

Players chase pigskin dreams far from limelight

NFL league has true love of the game

BY TOBY BURGER

There is no Super Bowl at the end of the season, or even the hope for a national championship. For the men of the Nebraska Indoor Football League, it isn't a goal that drives them.

"It's for the love of the game," Jeremy McMillin of the Lincoln Crush said.

Approximately 120 players comprise the four teams of the NIFL. The eight-man indoor football games are played at the Southside Sports Complex, 6th and Van Dorn streets.

The league is similar in play, rules and field dimensions to the Lincoln Lightning and Omaha

Beef. The main exception is that the NIFL players don't get paid; in fact, they pay to play.

"You don't get paid to go out there," McMillin said. "You're risking your health. You got to love the game."

Marty Silverstrand is a man who does love the game. He is the owner and creator of the NIFL. He hatched the league nearly four years ago when he branched off another Lincoln league which he said "discriminated" against some players wanting to participate in the competition.

Silverstrand said the former league would not let any person who played for a Division I

college football team, like Nebraska, or any person weighing over 250 pounds compete in the league. Dissatisfied with the league's stipulations, Silverstrand sought a change and created the NIFL.

"I started this because there are a lot of people in Nebraska that love football that don't have the ability to play at Nebraska ... or that still want to play football," Silverstrand said.

The weekend warriors playing in the NIFL include a wide array of people. The players range in age from 18 to 43 and in

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Lincoln Crush team members (front row left to right) Jeremy McMillin, Joe Clapper, Ryan Nickell, James Jackson, Gill Balboa (back left) and Greg Albright. The Crush are one of four teams in the Nebraska Indoor Football League.

Former Huskers jump at chance in new XFL

BY LINCOLN ARNEAL

Imagine a football game where punt returners are never safe from a bone-crushing hit, fans would be able to listen in on events in the locker room and huddle and players would receive bonuses if their team wins the game.

Welcome to the world of the XFL.

The Xtreme Football League will begin its inaugural season of play in February with eight franchises.

One of the teams, the Las Vegas Outlaws, will have strong ties to the Nebraska football programs because they picked up seven ex-Huskers in the draft.

The Outlaws selected former NU players Mike Croel, Troy Dumas, Josh Heske, Julius Jackson, Tony Ortiz, Jamel Williams and Toby Wright.

Another former Husker, Larry Townsend, was taken by the Chicago Enforcers.

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Volleyball team wins Big 12 title

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

It was about as weak a championship celebration a team could muster with Nebraska players smiling and slapping congratulatory pats towards one another as 4,128 fans politely cheered the new Big 12 volleyball champions on Wednesday night at the NU Coliseum.

Then quickly off to the locker room they went. It seemed pretty obvious that this Nebraska team had its sights on a bigger championship.

No. 1 Nebraska improved to 25-0, 17-0 in the conference, with a 15-5, 15-11, 15-1 sweep of Iowa State.

Despite playing a competitive second game, the overmatched Cyclones fell to 2-25 and a cellar dwelling 0-18 Big 12 record.

Nebraska Coach John Cook said his team did not play particularly well against ISU, but neither he nor the players seemed overly concerned.

The conference championship seemed to be a much better topic.

"It's diminished because of our success, but deep down and after the season is over, it's going to mean a lot," Cook said. "It will be significant to get that Big 12 championship ring."

Cook said that before the season started, he could have never fathomed winning the conference championship with three games still left to play.

NU setter Greichaly Cepero said this year's quick journey to the title offered quite a different experience compared to last year.

"Last year was more emotional because it came down to the last game with Texas," she said. "We weren't as good of a team though."

Sophomore defense specialist Lindsay Wischmeier said only one of many goals was accomplished on Wednesday.

"We still have three more Big 12 matches, and our goal is to go undefeated in the Big 12 and then NCAAAs," Wischmeier said.

This Big Red team is greedy.

"What we really want is a national championship," Cepero said.

High school finals set to begin today

BY GABRIEL STOVALL

The Nebraska football team is taking a Saturday off this weekend, but for Memorial Stadium, it'll be business as usual.

That's because the stadium will be rocking with the intensity of high school state championship football.

The festivities begin Thursday with the Class D-2 eight man final and will continue through Saturday evening, ending in the Class B championship game.

Of course, of the 12 teams playing only six squads will remain standing when it's all said and done, but Joe Selig, NU's senior assistant athletic director, said it will be a memorable time for all players win or lose.

"I think for high school students-athletes, Memorial Stadium is a place that they all shoot for at the beginning of the season," Selig said.

"They treat it as a real honor to play on the same field as the Nebraska Cornhuskers."

This season marks the fifth year Memorial Stadium has been the host of the state football championship games.

The 2000 edition of the state championship games offer some fairly intriguing matchups, including the Class A - Nebraska's largest class - final between defending 1999 state champion Omaha Creighton Prep and Lincoln Southeast.

Games like these in an atmosphere like Memorial Stadium is what high school football should be about, said Rex Jones, associate director in charge of football for the Nebraska School Activities Association.

"The opportunity for fans to see all levels of competition is great," Jones said.

"Any fan, parent, coach or athlete are overwhelmingly in favor. It's just something about the

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SEVEN-YEAR RICH

Walker takes NU soccer from nowhere to the penthouse

BY JOHN GASKINS

Seven years ago, the grounds that one of the nation's finest soccer programs call home were merely open fields of corn near a dog food plant and a construction plant, just north of Cornhusker Highway off 70th street.

Women's soccer in the Big Eight Conference did not exist. Neither did big-time interest in the sport in Nebraska, where there was plenty of football and volleyball to crow about.

