

## Crouch is genuine in false world

I have a sportswriter's confession to make. Brace yourselves.

Sometimes, us sportswriters tend to make things bigger and more dramatic than they really are (gasp). Sometimes we are too quick to draw to conclusions. (Remember how Mickey Joseph was supposed to be the Second Coming of Option Quarterback Christ? Oops.)

Every now and then, we hype athletes and coaches up like they are deities, especially when things are going good for them. And every now and then, if we're writing about a figure who hasn't ever, God forbid, pissed us off, we write kiss-ass columns drooling with praise about how good of a guy or gal someone is: even if they don't deserve it, even if that guy or gal really isn't a great guy or gal when the camera stops rolling and the notebooks are closed.

But what else can I say about nice guy Eric Crouch besides nice things after reading about him and talking to him personally? Not too many blemishes — neither on the field nor off. Okay, he *did* let a bunch of pop-sicles melt all over and stain his mom's carpet once when he was a kid. Once. We'll forgive him.

What else can I say about someone who would rather talk days on end about how much more his brother, and his mother, mean to him than football does?

After all, it was Susan Crouch who raised him and his younger brother by herself while she went to college, then worked as a cocktail waitress until 2:30 a.m. She's now a successful ultrasonographer in Omaha.

What else can I say about someone who would rather talk about how, because his mom didn't have time to cook and he raised him on fast food, thought he was a dork because he couldn't play a single Pop Warner game without eating a Taco Bell bean burrito first?

What else can I say about someone who has a firm perspective on life, which is hard to come by when you're a well-pampered, well-liked college athlete?

Crouch said a good portion of his leadership ability came from his sense of responsibility and hard work, a trait he learned from his mother, a trait he also picked up running the house when she was at work.

The sports world is going to want to know more about the NU quarterback as he continues to dish out impressive clutch performances like his game against Notre Dame.

If there was much doubt before that game of who he was, there is little mystery now: Just flip open the most recent issue of Sports Illustrated to a two-page lay-out that introduces the story of the Irish game with a picture of Crouch scoring the game-winning touchdown and, in huge letters, the title "Eric the Great."

What I have found out (and take my word for it, I'm not trumping anything up, here) and the sports world will find out is this: Crouch is about the most genuine, patient, easy-to-talk-to superstar athlete you'll meet — at least right now.

I didn't say funniest or most outgoing or most interesting or most quote-worthy or most candid. He's very mellow, very soft-spoken, fairly unrevealing. I said the most genuine.

Don't give me this, "Yeah, whatever, he's nice. So are lots of people, dude." Yeah, well, a lot of high-profile superstar Div. I athletes can easily be jerks, too. We've seen some at Nebraska. Remember the last Husker quarterback to wear No. 7?

I rest my case. Imagine being Eric Crouch. You'd feel pretty damn good about yourself right about now. He does. Nothing wrong with that. In his own words, after all, he is the starting quarterback

## Winless Hawkeyes search for silver lining

■ Ferenz sees improvement in squad despite poor results on the scoreboard.

BY DAVID DIEHL

With the situation Kirk Ferenz is in at Iowa, he must be a glass is half-full kind of guy.

His Iowa Hawkeyes rank in the lower half in 22 of 27 statistical categories in the Big 10 Conference, have lost to in-state rival Iowa State three years running, and now the Hawks (0-3) have to play the No. 1 team in the country.

But amidst the raging squall of dark clouds above the Iowa program, Ferenz has managed to find a silver lining.

"The thing that has impressed me

with this team is its attitude," he said. "The guys have been committed and they give everything they have."

But still, it obviously hasn't been enough to put Iowa over the top.

The pass-oriented offense, led by 6-6, 220-pound senior Scott Mullen, has put the ball across the goal-line just five times in Iowa's three games.

But even though the offense doesn't light up the scoreboard each week, wide receiver Kahlil Hill, said the Hawkeyes were getting to the point where they would be able to put up points.

A lot of it goes back to Ferenz's statements, and the new mentality of the team, Hill said.

"We're not just looking to survive," said Hill, who is also one of the most dan-

gerous punt returners in the Big 10. "We're looking to go in and win every game."

