

Optimistic Coach Cook delivers the goods

Dear John:
I admit it. I thought you were blowing smoke when you said this Nebraska volleyball team was better than last year's squad.



I assumed it wasn't your fault for such false optimism. You just took one too many Kim Behrends spikes to the head.

I wanted somebody to whisper the news to you. ... "Pssst. Hey Coach Cook, Nancy Meendering is redshirting. Sweet 16 and see ya' lata'."

"Pssst ... Coach, you have a completely new staff. It's a rebuilding year."

I figured you got the memo. Obviously, you didn't.

It seems that somewhere between here and a trip to China, you got this crazy idea that this team can compete with anyone in the country.

Correction. You don't just think they can compete.

You seem pretty confident that this team can beat anybody when the machine has enough Penzoi in it.

So I checked into your story. And after setting up a few of your career numbers and bumping a few variables around, I found out that you were a winner.

You won the state championship of the high school team you coached in California, twice.

You've been an assistant coach on the men's Olympic team, aiding the Yanks to a bronze medal.

You took down a few crib notes as an assistant to Coach Terry Pettit, the man who built Nebraska volleyball to what it is today. Not a bad tutor.

Heck, you grabbed a cheesehead and took the University of Wisconsin volleyball program from obscurity to the regional finals twice out of the seven years you coached there.

But when you told us that this new-look team is miles ahead of last year's Sweet 16 team, some Nebraska fans were left scratching their heads.

They need not scratch anymore. Coach, you have a real good team, a Top 5 team.

But then again, you told people that a long time ago.

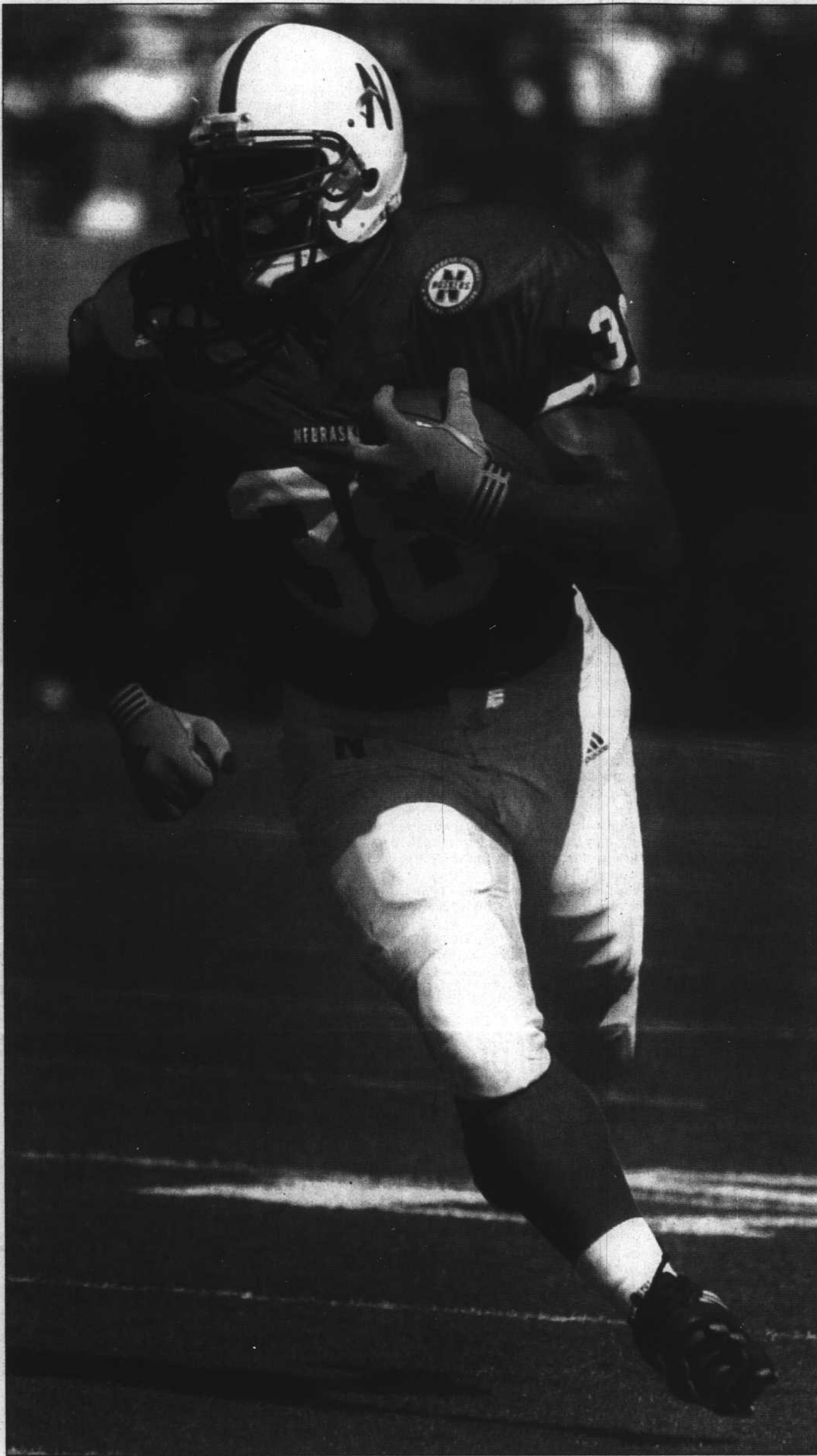
It was Saturday's Colorado State match that showed the fiber this team was made of.

