

Canadian pipeline helps NU soccer remain at the top

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Translation: Canada likes sports. The U.S. likes sports, too, with a whole extra load of blood, sweat, tears and dough attached to it.

And so the match made in Lincoln, which has helped produce the current No. 3 team in the country and a program that isn't going to fade into the cornfields anytime soon, is a case of supply and demand with a twist.

There's a supply of good Canadian soccer players itching to play in the States. But John Walker, a native Canadian himself, had to create the demand.

The Maple Leaf Pipeline

Imitation isn't just flattery, but the beeline to success in athletics. Can't beat 'em, small fry? Join 'em. And in April 1994 (and pretty much all the years before and all the years since) the standard in college soccer was North Carolina. To join them in an attempt to beat them meant recruiting the same players.

It wasn't a battle Walker could win or even wage with the newborn Huskers. Instead, he had two specific recruiting in-roads to explore: the state of Nebraska, which Walker said improved its talent all the time and would place four Huskers on the team next year.

Then there's the entire nation of Canada, where he served as a staff coach for the Canadian Soccer Association and continues to serve as an assistant for the Canadian National Team.

Walker went a step below the national team to a younger group of hungry, willing players to jump country and build at Nebraska.

Normally that type of wide-scale recruiting is costly, with airfare and travel and scouting hours poured in—a risky proposition for a program in its first year. But Walker already knew whom the best Canadian players were. No need for scouting reports on players he'd scouted himself.

And there was little risk involved, because regardless of record, the Canadian players were

facing better opponents in the States and getting treated better to do it.

"I don't know; you don't even look at Canada for college sports," NU goalie and Maple Ridge, British Columbia, native Karina LeBlanc said. "I never did."

Word spread for players that wanted a better shake in soccer: Walker's got something going in the States. In recent years, Husker players would reach out to members of the Canadian Under-20 National Team, of which Walker was also a coach.

"There's six or seven Canadians here," Walker said. "It doesn't take a genius to see it's a good situation—good place to play in, high performance, competitive environment."

In Latham's case, Walker attended Christmas and summer camps. She heard more about the program through LeBlanc and junior Shannon Tanaka, also of Calgary. Walker offered a scholarship; Latham accepted. Deal closed.

"I really didn't think about or look at any other schools," she said. "Everybody knew it was such a good program."

The coach, who dislikes the term "savior" as his role for plucking these women out of Canada, nonetheless recognized a need for these players to get better experience, which in turn would make the national team a larger force internationally.

In fact, several Nebraska players double as members of the Canadian National Team, including LeBlanc, who had hoped to be lounging around the Athletic Village of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, had the team qualified for the Games last summer.

Needing to finish in the top seven of the qualifiers (as host Australia was automatically invited), Canada failed, leaving LeBlanc stateside instead of an Olympic participant.

"It's very frustrating to watch it on TV," said LeBlanc, who was quite sure the 2000 Canada team, after tying the United States, could have been in the running for a medal, "especially when you know

we could've gone in there and given an effort. The two teams that are in the final (U.S. and Norway) are both teams we played close."

Canada's loss has been Nebraska's gain. Walker isn't sure where NU would be without LeBlanc or Latham, another Canadian National standout. He's accepted the dual nature of their college eligibility getting passed over for international competition like the 2000 Olympics.

It's all part of the package deal that won't become a problem again until Athens in 2004. Rather, Walker's challenge in the next four years will be keeping a secret to himself that's nearly impossible to hold.

Southern Invasion

Quick-strike success like Nebraska's has price: When you

beat them, they join you. The Huskers may have started the trend of recruiting Canadians. It's hard to say if they'll continue to corner the market.

The talent has to continue to flow, Walker said, as he's not interested in recruiting Canadians just to recruit them. Additionally, Nebraska has reached a level of success where it can battle for recruits who would have automatically punched their tickets for UNC otherwise.