But winning every game has been far from the case in the past. Far from it.

IU has lost 18 of its past 19 contests, the only bright spot being a 24-0 blanking of Northern Illinois last year. Ferenz finished his inaugural season 1-10 and his record as Iowa's coach is 1-13. The last time Iowa even won back to back games was in 1997 under Hayden Fry, who retired in 1998.

But having a year under his belt, Ferenz said there was a "world of difference" between this year's team and last year's.

"We've been around each other a lot longer," Ferenz said. "The camaraderie is

there, and we're more comfortable. That just hasn't shown up on the scoreboard yet."

In fact, not much has. The Hawks are putting up a Big-10 worst 14 points per game on offense.

While Mullen's passing offense still ranks third in the conference, as a whole, the offense is worst in the Big 10 in total production.

But Hill said that his team was just a step away from fixing that. And that means winning games, he said.

"It's just assignment errors," said Hill, a junior from Iowa City. "On a play we'll have 10 perfect assignments. We're just missing that one extra thing. We just have to get to the point where we're all on the same page making plays."

# HAWAII

## Hawaiians flocking to NU Athletics

BY JOSH CAMENZIND

It is hard to imagine that a Nebraska volleyball player would have an impact on football recruiting.

But when it comes to former Husker Fiona Nepo, that is exactly the case.

Nepo, who was NU's star setter from 1995 to 1998, received nearly full credit from Nebraska Assistant Coach George Darlington for helping land fellow Hawaiian-native Dominic Raiola four years ago.

"If Nepo was not happy here with her situation in volleyball or school, we wouldn't have gotten any players from the islands," he said.

Raiola, a junior, echoed the comments of Darlington.

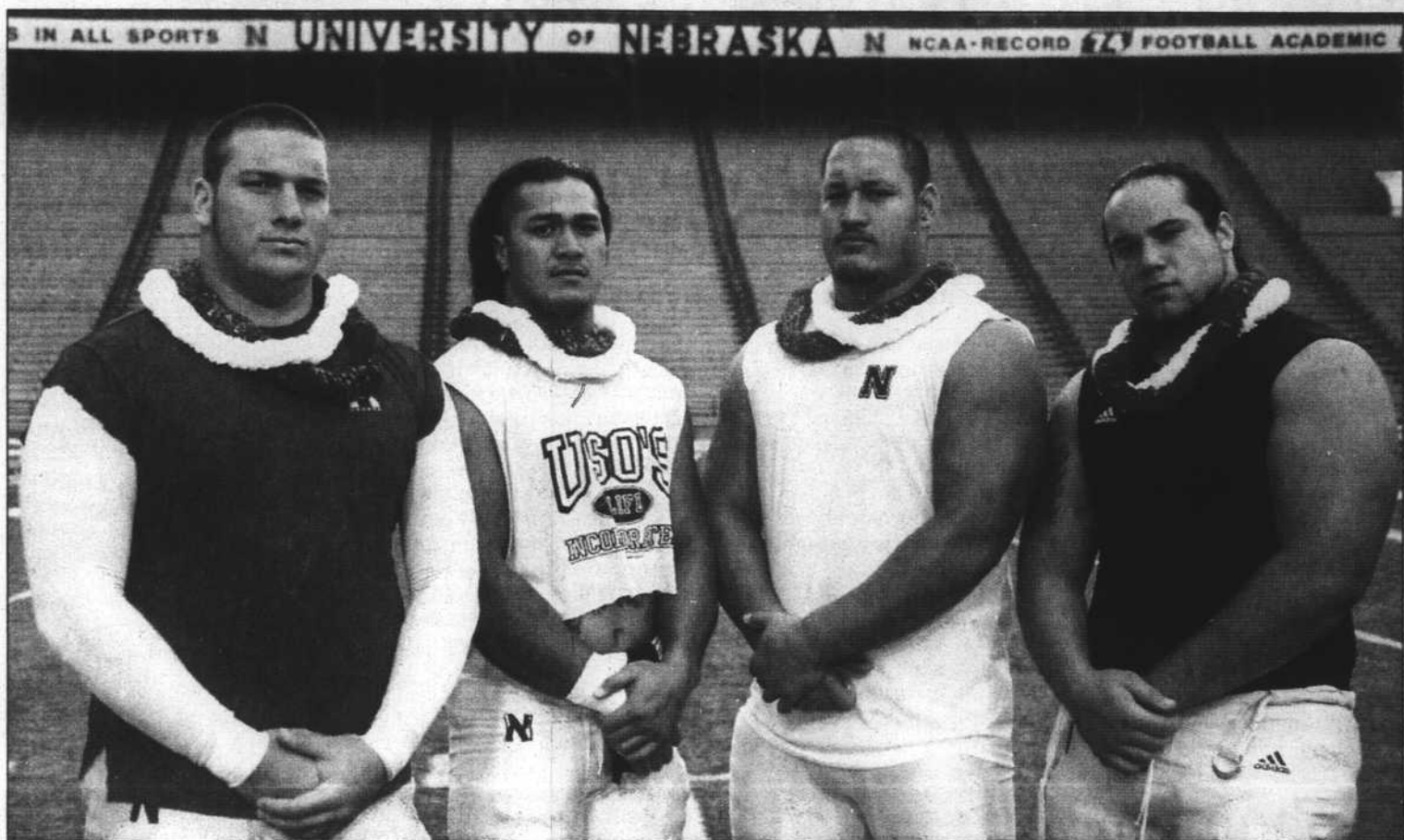
"Just to see someone from our island who made it on her own was real instrumental," said Raiola, who was the first native of Hawaii to play for the Huskers.

