

Nebraska natives return to face NU

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND

Fans attending this weekend's Husker Team Classic may have a hard time figuring out which exactly is the home team at the Bob Devaney Sports Center.

The confusion may stem from one of the tournament's participants, Pacific, sporting four native Nebraskans on its roster - two of which hail from Lincoln.

Juniors Mike Hahn, Mike Preston and Dan Masters all made the trip to Stockton, Calif., three years ago from the Cornhusker State and sophomore Tom Cackle followed one year later.

Masters, from Plattsmouth, said this weekend's tournament will be bittersweet.

"It's hard to describe," he said. "It will be my last opportunity to play in front of everybody back home."

Masters said he expects anywhere from 30 to 40 family and friends to attend Pacific's games, while Cackle, a Lincoln Christian

graduate, said he expects 75 to 100.

Hahn, from Lincoln Northeast, and Preston, from Omaha Westside, said they expect a crowd of about 20 apiece.

Pacific Coach Bob Thomason said he feels it is important to give his players an opportunity to come home and play - an opportunity that was sealed when ex-NU Coach Danny Nee ran into the three juniors when they were flying out to school.

As part of the deal that was struck, Pacific will play host to Nebraska next season in California on Jan. 2 in the final game of the three-year contract.

"I have a lot of respect for him to do that," Thomason said. "That was a class act."

If the Nebraska pipeline comes through again for Thomason, one might expect another deal to be signed.

"One of my assistants is out looking again tonight," Thomason said. "There are players out here that fit in well with our school."

That fit is what drew Preston out west.

"Everyone really cares," said Preston, who had a team-high 17 points against NU last season. "I like the smaller school atmosphere and all of the coaches. It has been the best fit."

The whole situation seems strange to Hahn, who played on the Godfather's AAU team with Preston and Masters.

"It's really crazy," he said. "But it has worked out real good, and I hope that they keep recruiting Nebraska. We have great players here."

The Huskers defeated the Tigers 92-68 last year in Lincoln, but if Pacific is looking for revenge, it must first beat Alaska-Fairbanks at 8:30 on Friday night.

"We are not looking straight to Nebraska, but we would like to hopefully play Nebraska in the second round," Cackle said.

Hahn, Preston and Cackle have all started four games apiece for the 3-2 Tigers, while Masters has been slowed by an injury so far this season.

NU looking for trophy

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"The University of Nebraska at Stockton is what they're moving towards with all those Nebraska kids," Collier said. "But one of the dangers is looking ahead to a Saturday night matchup. Anyone can get into trouble on the first night."

With Nebraska's focus squarely on getting back into the win column after a 52-51 loss at Pittsburgh, little notice has been given to the fact that Collier also can rack up his 200th career coaching victory with a tournament championship.

"To be honest I didn't even know about it, but we expect him to get it," Cochran said. "I just know he has two here, and hopefully he gets a lot more, and I am confident he will."

Women attempt to end three-game skid

BY LINCOLN ARNEAL

It hasn't reached the point of becoming an emergency yet, but the NU women's basketball team best change its losing ways.

Nebraska has lost its last three games, which were all on the road. Luckily for NU, it faces St. Peter's (N.J.) next in the Bob Devaney Sports Center, where the Huskers are 4-0.

It has been rough going for NU. The Huskers have looked great at times, as in their 69-61 defeat of then-ranked University of California-Santa Barbara, but at others, such as Wednesday's 12-point loss to Washington, things haven't been so pretty.

Youth and poor shooting has hurt NU's offense recently. The Huskers have been in all three of their losses late in the game and had chances to win, but not

being able to score doomed them.

NU has averaged just 59 points in the three losses compared with 77 points in their four wins.

Finding the right combination hasn't been easy for Coach Paul Sanderford. Nine different players have started for NU this year in seven games. Only seniors Casey Leonhardt and Monique Whitfield have started all seven games.

St. Peter's will be another challenge for NU. The Peahens were 3-1 going into Thursday's late game against Rider. St. Peter's finished last year with a 23-8 record and qualified for the NCAA Tournament.

The Peahens are led by senior Courtney Wicks, who is averaging 15 points per game.

The 2:05 game on Sunday will be broadcast on NETV, Channel 12.

Meendering sits while Huskers soar

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action. (A national championship) is a huge accomplishment, but it will be really hard to not participate in it.

"There's come a point in every match this year where I've thought, 'Ah, I just want to play.' I want to come out of the redshirt. I'd give anything for it."

Of course, this was all by choice.

The senior, with the recommendation of Cook and former Coach Terry Pettit, decided this summer to redshirt the season. She is not injured, and she's not academically ineligible.