Your team was taken to the woodshed in the first game.

It would have been easy for Nebraska to throw in the towel against CSU.

Please see **COOK** on 11

Huskers' running game back in action



Scott McClurg/DN

Husker I-back Dan Alexander rumbles for some of his 208 yards Saturday. NU amassed 505 yards on the ground, its highest single game mark in four seasons.

■ The 208-yard career-high record for Dan Alexander helped pave the way for Nebraska to trample SJSU for 505 total ground yards.

BY JOHN GASKINS

Amid the Notre Dame talk, Heisman Trophy buzz filled the air at Nebraska football's weekly press conference on Tuesday.

That came as little surprise to anyone, considering the fan and media obsession with the award, the Huskers' No. 1 ranking and last Saturday's explosive, 596-yard offensive output in a 49-13 stomping of San Jose State.

What was surprising was not only who the boldest Heisman comment came from, but who it was about.

NU Coach Frank Solich had plenty of high praise for early candidate quarterback Eric Crouch, who was coming off a four-touchdown performance.

But when asked about starting running back Dan Alexander—who has received little national praise and close to zero Heisman hype in his four years at NU—Solich, usually subdued on topics like this, offered quite a promotion.

"He's right at the top of my list," Solich said without a hint of kidding. "After the first game, in terms of yards per carry and total number of yards, he better be at the top of all kinds of lists."

Alexander's career-high 208 yards leads the nation, was the first 200-yard performance in the Solich era and broke All-American Bobby Reynolds' 50-year-old NU record for yards in a season opener. It was also just the fifth time a Husker had rushed for 200 yards in fewer than 20 carries.

But it wasn't just Alexander who wowed the nation Saturday. The highly rated beefcake offensive line opened plenty of holes, and other running backs found them.

In fact, the entire Husker ground game, which since the Solich era began in 1998 has been suspect to injury and speculation that it isn't the same invincible crew that gave opposing defenses nightmares in the mid-1990s, had quite a coming-out party.

"I definitely think the I-backs are back," Alexander said.

Along with Alexander, backup I-back Correll Buckhalter ran for 117 yards on just 13 carries, Crouch gained 57 on eight carries, and fullback Willie Miller rushed six times for 51 yards.

The 505 ground yards shattered the record by 39 yards, with an average of 8.4 yards per carry.

"We have a unique group of running backs, and all of them have shown they can be powerful," Solich said. "That includes (Crouch). We consider him a running back, too."

In fact, last year, Crouch was the first NU quarterback to lead the team in rushing in 44 years. But was that because of his abilities, or just weaknesses in the running-back core?

NU won nine national rushing titles and finished in the top three in all but one year of Solich's stint as running backs coach from 1983-97. However, in the last two years, the Huskers saw their two worst rushing seasons since the pass-happy team of 1976.

Alexander and Buckhalter have been the top two backs and have battled inexperience, injury and most of all fumbling problems. Last year, NU led the nation with 49 fumbles, 25 lost.

Now, especially after Saturday, it seems the backs are carrying the load the way Nebraska backs are expected to—especially when looking at one statistic: zero fumbles.

"Last year, it might have been a freakish kind of thing, or maybe it became a psychological thing, and it started to snowball a bit," said third-year Running Backs Coach Dave Gillespie, "and I'd be surprised if that trend continues this year."