But the more likely scenario is other teams will jump the bandwagon. Connecticut, a team NU defeated earlier this season, had a Canadian player, Walker said. Portland signed one of the top players out of Canada away from Nebraska.

"There's people who understand that there's good players in

"The transition from Canada to here is a pretty easy one. Especially when you're surrounded by other Canadians."

Karina LeBlanc
Nebraska goaltender

Canada," Walker said.

More importantly, Walker said, the differences between U.S. and Canadian players were little to none. Only rarely, as in the case of NU freshman and French-speaking Quebec native Marie-Claude Henri, is language a barrier.

Neither Latham nor LeBlanc mentioned any Canadian cliques on the team. If anything, their nationalities boil into the Husker Athletic Department's pot of for-

eign-born players, which is heavily mixed in other sports.

"Same music, same language, same food," Walker said of Canada and the U.S. "People tend to focus on differences, that these players are, you know, Canadian. But, there really isn't a cultural adjustment."

LeBlanc concurred. "The transition from Canada to here is a pretty easy one," she said. "Especially when you're surrounded by other Canadians."

Mizzou, Kansas pose challenge to NU



Nebraska's Becky Preston and the NU soccer team hits the road to battle Missouri and Kansas in a pair of Big 12 matchups this weekend.

BY GABRIEL STOVALL

The rankings seem to tell a person all one would need to know about the third-ranked Nebraska soccer team this season.

But Coach John Walker insists the Cornhuskers have much more to learn about themselves before they can talk about the Final Four or a national championship.

He is hoping his team's first two conference road games of the season will be good learning experiences.

"So far, we've played a pretty good season," Walker said. "But all of our conference games, especially the road ones, are going to be challenging. I believe we'll know a lot more about our team after this weekend."

Friday, the Huskers go to Columbia to tangle with the Missouri Tigers (6-4, 2-0) in a 4 p.m. contest. Sunday, the Huskers go up against the Kansas Jayhawks.

While the Tigers may not look so ferocious on paper, Coach Walker knows beating the Tigers at home will be no small feat.

"Traditionally, Mizzou is one of the toughest teams in the conference," said Walker, who has been head coach since the program began in 1994.

For that reason, Walker said he and his team were not looking past the Missouri

squad.

The Tigers come into Friday's game riding high after a 1-0 victory at Oklahoma last Sunday.

They boast one of the best players in the nation in senior forward Nikki Thole.

Thole, who was a 1999 All-American selection, is also a finalist for the 2000 Harmon Award. The award is soccer's equivalent to football's Heisman Trophy.

With such opposing talent on the field, Husker star goalkeeper Karina LeBlanc said it won't be hard to stay focused.

"We're going to have to come prepared and ready to play," said the senior, who is also a finalist for this season's Harmon.

"If we don't come ready to play against Missouri or Kansas, we run the risk of getting upset."

Walker said the Jayhawks (5-7, 1-1) will pose a formidable challenge to the Huskers in their Sunday contest in Lawrence, Kan.

"They're the most improved team in the conference," Walker said.

"The thing that makes them dangerous is that they are balanced. No one player stands out."

KU is also coming off a win. The Jayhawks won their first conference game of the season in a 1-0 decision at Oklahoma State.

Tough Texas A&M next volleyball test

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

Put the word Texas in a school's name, and the Nebraska volleyball team will take notice.

NU always expects a little more attitude, confidence and talent to stand on the other side of the net when schools from the deep south are involved.

"There's always good teams down there in Texas," junior middle blocker Jenny Kropp said. "They have down years, but Texas A&M is always fairly good."

And as coincidence would have it, the Aggies just happen to be next on the Big Red's hit list.

On Saturday, the NU Coliseum will host the duel between No. 22 Texas A&M and the top-ranked Cornhuskers, who are 12-0 overall, and an untested 5-0 in conference play.

A&M has a little swagger in its step too, coming in with an 8-3 mark, sitting at 3-1 in the conference after being hit early in conference play by Missouri.