Meendering is not playing her senior season in 2000 for several reasons: To prevent burnout. To prevent breaking up the team's chemistry that had formed without her over the spring, as she tried out for the 2000 Olympic team.

To reload for 2001, when the "Fab Four" sophomores Big 12 player of the year Greichaly Cepero, Amber Holmquist, Laura Pilakowski and Lindsey Wischmeier will be a year older and a year stronger, and the team will be even deadlier.

Whatever the reasons, she's a bystander. Sure, she plays and simulates the Huskers' opposition in practice and gives the young whippersnappers serious real-life competition.

But she's on the bench, or at home, in real matches. How she got there is an odd and most compelling tale - almost as odd and compelling as how well the team has performed without her.

"Coach Cook made us commit from day one of spring ball that we were going to be a national-championship team with or without Nancy," senior outside hitter Kim Behrends said.

Meendering took the spring semester, and therefore NU's spring volleyball season, off to work out at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., and try out for the 2000 Olympic team.

It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and Meendering emerged as a top candidate to

make the team. Shortly before the last cut was to be made in May, the Huskers were to take off for a three-week trip to China - a trip the team describes as a major factor in the continuity that makes it so successful. Meendering badly wanted to join them.

She asked the U.S. coaches if the trip would affect her chances of making the Olympics. They said no. Destined to be a shoe-in, Meendering joined the trip.

When she arrived back in the states, the U.S. team's decision had been made, and it wasn't the one she expected. She had been cut, and she was given little, if any, reason. Her dream, all of a sudden, was shattered.

"It really shocked me," Meendering said. "It definitely hurt for me personally. It was so strange the way it came about. But what could I do? I quickly enrolled in summer school and joined the team when it started summer workouts."

"When something you had planned six months for all of a sudden cracks up, all you can do is pick up the pieces and go on."

During those months, the Huskers trained as usual. Cook sent Meendering e-mail telling her how quickly they were developing, so she expected a finely tuned crew to work with whenever she would return.

What she found when she arrived just after her Olympic surprise was a team that was doing just fine without the 1999 Big 12 player of the year.

So fine that Cook convinced her it was best to be left that way. It was a hard pill for Meendering to swallow, but after seeing NU go 30-0, she's convinced it was the right move.

"In hindsight, that would've been kind of crazy to try and tear that apart," Meendering said. "I think it would've been different because when you play with somebody long enough, you understand how they play. Everybody had assumed their role."

"To come back into that, to get a starting position, someone would have to lose one, and that

"There's come a point in every match this year where I've thought, 'Ah, I just want to play.' I want to come out of the redshirt. I'd give anything for it."

Nancy Meendering
NU redshirt volleyball player

twists the chemistry a little more, because now you've got some players on edge going, 'Am I going to lose my spot?' That would've harmed our team."

Cook knew what he was talking about. NU started ranked No. 11 - a low ranking for them - largely because of Meendering's absence. No matter.

In the season's second week, NU beat three ranked teams at Notre Dame's tournament, the capper being a five-set victory over then-No. 3 UCLA.

"That's when we realized this team could be something really special," senior and Meendering's good friend Jill McWilliams said.

Few teams throughout the year challenged NU, and those that did couldn't beef up in crunch time. Even when South Carolina came three points away from ending the season in last week's second-round NCAA match, the Huskers survived.

Which makes people wonder, would NU be as good, and would so many players like the super sophomores have emerged with Meendering in the lineup? Would her presence have actually hurt them?

"That's awfully tough to predict," Meendering said. Said Behrends: "Other people knew they had to step up, and they did. We have a lot of good players, not just one. I think the other players would have emerged anyway."

And, Meendering said, playing would have harmed her, too. She had taken 42 swings per match in '99, and the competitive atmosphere in Colorado Springs had exhausted her.

That, and she's had no pressure from coaches, no pressure

from the media, no injuries, and she can study a lot easier - all while staying in tip-top volleyball shape while practicing with (and in scrimmages against) the No. 1 team in the nation.

"Even when I came back, I didn't think I needed a break," she said. "Now I do. I can tell the difference in the way I play. It's been nice to kind of sit back and absorb things. I feel so refreshed."

So, her dream of being an Olympian fell through. So, she now knows Nebraska can win a national title without her playing a single second.

But Meendering seems peaceful, and as Behrends said, has not changed her unselfish attitude one bit.

"She's just always smiling, happy Nancy, helping wherever she can and encouraging us on the bench," Behrends said.

Next year, Meendering will be in her rightful spot - on the court, with a year's worth of power bottled up in that left arm.

And rustiness, she said, will be the least of her problems.

