

NU looks to succeed without suspended coaches

BY TOBY BURGER

Maybe "All Americans and Underclassmen" should be the title for the Nebraska swimming and diving team's coming season.

The Husker men's and women's teams are looking to those key elements to lead them to victory this season.

"With so many All Americans and so many young kids it is a great opportunity for both of them," interim swimming and diving Coach Paul Nelsen said.

Leadership may be more important than usual this year. NU is without longtime NU Coach Cal Bentz as well as three assis-

tants, suspended while the Athletic Department investigates possible violations. Nelsen, the only NU assistant not suspended, is the interim coach.

For the men's swim team, graduated are Olympians Adam Pine, Carlos Asarta, Valery Kalmikovs and Michael Windisch from a team that managed a runner-up finish in the Big 12. Also gone is All-American diver Erik Cook.

But even with those losses the Huskers have more established swimmers to anchor the team, ranked 18th in preseason polls.

Senior All-American Peter Fry and junior All-American Anthony Rogis, Carlos Oliva and Javier Botello will lead NU in 2000.

Botello is returning from the

Olympics where he competed for Spain. Fry and junior Jon Hahn are the team's co-captains.

While All Americans and seniors are expected to produce, so are a handful of underclassmen.

Erik Wilken, a sophomore, is one of the proven underclassmen as he obtained All-American honors last year. Talented freshmen looking to make an immediate mark include Brent Menghini, Aaron McLachlan and Dustin McKnight.

Nelsen aims to have his diving team "mentally ready every day."

That readiness starts with diving captain Bert Locklin. He will lead a squad that lost only Cook.

Senior Charlie Law, junior Pedram Nabegh and sophomores Michael Joubanc, Lucas Brown

and Cory Yeager all return, and freshman Dan Ballarin expects to contribute.

The biggest loss for the women's swimming team is the one it didn't see coming.

Senior swimming co-captain Shandra Johnson will sit out the year with a medical redshirt year as she recovers from back surgery. The five-time All American and Big 12 Champion plans to return next season.

Fellow senior and co-captain Beth Karaica will head a core of returning letter winners and All Americans, ranked 21st in the coaches' preseason poll.

Two of those All Americans are sophomores Lindsey Highstrom and Elvira Fischer. Fischer is returning to the Husker team after

competing for Australia at the Sydney Olympics.

Similar to the men's team, the women will be seeking contributions from some new team members. Nelsen said he is counting on contributions from freshmen Jackie Lobdell and Rebecca Wolfe.

Junior diving captain Tami Bernth will lead the diving squad for the Huskers. Along with Bernth, fellow senior Elizabeth Moss and three freshmen, Molly Christensen, Jerilyn Drummond, and Kristin Stratton, round out the squad.

Nelsen said his three assistant coaches are key to the entire swimming and diving team. Jefferson Bro, Dough Humphrey and Jon Haggerty have been a pivotal part in helping Nelsen in his

first year as interim head coach, he said.

"They have really made my job easier," Nelsen said. "I really couldn't have done it without them."

Nelsen and his assistants need to be ready with the competition both squads will face this season, he said.

The men will face defending national champion Texas in addition to some of the top teams in the nation including Iowa State, SMU, UNLV and Virginia.

The women also will face stiff competition throughout the season. They will face women's two-time defending national champion Georgia. Also, Iowa State, Michigan and SMU will test the women.

Belcher returns

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two guys play defense and three guys don't," Collier said. "Cookie is a very good defensive player and his commitment to defense excites me."

Fellow guard Cary Cochran, who is the only Husker on this year's team to play a full season with Belcher, knows firsthand of the impact he can make on a game. Cochran said Belcher is underrated and that he was lost to an extent without Belcher last year.

"He will shut down a whole side of the floor because the other team won't even throw it near him because of his ability to pick off a pass," Cochran said.

Not only does Belcher have a knack for getting steals, but he is one of the best at doing so. If Belcher can reach his season-high total of 102 steals, set back in his junior year, and get three more, for 105, he will tie Eric Murdock for the career NCAA mark at 376.

It is a goal Belcher admits he

would like to have and is confident that, if he plays his game, he can reach.

Collier's defensive philosophy, which emphasizes team defense instead of individual pressure, might help Belcher set the record, the guard said.

Belcher, who has averaged just 10.5 points per game in his career, thinks the differences between Nee's and Collier's offensive systems will allow him to blossom on that side of the ball, as well.

"We never really ran plays for me, and we just played and tried to get it inside," said Belcher of Nee's offensive strategy of having one go-to guy. "We would always run a play half-ass, and if it broke down, we would just get the ball to that player. Collier doesn't care who scores, as long as the ball gets in the basket."

Neither does Belcher. He just wants to win.

"If you know your role and play it, you should be successful," he said.

Trio of seniors lead wrestlers

BY VINCE KUPPIG

The Nebraska wrestling team may have a new coach, but it returns three All Americans, including a national champion, who led the Cornhuskers to an eighth-place finish nationally last year.

Coach Mark Manning comes to Nebraska from Northern Iowa, where he coached the team to an 11th-place finish in the 1999-2000 season. Manning replaces Tim Neumann, who posted a 199-76-6 record in 15 seasons as Nebraska's coach.

