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The Bear

Sanderford's team reflects him

BY JOHN GASKINS

Walk anywhere near the main arena of the Bob Devaney Sports Center on a winter afternoon, and you'll immediately hear the growling.

It's a booming, hard-hitting southern drawl of repeated commands and constructive criticism.

"Push it! Push it! Push it! Start over. Again! You're not listening to what I said. Do it again. We're gonna keep doing this until we get it right!"

The growl, via the loud PA system, comes from a stout man with a red face and veins popping out of his forehead, with hair and arms flying all over the place.

This scene has earned him the nickname "The Bear."

"He says he's not trying to embarrass anybody," said senior guard Amanda Went of boisterous Coach Paul Sanderford, who has made a name for himself and his program over the past four years greatly through his bold demeanor.

"But you can hear him all over Devaney. Other athletic teams come in and just watch because it's just crazy."

The scene seems the same at women's basketball practices as it has been for four years. Players are running, banging, shooting around as if practices were actual games, or wars.

Sanderford, their field general, seems the same, as well. So are the goals the team has set every year he's been here: to be a force in the Big 12 and qualify for the NCAA tournament.

But in the fourth year of the Paul Sanderford era of women's basketball at Nebraska — an era marked by advancement in winning attitude, popularity and respect for the team — things have changed.

For the first time since he's been here, this is truly Sanderford's basketball team. The days of former Coach Angela Beck's run-and-finesse game are over, and those players are gone.

And although he's lost the top three scorers from last year's team, for the first time all of Sanderford's players know no other NU coach, and almost all of his players were recruited by him.

"It's always been my team," Sanderford said. "But I like the makeup of it. I like the personality."

The personality is his personality, and it's different from past NU teams; a team, in his words — he hopes — will "make winning ugly stylish."

"Competitive and physical," said Went, a veteran leader who, judging by appearance, hits the weights and the boards with the brute force Sanderford demands.

"These girls are strong. They're real physical. If you don't come to practice with your hard hat everyday, you're probably not going to play. You see bruises all over us, and it just comes with the territory."

"We're trying to do something different with the kind of athletes that we have this year. In the past, we've had great ballplayers but not the kind that can get done what these kids can get done."

They are the kind of athletes Sanderford feels he needs to recruit for Nebraska to become a national-title contender because being a national-title contender is what Sanderford wants. He feels the tools are in place for NU to start a run after three years of 20-win basketball and three NCAA Tournament appearances.

However, a rollercoaster ride is expected in 2000-01, considering NU has 11 freshmen and sophomores on the roster and no clue who its starting lineup will be. Such a situation has left experts to predict a below-Sanderford-standard seventh-place finish in the Big 12 this year.

Sanderford — who takes pride in the spotlight and enjoys having a powerful image — says that's a reasonable pick, but that doesn't mean he plans to change any team goals.

The Bear doesn't have much patience for "rebuilding" anything, not after leading Western Kentucky to near the top of the women's game for 18 years before he arrived at NU in 1997.

"If we're not going to play in the postseason, I'm not going to be a happy camper," Sanderford said. "I've been fortunate enough to get 15 (NCAA Tournament) watches and three Final Four rings. I'm too old to lower my goals."

"Let's face it. I came here to win a national championship, and we're not there. If you can't get it done or be on the way in four or five years, you're probably not going to do it."

So this crop of youngsters has a hard task. Playing for Sanderford is not for the faint of heart.

The epitome of the Sanderford style is NU sophomore Stephanie Jones, who tore her ACL last season while diving for a loose ball and crashing into the scorer's table.

"When he comes push to push, he's got two or three people behind you," said Jones, a former blue-chip prepster from Omaha Benson who chose Nebraska over powerhouse UConn. "So, if you're not getting it done, somebody's going to get it done for you."

"We've got the kind of girls that, they compete so hard, they're not willing to give up because they're not letting you take their spot. It forces a lot of us in practice to compete at a level they've never seen."

As restless as Sanderford gets, his growl is actually heard at a less frequent rate nowadays. Sanderford said he pushed so hard with last year's underachieving team — which squeezed into the NCAA Tournament after a miserable start — that he stopped enjoying coaching for maybe the first time in his life.

With his system at NU now firmly in place, Sanderford has instilled a lot more confidence in his assistants to let them do more of the coaching. Fourth-year assistant Jeff Walz runs the defense. Third-year assistant Steve Curtis works the new motion offense. Third-year assistant Michelle Clark focuses on rebounds.