Since then, the Tigers have won four straight matches, with notable wins over Kansas, Oklahoma and Colorado.

"They're a really balanced team. They have people hitting for a good attack percentage down their lineup, and they've played a tough schedule," Nebraska Coach John Cook said.

That tough schedule includes a four-game, hard-fought match on the road with the current No. 2 team in the country, Hawaii.

The Aggies balance also concerns Cook.

"There's always good teams down there in Texas. They have down years, but Texas A&M is always fairly good."

Jenny Kropp
NU middle blocker

In A&M's last outing against Texas-Pan America, two true freshmen led the team in kills, with outside hitter Beth Skypala and middle blocker Carol Price scoring 10 and seven kills, respectively.

Meanwhile, NU continues to look dominant coming off a sweep of Colorado in Boulder in a match that left Cook pleased with his team.

Last Saturday, Nebraska cruised at home against Oklahoma and freely substituted throughout.

Cook said this match might not allow for the same subbing strategy.

"We would have to get in a position to put other people in," Cook said.

"But we are going into this match expecting it to be tough."

Cook also has not bought into the hype about being undefeated and No. 1.

"We aren't concerned about that right now," Cook said. "If we play to our maximum level and win all our matches, that's great."

"If we lose a match or two along the way but played to our maximum level, that's good."

Three years, four plays: All memorable

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boy of the Mike and Ralph Brown-led secondary as a true freshman the season before—the little rookie who got picked on.

As he got more playing time in season No. 2, his challenges got steeper as teams threw away from the All-American Browns and toward him even more.

In just the third game of the season, Craver had to cover dangerous Golden Eagle receivers Todd Pinkston and Sherrod Gideon and played so fervently, he got cramped up and exhausted.

That didn't stop him from tipping a pass Julius Jackson intercepted to score the go-ahead touchdown with 8:26 left, then intercepting another pass soon after.

Somehow, down 20-13, with under two minutes left and with Memorial Stadium on its heels, Southern Miss. drove all the way to the red zone and dared to challenge the whipping boy again. Quarterback Jeff Kelly threw the ball toward the end zone, in Pinkston's direction, and Craver was right there.

"I remember Mike (Brown) telling me, 'You better be ready; they're gonna go deep because it was a blitz,'" Craver said.

"So we expected the ball to come down real quick, which it did, and I just stuck my hands out and caught it."

"I was in a zone, and once I caught the ball, I was on the ground and being tackled. I remember big, old linemen jumping on me, and that's when I got back to reality and felt the crowd."

Turns out that Craver did get whipped on the play, but not like plays before. He dislocated his shoulder.

Oh well. The pain was healed by the knowledge he had arrived. The whipping boy had just won the game for the Huskers.

"I was on cloud nine ... I

remember Mike Brown coming up to me after the play and telling me I was 'the next,' meaning the next great thing. It made me feel real good. I hoped it was a sign of things to come."

It was.

Jeremy Slechta - sack on Notre Dame QB Arnaz Battle in overtime, 2000.

It's funny how one play can make you so much more popular. Mild-mannered Slechta understands why people recognize him more now, but it feels kind of odd.

Slechta, a junior defensive tackle with plenty of experience, had earned his spurs with coaches, players and knowledgeable fans as part of NU's punishing '99 D-line that helped the Blackshirts mount the nation's fourth-best defense.

But he wasn't a household name and had made few plays of memory until one big sack in South Bend.

After regulation ended in a 21-21 tie, Nebraska won the toss, forcing the Irish to score first from the 25-yard line.

After Notre Dame got to the eight-yard-line, it faced third and goal from the five. Battle scrambled left, and Slechta gave chase.

"I knew it was just me and Battle. I had been watching him all day make guys miss on our team. He did it to me earlier."

"I remember coming out there, and it was just me and him. You block everything out. My attention was just on me and him, and I'm watching him, and as many people as there were there, I didn't hear one voice coming from the stands."