Manning said the team has been accepting of the new coaching staff, which has made the change relatively easy.

"They've responded right away. From day one, they've done a good job of picking up how we do things," Manning said.

Since taking over, Manning has noticed the commitment the wrestlers have to Nebraska.

"Their attitude and commitment has been as much as I could ask," he said.

Manning is relying on senior Brad Vering to lead the Huskers.

"He's a role model and a

leader," Manning said. "He exemplifies what we want out of him, not only as a wrestler, but also as a student athlete and a person."

Last year, Vering became the seventh national champion in Nebraska's wrestling history. Vering enters the 2000-2001 season atop Amateur Wrestling News' preseason rankings.

Vering is looking to become Nebraska's first two-time national champion. He's confident about repeating.

"There's nobody else in my weight class that is a national champion," Vering said. "I feel like I'm on a plateau above them. If I get better, I don't think anybody in the country can keep up."

Manning said senior Todd Beckerman would likely join Vering as a team co-captain.

Beckerman enters the season as the second-ranked 133-pounder in the nation. Beckerman finished fifth while earning his first All-American honor with a 31-10 record last year.

Beckerman has set high standards to live up to that ranking: "My main thing this year is to dominate all my opponents."

The Huskers' other returning All American is junior Bryan Snyder. Snyder posted a 43-3 record last season and finished fifth at 157 pounds.

Snyder entered the NCAA Championships as the No. 1 seed but lost in the first round. Without a chance to finish first, Snyder fought back to finish fifth.

With that first round loss lingering in the back of Snyder's head, he is determined to go all the way and bring home a national championship to Nebraska.

"I think (the loss) was a blessing in disguise," Snyder said. "It made me take a character check. I've already been through the wrestlebacks. I'm not going to be there again."

Manning is relying on the trio to lead the rest of the team.

"Those guys have been there, and they've had a lot of success," Manning said. "I think the other guys are going to (look up to them)."

While the Huskers have nothing to worry about at those three weights, Manning said there are some other spots where they aren't so strong.

One of those spots is at 184

pounds, where ninth-ranked senior Charles McTorry finished 21-10 last year. McTorry, a previous NCAA qualifier, probably won't wrestle until mid-December because of shoulder and neck injuries.

Manning will have some help finding wrestlers to fill NU's remaining holes. New Husker assistant Terry Brands joins Manning's staff from the wrestling powerhouse of Iowa, where he was a two-time national champion.

The other assistant is Steve Hamilton, a familiar face to Manning. Hamilton worked on Manning's staff at Northern Iowa after winning All-American honors four years in a row at UNI.

Snyder said the staff passes its understanding and appreciation of wrestling on to the team.

"The coaches bring a lot of motivation. They bring out the best in us," Snyder said. "Each coach has their own little specialty to get us going."

The staff will have its hands full with the Big 12 conference. Four Big 12 teams enter the season as four of the country's top seven teams.

Huskers must mature quickly

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ing scorer (9.8 points per game) and rebounder (6.2 rpg), said the loss of offensive production could be compensated.

"We have a lot of threats on offense," Leonhardt said. "I don't think it will be a problem."

While the Huskers lost a number of experienced players, the team also will welcome back two key contributors who were forced to sit out last season, with serious knee injuries - senior forward Monique Whitfield and sophomore forward Stephanie Jones.

Whitfield, a former junior college All American, is expected to supply NU with instant offense after sitting out all of last season. Jones, a former Nike high school All American at Omaha Benson, scored 5.6 points and four rebounds per game last season before being injured in the Huskers' seventh game.

While the Huskers lack a go-to player like Kubik, a second team All American last season, NU can boast one of the deepest teams in the conference.

The coach prefers to look at the cup as being half full.

"Our strength is numbers," Sanderford said. "We have the ability to wear people down with our pressure and hopefully wear them down with our running game."

But who will lead the running game is still up in the air, Sanderford said.

Two freshmen, Shannon Howell and K.C. Cowgill, are vying for playing time at the point with

sophomore Isha Kelley (1.2 ppg) and senior Amanda Went (5.8 ppg).

"You're going to see all four of those kids at one time or another at the point," Sanderford said.

He won't have much time to let the youngsters grow with what Sanderford called a "gruesome" non-conference schedule. Of the Huskers' 13 non-conference games, five are against teams in last season's NCAA Tournament.

"We could be 6-5 at Christmas and be a good basketball team," Sanderford said.

Sanderford, however, said he wouldn't use the non-conference schedule as a measuring stick for how good his team is. Rather, it will show the Huskers how far they have to go.

NU has gone to postseason play in each of Sanderford's three seasons. Time will tell if the 2000 Huskers will follow suit, he said.

"I'm not sure this is an NCAA Tournament team, but I hope it is," Sanderford said.

Likely because of the team's inexperience, NU is picked to finish seventh in the Big 12, a ranking Sanderford said he understands but doesn't agree with.

Nebraska's final spot in the standings will hinge on whether the five freshmen and six sophomores on the roster can produce despite their inexperience.

"Everything centers around us," said Margaret Richards, one of the newcomers. "We'll have to step up a whole lot."

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