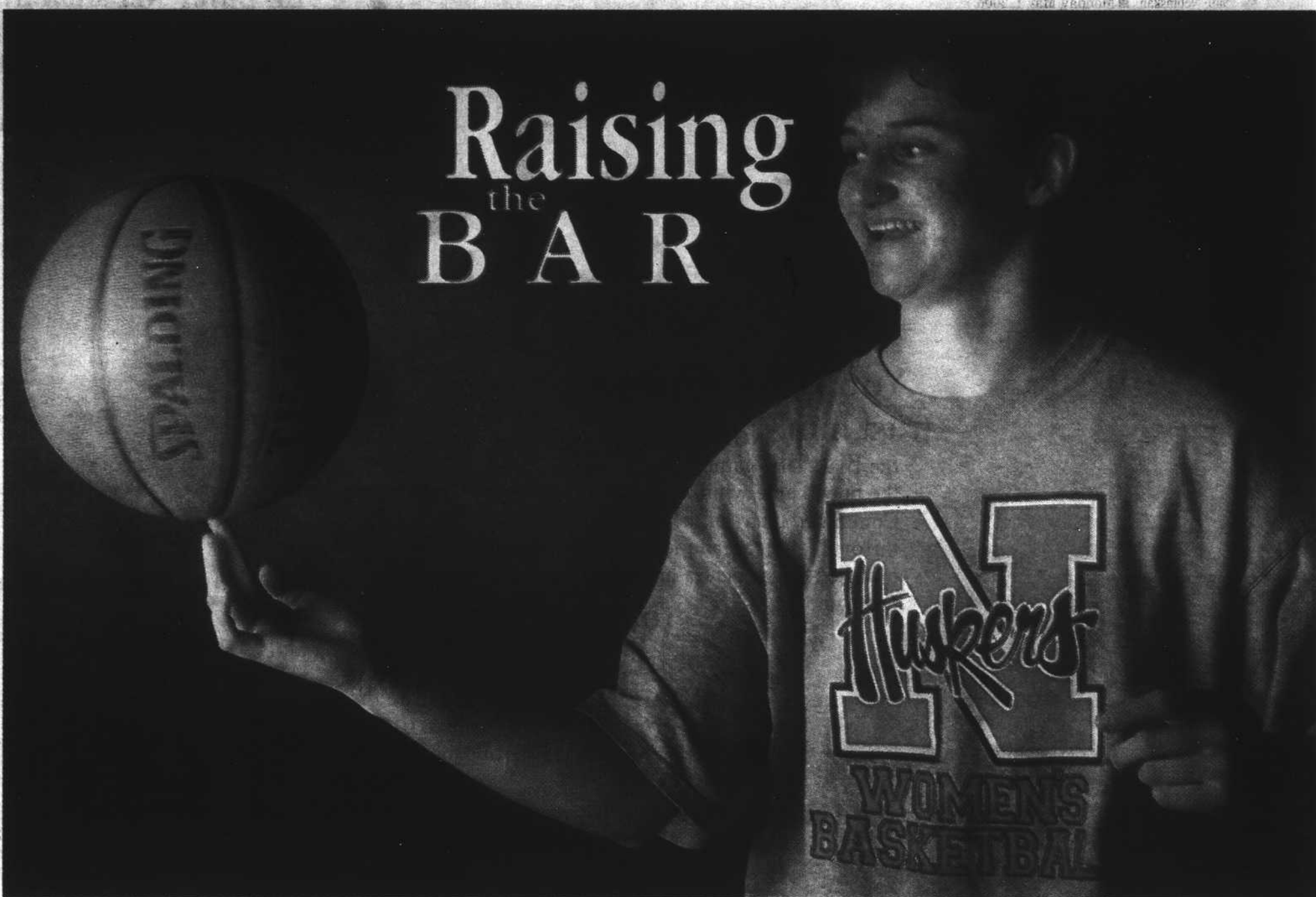


Raising the BAR



▲ Nicole Kubik

photo by Josh Wolfe

Senior potential comes through in surprise victories

By John Gaskins

Staff writer

No matter how loud he yelled, no matter how much he stomped his feet, no matter how intense that vein in his forehead got, Nebraska Women's Basketball Coach Paul Sanderford couldn't get his 1999-2000 team to live up to its preseason potential.

And boy, was there potential.

The third-year coach left it to his seniors to strike up the tune. Nicole Kubik and Brooke Schwartz, the team's heart and leading two scorers, weren't afraid to use the words Sweet 16 and Final Four when asked about how far the team could go.

And why not? Sanderford had left Western Kentucky — where in 15 seasons he took two teams to the Final Four — to raise expectations at Nebraska.

"We asked a lot more out of them than they were used to," Sanderford said.

After two straight NCAA Tournament appearances, the Huskers — picked to finish third in the strong Big 12 — raised the bar. Grabbing it became a much loftier task than they expected.

First came a 6-5 non-conference season that included a 24-point loss at home to BYU and a season-ending injury to much-touted freshman Stephanie Jones. Then came a grueling conference season that left them at 12-11 and on the NCAA bubble with four games left.

For the next six games, potential kicked in. NU won all those games, including the regular season finale at Missouri, in which it trailed by 10 points with 14 minutes left.

After that, two Big 12 tournament wins boosted NU into the NAAs, silencing doubters who said its season was as good as dead weeks before.

"This team seems to play best with our backs against the wall," said Kubik, who finished her career as NU's fifth-leading scorer and all-time steals leader.

The fact that their backs were against a wall in the first place will puzzle program observers forever. The season ended anticlimactically with blowout losses to top-20 teams Iowa State (in the semifinals of the conference tournament) and Boston College (in the first round of the NAAs).

But although they didn't quite reach it, the seniors will be proud of raising the bar.

"We laid the foundation for a great program," Kubik said.



photo by Mike Warren
▼ Barry Collier

time WILL t e 1 1

Collier takes reins following rough year

By Matthew Hansen

Staff writer

Danny Nee stands in front of the Nebraska bench, arms folded, frustration evident. Nearby, star guard Cookie Belcher sits quietly in street clothes, unable to play because of an injured wrist.

It was a scene often repeated as this year's Husker basketball team stumbled to an 11-19 record. Nebraska finished No. 159 in the Saragin computer ratings, five spots above Wichita State.

Nee will not have a chance to repeat or improve the scene in coming years, as he was fired shortly after the

Huskers' first-round exit in the Big 12 Tournament.

Things may have been different for the team, and for its former coach, if Belcher had been on the floor instead of on the bench. No one will ever know.

What did happen was NU's worst season in a decade. There were too many turnovers, not enough jumpers, spotty defense.

There was the embarrassing loss to Western Carolina in the Ameritas Classic followed by missed opportunities against NCAA Tournament teams Iowa State, Missouri and Oklahoma at home.

And finally, there was the white

flag of surrender, with "Huskers" written in script across it. It went up midway through the Big 12 conference season.

After beating Kansas State on January 29, the team would lose nine of its last 10 games.

Now, new Coach Barry Collier, full of smiles, brimming with confidence, gets his shot with a mended Belcher, four returning starters, red-shirt freshman Brian Conklin and New Mexico transfer John Robinson.

The contrasts between the Huskers' new and old coaches hardly could be more pronounced.

Only time will tell whether their results will be.