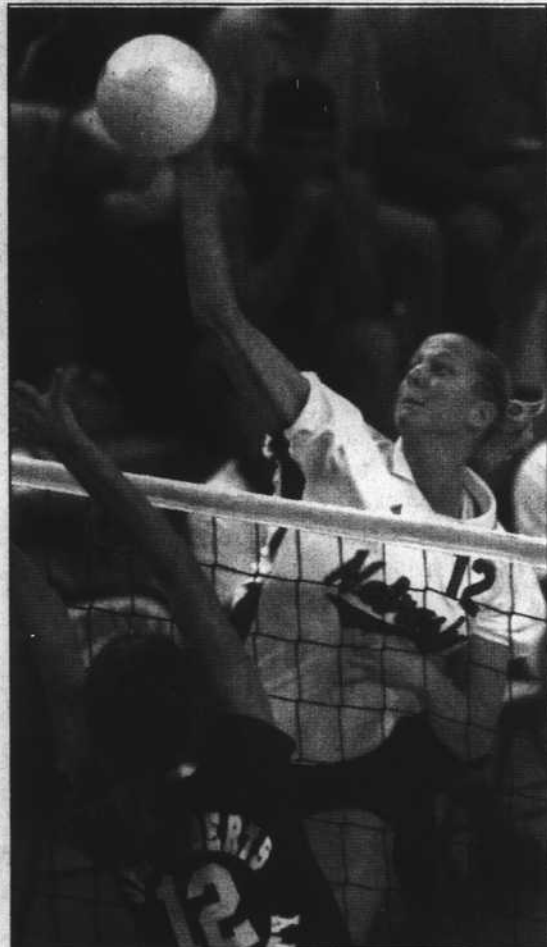
The I-backs' problems put the weight on Crouch's shoulders, which may prove unbearable if the trend continues. Crouch isn't worried.

"There's a big difference about how these guys feel this year compared to how they felt last year," Crouch said. "That's just a confidence level and believing in themselves. It's great knowing I

Please see **BACKS** on 11

NU rolling after weekend victories

Scott McClurg/DN
Husker middle blocker Pam Krejci attempts a kill during a match against Oral Roberts at the Nebraska Coliseum.



BY SEAN CALLAHAN

Confidence can travel a long way.

During the preseason, Cornhusker volleyball Coach John Cook didn't think his team was good, he knew they were.

This weekend, Cook's young, inexperienced squad finally had a chance to prove to the critics they are for real.

With Saturday's 3-1 decision over No. 7 Colorado State the No. 4 ranked Huskers (4-0) went on to destroy a helpless Tulsa, Okla., Oral Roberts team on Monday 3-0.

Sophomore middle hitter Amber Holmquist thought this weekend showed that the Huskers are in the hunt for the National Championship. The fact they have championship aspirations shows Cook is a great motivator, she said.

"From hearing it from him we started to get more confident as a team," Holmquist said. "His confidence in us to perform at that high a level helped us gain confidence."

One of the players that had to step up this weekend for NU was senior Angie Oxley.

With senior All-American Nancy Meendering redshirting

this season, Oxley was given some big shoes to fill.

Against CSU, Oxley met the challenge when she recorded a triple double with 15 kills, 12 digs and 10 blocks.

Oxley attributes much of the success she and her teammates had this weekend to the confidence Cook instilled in them early on.

"Coach Cook is all about being physical and aggressive," Oxley said. "If you make mistakes, make them aggressively, not passively."

Cook said he was happy with his team's performance this weekend. There's always room for improvement, though, he said.

"Colorado State stressed us in a lot of ways on what we need to work on for our team," Cook said. "We let somebody get 30 kills against us. We can't let that happen. Some of the rhythm of our attack needs to improve. Defensively the play of our middle back has to be much better. We need to start digging more balls."

Oxley was on the same page as Cook.

"We have ton's more of improvement we can make. If everything goes right we can go all the way."

A week-long series devoted to taking a closer look at Notre Dame

Beneath the Golden Dome

Notre Dame, Huskers share similar history

BY DAVID DIEHL

Tim Brown and Johnny Rodgers. Joe Montana and Tommie Frazier. Knute Rockne and Tom Osborne.

Notre Dame and Nebraska.

In over a century of college football, both schools have established themselves as two historically celebrated football programs, gaining fan following and support nationwide.

Both Nebraska and Notre Dame football programs contain many similarities—among other things, their histories and fanfare. Amid these similarities are stark differences that define each school's standings in a football elite.

Checking the History Books

The Irish and Cornhuskers have co-existed in college football for 104 years, and Saturday's meeting in South Bend will mark the 15th time the two will clash and the first since the 1973 Orange Bowl. Notre Dame leads the series 7-6-1.

Through the 100-plus years, both teams have staked a claim to national prominence from the records, legends, players and personnel representing each school.

Please see **NOTRE DAME** on 11