

Cornhuskers' title bid begins with Princeton

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

Tonight, the Nebraska volleyball team begins what it hopes will be the first of six consecutive victories on its road to the school's second national championship in school history.

The 28-0 Cornhuskers take on Princeton, the 20-8 Ivy League champions at 7:30 p.m. at the NU Coliseum. South Carolina and George Washington will play at 5 p.m. at the coliseum, with both winners meeting Saturday night.

While a huge underdog

to No. 1 Nebraska, the Tigers aren't willing to concede just yet. Princeton senior outside hitter Emily Brown was quoted as saying that Princeton could pull one of the biggest upsets in volleyball history.

"I like their spunk and attitude," Nebraska Coach John Cook said, after reading Brown's quote aloud at Tuesday's press conference.

Nebraska sophomore middle blocker Amber Holmquist said Nebraska doesn't need bulletin-board material to fire them up.

"We're just prepared to show them the same things

we've been doing all year," Holmquist said. "We have enough motivation. We're used to teams going all out against us."

Princeton Coach Glenn Nelson didn't offer any bold statements about Friday's contest, going instead with the "happy to be there" route that is notorious of major NCAA tournament underdogs.

"We're excited to play in front of a big crowd," Nelson said to the Daily Princetonian. "It's really a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for these girls."

"We're there to represent the Ivy League. We know our chances of winning might be slim, but we're just going to represent and play the best we can."

Princeton's chances are slim, with height playing as a major disadvantage for the Tigers.

Princeton has only three players that stand over 6-foot-tall. Nebraska has no one under that height in its starting line-up.

Cook said Nebraska won't take Princeton lightly, though.

"We always feel like each

match we play is the most important match at that time," Cook said.

One thing definitely important to the Huskers is home court advantage. With the No. 1 seed in the central region, NU can stay in the cozy confines of the Coliseum until the Final Four, provided it continues to win.

Holmquist said nothing beats NCAA Tournament volleyball in Lincoln.

"It's magical every time that I step on the floor at the coliseum," she said. "It's an amazing experience."



DN File Photo

NU senior Kim Behrends and the No. 1 Huskers head into the first round of the NCAA Tournament against Princeton at 7 tonight at the Nebraska Coliseum.

KSU, OU rematch for title

BY SAMUEL MCKEYON

The password is ... umbrella.

It's become the catchphrase for Saturday's Big 12 Championship between No. 1 Oklahoma and No. 7 Kansas State in Kansas City, Mo., a contest that has one half of the national title game hanging in the balance.

It's the surprise Sooners (11-0) who could earn an Orange Bowl ticket to play No. 3 Florida State if they can beat the Wildcats (10-2) again after winning in Manhattan 41-31 earlier this season.

"I just think it's exciting," Oklahoma Coach Bob Stoops said earlier this week. "It's another game to play. We're fired up about it."

But on top of the onus to beat KSU twice in one year is an added K-State advantage: a new defensive strategy to combat OU's passing attack, led by Big 12 Offensive Player of Year Josh Heupel, that riddled nearly every opponent in its wake this season.

Texas A&M first employed the "umbrella" defense in a 35-31 loss to the Sooners three weeks ago by deploying a glut of defensive backs into coverage - the reverse of KSU's blitz-first strategy in the first game and Nebraska's pressure package in its 31-14 loss to Oklahoma.

A&M, whose base 3-4 defense allows for greater flexibility, started the trend that forced Heupel into poor games against Texas Tech (a 24-14 win) and lame-duck-led Oklahoma State (a 12-7 win).

The Cowboys, in fact, began dropping nine, even ten, defensive backs into coverage while holding Heupel to just 154 yards passing, a career low.

"I've never seen a defense quite like that before," Heupel said.

The Heisman Trophy candidate should expect some sort of wrinkle from K-State Saturday, as the Wildcats can't possibly duplicate its defensive scheme if they hope to win. Heupel had his finest game in Manhattan, completing 29 of 37 passes for 374 yards.

"That's more than pretty good in anybody's book," KSU Coach Bill Snyder said, adding Oklahoma State was the first team this season to show OU new and challenging defensive schemes.

By contrast, the Wildcats' Jonathan Beasley completed just 36 percent of his passes, largely because eight were dropped, both early and late in the game.

A critical drop came from All-American Quincy Morgan with OU ahead 38-31.

"That's been haunting me all season," Morgan said.

That's not all. K-State still smarts from a 33-27 loss to A&M in the 1998 Championship, which cost the Wildcats a shot at the national title.

Snyder pushes aside any notions of revenge. But he does not deny still remembering it.

"If you fail to succeed then obviously there is some pain that goes along with it, and there was at that time," Snyder said. "Maybe that game, more so than others, perhaps because of what was on the line."



Scott McClurg/DN

NU power forward Steffon Bradford has used his strength to pull down a team-leading 11.3 rebounds per game so far this season. Bradford averaged eight rebounds per game last season to go along with 11 points per contest.

Husker Muscle

Power big part of Bradford's game

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND

Steffon Bradford doesn't like to mince words. When describing his game, the Nebraska power forward prefers just one - power.

And he has a tattoo to show for it - a pit bull on his left bicep that he refers to as "Pit." "It represents power," Bradford said. "Pit already has a determined attitude. Once he bites you, he doesn't let go until you are dead."