Sanderford now refers to himself as the "coordinator."

"When you come in and start a program, you have to establish that it's your program," he said. "I probably did 90 percent of the coaching my first year, 95 percent of the individual work."

"Now, I've got a more veteran staff, and I'm trying to allow them to coach," he said. "I think the kids now when I stop and interject have a tendency to hear more what I'd say. Everyone's heard me so much for three years, they'd probably shut me up if I kept going at the rate I was going."

What hasn't changed about Sanderford as a coach is how he is able to get his players to go to war for him. That isn't all by being a mean bear on the court. What many don't know about the often-parodied madman is the teddy bear he is off the court.

Team dinners at Sanderford's house and long one-on-one conversations are commonplace and a major part of his persona, said Jami Kubik, a former NU four-year letterwinner who helped lead Sanderford's first team to 23 wins in her senior season. Kubik is now an administrative assistant for Sanderford.

"His door is always open," Kubik said. "It might not seem like it off-hand, but he's much more a people person (than Beck was). He really takes the time to get to know the kids and what they are like."

Said Sanderford: "As soon as we leave that floor, I try to leave it on the floor."

"You can't ask your players to run through a wall or dive on the floor after a loose ball or step in front of somebody going full speed and take a charge if you're not willing to get involved in their lives. I want (the players) to know if they're hurt, or sick, or in trouble, I'll be the first one there."

And the players recognize this, he said.

"I think the players see me as more than that red-faced guy screaming for them to go harder. There's a little more substance there, I hope."

Maybe the flailing arms and flying hair and growling voice won't get Nebraska a national championship, no matter how hard Sanderford tries. Maybe this young and unsettled team of 2000-01 won't be any better than middle-of-the-pack Big 12 material.

But that won't stop The Bear from growling.

"I think this year I'm excited every day to come back to practice because nobody expects very much," Sanderford said.

"It's like your parents telling you that you can't go to the beach, or you can't go on spring break to Cancun — you're going to find a way to get it done. That's kind of my makeup. If you tell me I can't do something, I'm very motivated to find a way."

That's what he hopes his first true Nebraska team does this year.

Women's team deep but untested

BY JAMIE SUHR

In his 18 years of pacing Division I sidelines, Nebraska women's basketball Coach Paul Sanderford has never had it quite like this.

With the season quickly approaching, Sanderford has no idea who his starting five will be. And with the Huskers' "strength in numbers," he may not know for the rest of the season.

"Starting isn't gonna be a big key on this basketball team," Sanderford said. "We're probably gonna get at least 10 people dou-

ble figure (minutes of) playing time."

Sanderford said 15 players will battle for the team's top 10 spots in the rotation, and the starters will be determined game by game.

"A lot of it depends on matchups and who steps up defensively," Sanderford said.

This much is clear — Casey Leonhardt will be the team's starting center. Everything else is surrounded by a cloud of uncertainty.

NU must replace three starters: Nicole Kubik, Brooke

Swartz and Charlie Rogers. Each graduated with more than 1,000 points in their careers. Another starter, Melody Peterson, left for personal reasons, and Naciska Gilmore, the team's first player off the bench, also graduated.

Those five players started a collective 125 games last season. Besides Leonhardt, who started 24 games last season, NU returnees combined to start just six games last year.

Leonhardt, NU's top return-

Please see **WOMEN** on 8

Pain-free

Belcher back to lead Huskers

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND

Cookie Belcher feels that no one player could be blamed for the 19-loss season that Nebraska endured last year.

And that includes himself. "I tried to help all I could," Belcher said. "It got to the point where I was so frustrated with how we were playing and the losing that I shut down and may have hurt the team by doing so."

After playing in four out of NU's first eight games, Belcher and his injured wrist were designated to a spectator role, rendering him helpless on the bench.

But Belcher is back, hungry as ever to make up for last season's struggles — and those around him are paying attention.

"I think my teammates listen to me today," Belcher said. "I don't know what it was last year, but it has changed from everybody wanting to be the top dog. They know that I am the veteran and know what I am talking about."

Under former Coach Danny Nee, NU had little structure, equaling disaster with five contributing newcomers.

Belcher said that new Coach Barry Collier has brought what the Huskers have been needing — discipline.

And for that reason, along with last year's newcomers getting a full season under their belts, Belcher is thinking big. The fifth-year senior is talking of conference championships and NU's first-ever NCAA Tournament win.