John Walker was a coach at both Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and the Canadian World University Games team. Nebraska's Athletic Director Bill Byrne had just started the job, hoping to raise enough money to fund more women's sports.

Six years later, in November of 1999, the same grounds were more than home to a school-record crowd of 3,700 screaming soccer fans jammed into the Abbott Sports Complex - regarded as one of the nation's plushiest stadiums - to watch No. 4 Nebraska battle Notre Dame to a shootout after four overtimes. The winner would advance to the Women's College Cup, the Final Four of women's soccer.

This year, after another pair of Big 12 titles (regular season and tournament) the coffee table in the waiting room of the complex is unable to fit all the trophies. Nebraska soccer is a force to be reckoned with.

"Nobody wants to play Nebraska," said Amy Walsh, a former all-conference player who graduated last year and is now a member of the Canadian national team. "They put everyone on their heels with their aggressive style of play. It's very similar to an international game in how they're forcing other teams to make adjustments."

That's Walker's style, as he combined his experience with recruiting players like Walsh and a no-nonsense approach to form a program that is rivaled by only a few others in the country.

This Saturday, NU will look to take another step toward that elusive College Cup berth after winning three regular season and four Big 12 tournament titles and coming within just a game of a national semifinal twice.

This, plus 10 All-Americans and probably two more came from the 2000 squad, all in a matter of seven seasons.

"It's not like I didn't think that this could be a possibility six years ago," Walker said. "But I didn't think it would be this big."

Right Man for the Job

Byrne's first coaching hire of many may have been his smartest.

The athletic director called Bret Simon, the Creighton men's soccer coach. Simon suggested Walker, and on a recruiting trip to Canada in April of 1994, told Walker of the opportunity.

"At first I wasn't particularly interested," Walker said. "But when I came here to interview, I was very impressed with the facilities and other athletic teams, and not just the football team. It looked as though I had a good opportunity to build a winning program with an athletic department behind me."

Byrne promised Walker NU would play in a new complex. Walker, in his early 30s at the time, also had two 1-year-old twins and was attracted to Lincoln's family atmosphere.

And so, the Canadian set out to build a soccer program in the middle of nowhere - literally.

Humble Beginnings

Walker had to build a player base quickly, and took a combination of signees, club team members and walk-ons. The first NU team, in 1994, practiced and played at Whittier Junior High School's field, with a couple hundred fans at each game.

"It was actually an enthusiastic atmosphere," Walker said. "There were no stands at Whittier, so the fans stood on the sidelines, close to the field. It was fun. We had a real hard-working team for players who were fielded in such a short

period of time."

NU went 14-4 that first year with a soft schedule, and Walker found an almost revolutionary way to build on it, implementing a spring conditioning program that has continued to be one of the cornerstones of Nebraska's success.

The Huskers hit the weights and the track not long after the season ended, much like the football team. Then, they played what they consider the hardest spring exhibition schedule in the nation.

"John's got the ability to see the big picture, and he sees the spring as the best time to make the biggest gains," said assistant coach Marty Everding, Walker's right hand man and former teammate at Queen's in the early 80s.

"Every spring we would play better teams than us, realizing we'd get waxed a couple of times, and we got waxed a bunch of times. But eventually it hardened us for the next year, sharpened us, and that's what's happened to us every year."

Breakthrough Season

Walker's vision was to crack the top 25 rankings in five years. It happened much sooner.

In 1996, a freshman class came in and thrust Nebraska onto the national soccer map.

Three eventual All-Americans in Lindsey Eddleman (NU's all-time leading scorer), Isabelle Morneau and 1999 Big 12 Player of the Year Sharlota Nonen joined All-Americans Kari Uppinghouse and Rebecca Hornbacher to record a 19-0 regular season and Big 12 Championship.

The Huskers eventually lost 1-0 to Portland to fall in the NCAA quarterfinals, one game short of the College Cup. The landmark game of the year, according to Walker, was a 3-1 victory over No. 6 Duke early in the season. It carried NU from an unranked team to No. 12 and merited a feature in USA Today.

"After that season, athletes that wouldn't give us the time of day were lining up," Everding said. "That's what's made the program more than anything - the quality of athletes. They have as good of speed, technical ability and soccer sense as any in the nation."

Those kind of athletes would lead NU to Big 12 Championships in 1999 and 2000 and Big 12 Tournament Champions the last three years. NU has finished in the top 10 each of the last three years - despite the growing parity and power in the sport nationally.

A Budding Dynasty

While some programs would drop off after losing its all-time leading scorer and three other All-Americans, NU has stayed near the top with athletes like Karina LeBlanc - one of the best goal-keepers in the nation and

Big 12 Player of the Year and sophomore Christina Latham.

About half of these athletes come from Canada, mainly through Walker's ties. But Walker continues to emphasize that it is not a Canadian pipeline that has made the program, but the program that has turned the Canadians into national team members, like Walsh, one of five NU players that competed for Canada in the Women's World Cup, a team on which Walker was an assistant coach.

"I am twice the soccer player I was when I got here because of John Walker and this program," Walsh said.

But it hasn't just been the athletes who have made the program.

"This team is so unselfish," said Benson, a fifth-year senior and the only member of the 1996 team on this year's team. "That comes from the coaches. There are no superstars. It's just a group of several talented athletes who work hard and play together."

The same can be said about the coaches. Everding has stayed loyal to Walker for all seven years.

"He's a terrific boss," Everding said. "He knows what he's doing, and he doesn't put you in an impossible ethical position to do anything bad, like all sorts of



Delan Lonowski/DN

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