So do "Pit" and Bradford have similarities? Most definitely, Bradford said.

Bradford is the team's warrior under the boards, controlling the paint and averaging 11.3 rebounds per game.

A 240-pound tireless worker, Bradford has earned the praise of his new coach after only three games this season.

"Steffon is a real warrior on the boards," NU Coach Barry Collier said.

One example of Bradford's effort comes looking at his rebounding statistics. The senior has 34 rebounds total, 19 of which are offensive.

"It's hard to go out there and get offensive boards," he said. "Over half of my rebounds are offensive."

"You can't tell someone to go out there and get five or six offensive boards. That's hard work. You have to take the elbows in the mouth and take people cheap-shooting you."

There is no secret to Bradford's rebounding formula. He said it is all about good instincts that God

has blessed him with.

"Coach said I have bad positioning, so it isn't that," Bradford said. "It is just outworking your opponent. Every time I grab a rebound, I think about my family."

"That's my fuel, my drive and the fire that keeps me going."

Bradford must have been thinking about his family a lot last year as he averaged eight rebounds per game to go along with his scoring average of 11 points per outing.

But with the absence of center Kimani Ffriend from NU's first two exhibition games and the Husker's opener at Oral Roberts, Bradford needed to pick it up offensively.

He did, scoring a career-high 26 points against ORU after being a dominant force in the exhibitions, averaging 18.5 points per game.

"Steffon has played real aggressively and has been a big factor for us offensively," Collier said.

"If I get the ball, I know how to finish," Bradford added.

In 2000-01, Bradford is finishing on 73 percent of his attempts, making 19 of 26 field goals on the year.

Last year, Bradford shot 50 percent but didn't always finish when he was near the rim, much like many of his teammates.

Bradford didn't see much in the way of motivating factors when times were rough, either.

Please see BRADFORD on 9

NU's dunk-happy offense battles Pitt

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND

Dunking gets the crowd pumped up, the players off the bench and is a big momentum shifter in the game of basketball.

The execution is significant enough that it has its own vocabulary - slam, stuff, flush and jam.

Whatever the name, Nebraska has seen plenty in its first three games this season.

"I notice somebody had the idea of changing the rule and counting dunks as one point instead of two," NU Coach Barry Collier said. "Of course, we are against that. I would rather have them go up strong and attack offensively."

Collier is against the proposed rule because his team has compiled 20 dunks thus far, just under seven a game.

The slams have come from all different areas - fast breaks, post feeds and the Husker favorite: alley-oops.

"For the most part they have

done a really good job of completing those passes," Collier said. "When you have as much room for error with how Cookie (Belcher) and Kimani (Ffriend) can jump, you expect to get some of that."

Belcher and Ffriend lead the team with seven dunks a piece and Steffon Bradford and Rodney Fields trail with four and two dunks, respectively.

Bradford said the jams were commonplace last year in practice and are showing in games this year because of unselfish play.

"Dunks are a momentum-giver," Bradford said. "This year we enjoy each other and have so much fun."

"We know what we can do together. In practice, all we do is dunk on each other. Last year, we were in a war amongst each other, but this year we are like a family."

NU, which will enter Saturday's 6:30 p.m. contest at

Please see HOOPS on 9

National meet offers stern early season test for NU wrestlers

BY VINCE KUPPIG

After breezing through its first three dual meets of the season, the Nebraska wrestling team is now prepared to face its toughest competition so far at the Cliff Keen Las Vegas Collegiate Invitational this weekend.

The tournament field consists of 53 teams, with action starting this morning and concluding Saturday night.

The tournament features team scoring along with individual titles and will be the first non-dual meet of the season for the Cornhuskers, who are 3-0 and ranked sixth by Amateur Wrestling News.

Eleven teams competing at the invita-

tional are ranked in the top 20, including No. 5 Illinois, No. 6 Nebraska, No. 8 Lehigh, No. 9 Michigan and No. 10 Arizona State.

"It is going to be the toughest competition we've faced all year," NU Coach Mark Manning said. "Our team is ready for the challenge."

The most difficult match appears to be for NU senior Aui Conner at 174 pounds, in which the nation's top three wrestlers are competing.

Conner, who just achieved his career-high eighth-place ranking, is coming off a summer of rehabilitation for a surgically repaired shoulder.

"If I could get a good performance, I will

get confidence that my arm is holding up and that I'm ready for the season," he said.

Manning said his 174-pounder is well on his way back.

"Aui's been training extremely well and is only going to get better," Manning said. "I think it's important for him to see these top-three ranked guys because he wants to end up on the top."

Besides Conner's 174-pound weight class, the invitational features four other weights with top-ranked wrestlers, including the 197-pound division where NU senior Brad Vering is atop the rankings.

Looking to climb up in the individual rankings is senior Charles McTorry, who is

returning to competition at 184 pounds for the first time this season. He has been sidelined with a nerve problem that causes numbness in his left arm.

Manning said he doesn't know how long McTorry is going to be able to make it this weekend because of the injury, but the invite should provide him with some much needed competition.

The competition will be helpful for the team, Manning said.

"We're going to see how our guys match up with some of the other top wrestlers in the country," he said. "It's a good indication to see where we are and what we need to do."