Belcher badly wants to win and is in the best shape of his life to do it. He set six Husker performance marks in offseason testing to prove it.

"I came in fresh because I was out, and I was hungry to prove that I did something this summer," he said. "By coming in and testing the way I did, it showed me that I was in good shape — the best shape since I have been here."

For the first time in more than a year, Belcher is happy with his situation, happy the ups and downs of last year are behind him.

Belcher entered last year with hopes of playing at full speed at some point, agreeing to help Nee win games even while he wasn't 100 percent.

But the more he played, the more he realized that he hurt his team, hurt his wrist and most of all, hurt himself. But he fought

through it all in the beginning, telling Nee he would give it his best shot.

Nee was supposed to use him sparingly at first, but Belcher found himself starting against Creighton and Pittsburgh and logging major minutes. He also found his wrist hurting more as time went by, which made him doubt his ability to play the entire year.

Still, Belcher would be pressured to play by Nee, whose inexperienced team was 4-4 after Belcher's last game of the year against Pitt.

Shortly after the 69-57 win against the Panthers, it became public that the NCAA, because of the way Nee dealt with Belcher's status, may not grant Belcher a medical redshirt.

"At that point, it kind of opened my eyes to what was really going on with my situation," said Belcher, who averaged six points and 3.8 rebounds in four games last year. "I didn't know if I was going to get that year back, and I was hearing things from different people that I might not get it back."

After deciding not to make a go of it, Belcher suffered through the losses on the bench and the scrutiny that went along with it.

"A lot of times people were saying that the team was losing because of me not playing, and some of my teammates were saying, 'We need Cookie back,'" Belcher said. "I just wanted them to realize that if they just play and not worry about me, then they would be all right."

While dressed in street clothes on the bench, Belcher said, he began to recognize things about his teammates that he could not see while on the floor. He also took on a coach's role, pulling players off to the side to give instruction and motivation.

But being a vocal leader this season is still in the works for Belcher — something he is working at because he knows his leadership will go a long way in determining how many wins Nebraska produces.

As vocal as Belcher is, teammate and roommate Rodney Fields said the real example that Belcher sets for the team is in his actions on the court.

And everybody knows that will start on the defensive side of the ball, on which Belcher has been a dominant force since his freshman year.

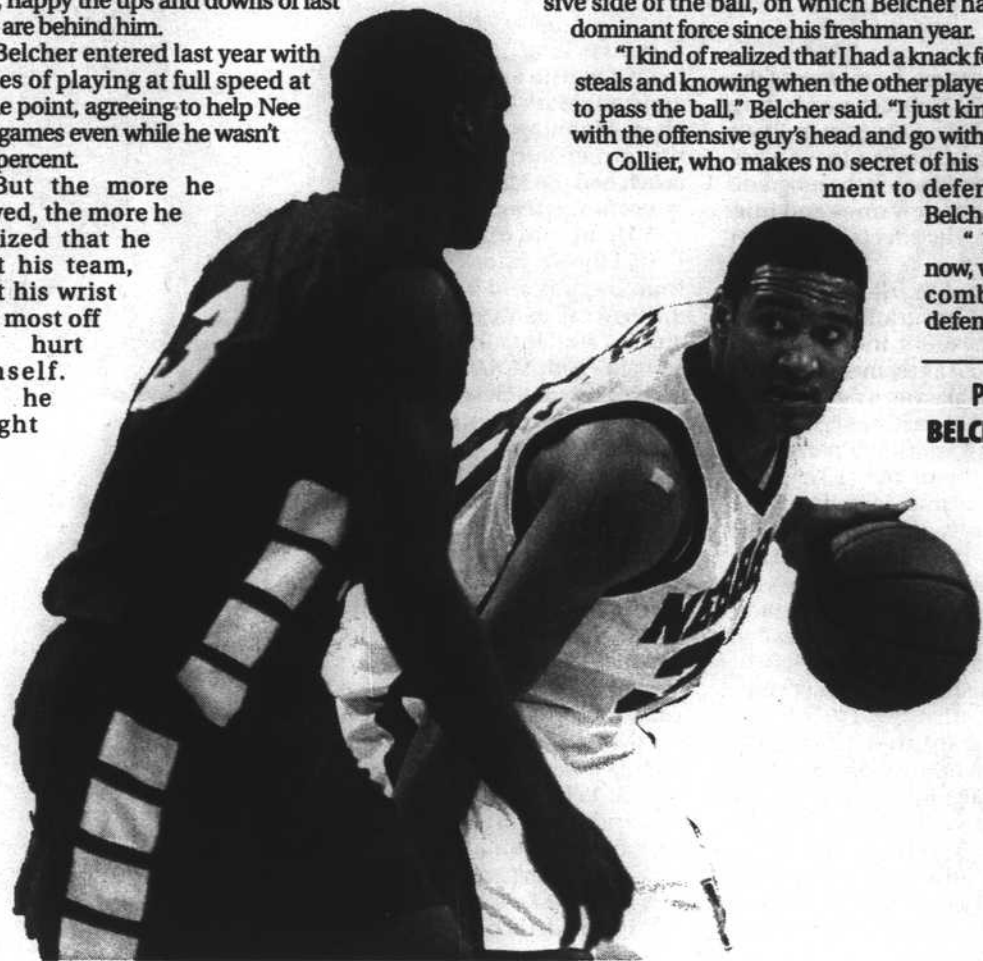
"I kind of realized that I had a knack for getting steals and knowing when the other player is going to pass the ball," Belcher said. "I just kind of play with the offensive guy's head and go with it."