"After you tackle him, and you realize what you did, you stand up and everything comes back, and all of a sudden you can hear everybody yelling again. I was just so excited, and I just stood up."

"I'm not one of those guys that has my signature celebration move, but I just remember getting

"I was one of the last ones to leave the field. Everyone stormed the field, and I kind of just walked out there with Loren and Kyle and tried to grasp what happened."

Jeremy Slechta
NU defensive tackle

up off the field, and I took both of my hands and basically slapped the side of my helmet—both hands, one on each side, because I was so excited. I just jumped up."

The sack went for a five-yard loss and forced Irish kicker Nick Setta to boot a 29-yard-field goal. That stand was good enough to allow Eric Crouch to score a touchdown and win the game, making Slechta's sack enormous, and he knew it.

"I was one of the last ones to leave the field. Everyone stormed the field, and I kind of just walked out there with Loren (Kaiser) and Kyle (Vanden Bosch) and tried to grasp what happened. I was in the stage where I knew what happened, but really it didn't sink in yet, so I was still trying to sit on that field and let that feeling last as long as I could."

But Slechta got a whole different post-game feeling once he left the locker room and was uncharacteristically hounded by media.

"It was a lot different that way. Everybody was asking, 'Is this the biggest play you've made to date?' You know, I had to say yes, and it was, and everything has just kind of ... it's weird how I can make one play like that, and now everybody wants to talk to me."

Eric Crouch - touchdown in overtime vs. Notre Dame, 2000.

Driving toward the north end zone—the same end zone that Touchdown Jesus lords over, with the ND student section roaring, "Kill, kill, kill," Crouch was his signature cool self. Though the ghosts of Notre Dame past had

carried the Irish into overtime, they didn't haunt Crouch.

After a gritty third-and-nine pass to Tracey Thole for a first down and a Dan Alexander run to the eight-yard-line, Solich called a favorite NU goal-to-go play: for Crouch to call his own number.

"When the play came in, I was like, okay, time to win, time to get this game over with. I was thinking the play's been working the whole game."

"Dan (Alexander) did such a great job of blocking on that play, and I saw the end zone and tried to beat two guys, and just got a couple feet in there."

"Everything happened so fast. Afterward, the official didn't signal touchdown for a little while. It was kind of strange in that regard. I knew I scored, I knew the game was over with, so I kind of walked off, and then I saw everyone running toward me."

"I remember Coach (Turner) Gill being one of the first people to congratulate me, but everything was kind of blurry. All of a sudden, there's ten cameras around me and people asking me questions and people jumping on me. There was just so much going on."

"It was just amazing the way it ended up," Crouch told the Daily Nebraskan after he spoke to the national media. "It was a feeling of greatness, a feeling that you accomplished something that maybe not a lot of people think you would have ... and in front of a national broadcast with all our fans there. It means so much more than I ever thought it would have."



Young runners prepared for Kansas invitational

FROM STAFF REPORTS

The fresh faces of the Nebraska Cross Country team will have a chance to shine Friday at the Emporia State Invitational in Emporia, Kan.

The team will send its younger, less experienced runners to compete, as the rest of the

team will prepare for the Murray Keatinge Invitational in Orono, Maine, Oct. 7, said Coach Jay Dirksen.

Dirksen said he would send six runners—two men and four women.

Sophomore Phillip Davis and freshman Paul Wilson will compete for the men, while senior

Deb Osteen, sophomores Christy Linnell and Melissa Drozda, and freshman Hillary Laird will suit up for the women.

Dirksen said he thought the runners would fare well in Friday's race, especially because junior colleges and smaller schools make up most of the competition.

The team continues to up its miles in training, and Dirksen said his runners would peak in late October.

"Right now we're concerned about making improvements," he said.

The women's 5,000-meter race will begin at 5 p.m. with the men's 8,000-meter race to follow.