"I knew if I came over that she would still be here for a year and we might be able to get another one or two from Hawaii."

Darlington and Nebraska did one better, landing three in the next two years.

Tony Tata became the next recruit for Darlington, and Toni Fonoti and Junior Tagoa'i followed in the 1999 recruiting class. In all, NU has four players from Hawaii on its roster — four more than the previous 110 years of Husker football.

Prep football in Hawaii has been an untapped resource for NU and other college programs



The Husker football team has four players from Hawaii. From left: Dominic Raiola (center), Tony Tata (middle linebacker), Toni Fonoti (offensive guard) and Junior Tagoa'i (nose tackle).

aside from the West Coast in the past because of many factors.

"We never had any exposure," said Tata, a redshirt sophomore. "The college coaches just didn't want to take a chance because of the long plane ride, I guess."

Darlington said the flight was too time consuming for many coaches.

"You spend a whole day there and take a red-eye back," he said. "You can hit six schools in California in the same time."

But the time has paid off for programs like Arizona, Washington and Colorado in the past. And it is no surprise those same programs were also in the thick of recruiting the four.

But the Huskers, not the Huskies or Buffaloes, are reaping the benefits.

Raiola is a two-year starter at center and Fonoti saw action last season as a true freshman and is now starting at left guard.

Tagoa'i, a redshirt freshman nose tackle, and Tata, a middle linebacker, occupy backup roles behind proven players.

The four leave no doubt that the talent base in Hawaii is stocked. So why did they choose the corn field over the beach?

All four responded that the other three had an impact on their decision to come to Nebraska.

"Polynesians are different from many cultures, so being

able to talk to someone who is on a level with you, who understands what you think and feel, helps a lot," Tagoa'i said.

Raiola, Tata and Tagoa'i all attended St. Louis High School in Honolulu together and the three, along with Fonoti, still like to hang out.

They said a normal gathering includes Tagoa'i playing his ukulele, singing and Samoan card games.

"We are pretty much the only ones who know how to play the games, so we have to play with each other," said Tagoa'i, who is originally from Seattle.

Fonoti said having the others around his freshman year helped him cope with being thousands

of miles away from home.

"When we get the time we get together," he said, "it is real good to remind us when we get homesick where we are from and what we are representing."

If Darlington has his way, what the four are representing is an island that will continue to produce quality players for NU.

The Huskers are in the process of recruiting several other island natives at this time, Darlington and Fonoti said.

And the all-important role of Nepo will be filled by actual football players in the future.

"We have the opportunity to show that there are people from the islands that are here and happy," Darlington said.

## Pilakowski motivated by slow freshman year

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

Nebraska volleyball Coach John Cook remembers the look in Laura Pilakowski's eyes last December.