"The overload of adrenaline when I get back on the floor will be my biggest problem," she said. "I honestly think that by the time I get on the floor, the people on the top row of the bleachers better look out because I might miss a couple."

Few will expect her to miss much. And when the time comes, she'll be charging out of the locker room in her uniform and with her teammates.

In fact, she'll probably be the one leading the charge this time. That might just excite her the most.

"Yeah, I'll be ready," Meendering said. "It'll be exciting."

Vering faces tough match

BY DAVID DIEHL

Defending National Champion Brad Vering has an opportunity to avenge what could have been a dead end on his road to last year's national title.

When the seventh-ranked Cornhuskers battle Ohio State and Oregon State tomorrow, Vering will square off across from Nick Preston, the nation's No. 3 197-pounder, who nearly upset Vering in last year's NCAA quarterfinals.

Preston took a 4-3 lead on a takedown in the match's closing seconds and seemed to have pulled off the upset. But Vering whipped Preston onto his back for a two-point reversal and the lead with just two seconds left in the match.

Vering said the close call has provided him with motivation to work harder in the wrestling room to avoid possible upsets on his journey to a second national title.

But Vering said the rematch

with Preston on Saturday will still be a dogfight.

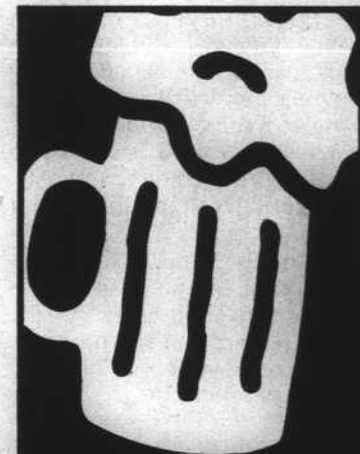
"It's a new year," Vering said. "He's gotten a lot better over the summer. I've gotten a lot better. We're raising the level of competition at that weight class, and we'll just see what happens."

The rematch highlights Nebraska's dual against the No. 15 Buckeyes, slated to begin at 1 p.m. at Lincoln Northeast High School. At 7 p.m., the Cornhuskers will take on 14th-ranked Oregon State. Both matches have been moved to Northeast's gym because of scheduling conflicts.

Nebraska Coach Mark Manning said the doubleheader should prepare his wrestlers for tournaments, such as the NCAAs, where wrestlers will be on the mat two or three times a day.

The drain is mental, as well as physical, Manning said.

"It's just you out there," he said. "There's not five other guys or 10 other guys out there. It's your deal."



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Ex-coach Nee is genuine, despicable

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erupts. The ensuing tirade is entirely unprintable. Let's just say he wasn't a big fan.

It isn't the antiseptic, distant sort of response that has come to be expected from major college coaches when dealing with reporters, that uneasy coexistence based on dual mistrust that results in a web of clichés.

It is childish. It is profane. It is ... honest.

Don't get the interview with Nee. He, apparently, doesn't talk to reporters employed by cocksucker newspapers, at least not today.

Dec. 9, 1999

First half against Creighton

Rewind a month. It is already clear that the Huskers are very, very bad.

But Cookie Belcher, Nebraska's best player even with the use of one wrist, is suiting up tonight against in-state rival Creighton.

There's reason for hope. NU plays like it. Nee coaches like it. The Civic Auditorium is rocking; the two teams are battling it out in a well played half. Although unable to shoot because of his injured right wrist, Belcher is all over the place.

Nee is electric, too. The jacket is off, the tie is loosened. He scowls, cajoles, pleads, spews forth venom at officials. And on this night, for one half, Nee coaches brilliantly, fooling the Bluejays with a variety of full-court presses, zones and zone traps. He gets his rag-tag bunch of players functioning as a single unit. For 20 minutes, he is truly masterful.

In the second half Nee's team falls apart. Creighton coasts to a double-digit win. The coach, and his players, deflate. Just another lopsided road loss in a season full of them, albeit with a little taste of what used to be.

Feb. 26, 2000
Nee's last stand

The final weeks of the Nee era are disgusting.

Nee is all-around surly, depressed. Like his team, he's given up on the season. He coaches like a man condemned to be fired, which he is.

Then, on Senior Day, in front of several thousand half-interested spectators, Nebraska finally wins.

Florence plays well in his last home game. At long last, Nee breaks NU's all-time wins record.

The embattled coach enters the press room, looking happier than he has in a while, but definitely not overjoyed. He, after all, is still condemned.

Then, the camera lights turn on. Nee straightens up, and out of the muck, musters what will be the final Danny memory for those who love to hate him, and hate to love him.

He stares straight into the camera. Smiles like an alligator.

"I pity the next son-of-a-bitch in here," he says. Exactly.

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