Collier, who makes no secret of his commitment to defense, said

Belcher is vital.

"Right now, we have a combination defense where

Please see **BELCHER** on 9



Collier stresses discipline to team

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

Nebraska junior guard Cary Cochran heard that new basketball coach Barry Collier would run a tight ship, but this was borderline crazy.

Cochran was pulling down a solid 3.19 GPA in communication studies and certainly makes it to class way more than many of the backpack wearers who trod across the UNL campus.

However, Collier thought Cochran was slacking ever so slightly, and he let his player know it in their first meeting.

"He laid down the law right when he got here," Cochran said. "He looked down on my grades, looked at me, and said: 'I see you missed this one class two times during the year. What's the deal?'"

Cochran attributed one of his absences to sickness but couldn't offer an explanation for the second absence.

"So you blew it off," Collier said.

"I can't remember," Cochran retorted.

"Then, you blew it off," Collier said.

"He sent the message right away that we do things right," Cochran said. "I think that's the big thing, that we do things right in our program."

Welcome discipline and fundamental-loving Barry Collier, the new coach of the Cornhuskers. Collier took Butler University from obscurity to three NCAA tournaments, including a 23-8 season last year that ended only on a

buzzer-beating shot by national runner-up Florida in the first round of the tourney.

NU fans are now hoping Collier will be the savior of a team that lulled through a 11-19 season under the direction of Danny Nee.

Collier understands that all eyes are on his first Husker edition, and he welcomes the high hopes of the Nebraska faithful.

"I have those same expectations to have a successful season and push for the post-season," Collier said. He said early-season success could depend on how quickly the team can grasp the offensive and defensive sets.

Cochran has seen the team improve its grasp on Collier's system every day in practice.

"I think it's important to get better defensively, and I think we are doing that everyday," Cochran said. "Learning the plays and executing the offense is the easier part."

Nebraska senior center Kimani Friend said the team and coaches are coming together as the regular season approaches.

"Everybody's been gelling well and starting to know their roles and recognize each other's skills and talents on the court by just being together more," Friend said. "There wasn't that unity last year. Having that unity is going to help us win games."

The Huskers should be solidified by the presence of senior guard Cookie Belcher, who sat out last season with a medical redshirt for a hurt right wrist.

The Huskers did lose three sig-

nificant contributors from last season: Larry Florence (13 ppg); Louis Truscott (8.2 ppg); who transferred to Houston; and Danny Walker (9.6 ppg), kicked off the team for disciplinary reasons.

In preseason All-Big 12 pick Ffriend, returning starter Bradford and significant bench contributors Rodney Fields and Cary Cochran, NU does return a solid nucleus from last season's squad. Add a healthy Belcher, and Cochran thinks this year's team is solid.

"There's not as many question marks," Cochran said. "Last year, there were so many question marks about who was going to play, who was hurt, who was going to miss a meeting."

Friend also said the team is showing much more confidence at this time in the season compared with last year, and it has much to do with NU's new head coach.

"With (Collier), it's basketball now and fun later. We're here to win, and we need to do things to get better as a team and reach our potential," Friend said. "We needed discipline, and that's what we were lacking last year."

Collier thinks that philosophy will work. The first-year Husker coach said that if his players improve as he hopes, he doesn't think he will be vacationing in mid-March.

"We want to make progress and take things one game at a time, but we have plans of being in the post-season and the NCAA tournament," Collier said.