He had just told the young freshman she wouldn't be suiting up for the NCAA tournament.

Pilakowski wasn't used to playing second fiddle on the volleyball floor after years of dominating the hardwood at Columbus High. And she definitely wasn't used to being told she couldn't even put the uniform on.

Instead of consuming herself in sadness over such a setback, Pilakowski came back with determination this season.

"I think stuff like that pushes athletes like her," Cook said.

Something pushed her, and it was a solid enough shove to move Pilakowski onto the floor as a starter where she has starred for the Huskers.

"It was difficult going through last year, but I learned so much and saw how hard I had to work on the fundamentals," Pilakowski said.

Redshirting was a thought in Pilakowski's mind during that difficult freshman year. But the coaches maintained a hunch that her talent just might sneak her onto the floor for more playing time.

"Hindsight is always 20-20. But we really did think she could help us last year," Cook said.

But Pilakowski could never earn a prominent

role on the team last season playing at the middle blocker position

This season, in a move that paid off big dividends, Cook switched Pilakowski from middle blocker to outside hitter, and the switch has accentuated her talents.

"She has great arm swing, and she shoots so high. She uses her athletic ability to hit shots even if the ball is set in an unusual spot," Cook said.

Pilakowski has taken the 2000 season by storm, leading the team in kills with 120 through the first nine games and collecting top honors on the team with a .381 hitting percentage.

Cook knew the Pilakowski secret was going to be let out of the bag this season.

"To some people, she's come out of the blue, but I knew she was going to be good," Cook said.

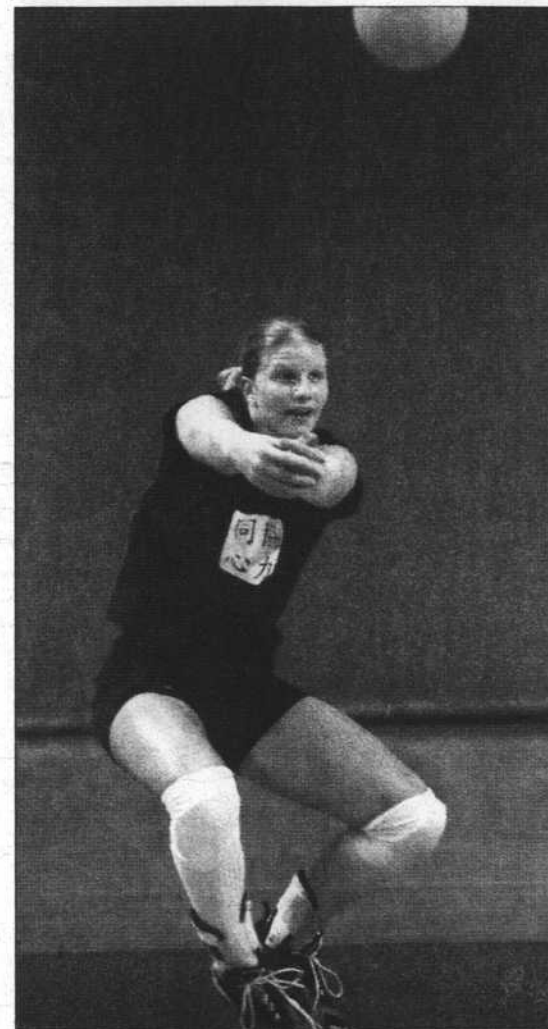
She's had a trail of coaches shaking their heads in disbelief, searching for an answer to silence her swing.

"Their offense ended up being Laura, and we never really had an answer for her," an exasperated Colorado State Coach Tim Hilbert had said after watching Pilakowski dash the Rams' hopes for an early-season victory.

Pilakowski doesn't care about grabbing the individual praise. She just likes winning, and the winning process is much more fun when team chemistry exists.

"We're all connected as a team, and it helps with the great senior leadership we have," she said. "It's really exciting to play on a team where we have just all bonded together."

Cook also sent out a frightening line to confer-



Nate Wagner/DN Husker sophomore outside hitter Laura Pilakowski has stepped up her performance for NU this year. She has a team-high 120 kills and the best hitting percentage at .381.