

The Perfect Season

The Nebraska volleyball team celebrates the game winning point in the NCAA championship match in Richmond, Va. The Huskers finished the season undefeated, only the second team in NCAA history to do so.



Scott McClurg/DN

Season to remember for Huskers

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

If only the Nebraska faithful had been at that dinner table in China.

Yes, if all the fans dressed in red could have been the person passing the dinner rolls to Greichaly Cepero on that summer evening in that China restaurant, they may have felt a little more comfortable about the upcoming season.

The Nebraska volleyball team was celebrating a successful team trip to China with a trip ending team dinner, and sophomore setter Greichaly Cepero took the spotlight like a best man at a wedding celebration.

Cook remembers the day as if it were yesterday. ...

"Greicha stood up in front of the team and said, 'We will win the national championship,' recalled Cook. "I think it takes a special kind of leader, being the setter on the team ... to make that statement and back it up ... and her team believed in her."

Granted, such a statement would seem a no-brainer after the season was written.

However, this was pre-season, Nancy Meendering was an almost certain redshirt due to Olympic tryouts and many Nebraska fans didn't even know a girl named Laura Pilakowski existed.

National championship? "I knew we would," Cepero said. "We had the people, our chemistry ... on that China trip, I realized that we were committed to work hard for each other and that we were going to do this."

Nebraska players couldn't help but think Cepero was right. If they could survive a trip to China together, the Kansas States, the Texas Techs, the Hawaiis were nothing but a small blip on the radar screen.

"We all agreed with Greicha," sophomore middle blocker Amber Holmquist said. "That last night in China... we survived... we were caught halfway around the world and we were still not sick of each other."

"We knew we were going to come together and we knew we had something special."

Making believers

Please see SEASON on 9

Huskers outlast UW for title

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

Long, long ago, while UNL students were sweating through first semester final exams, the Cornhusker volleyball team left for the Final Four in Richmond, Va. in hopes of passing their final tests.

Unlike most UNL students, however, the Nebraska volleyball team served up an ace on the tests put before them, scoring a perfect 34-0 season.

The Cornhuskers claimed the second national championship in school history by beating Wisconsin 15-9, 9-15, 7-15, 15-2, 15-9.

It wasn't an easy romp through the Virginia woods for NU, though.

Husker fans everywhere had to resort to the rally caps in the championship match.

Nebraska first-year Coach John Cook saw his No. 1 ranked Huskers spot his former Wisconsin team a 2-1 lead in games.

"Isn't this some irony?" a Wisconsin fan yelled from the stands.

"I probably had an ulcer," Cook said. "I had been dreading this match. How bad do you think they want to beat Nebraska with me being the coach there?"

Pretty bad. And when Wisconsin's junior outside hitter Sherisa Livingston hammered one of her team



Scott McClurg/DN

Senior hitter Angie Oxley smashes a kill over Wisconsin blockers during the championship match. The match was the last for seniors Oxley, Kim Behrends and Jill McWilliams.

high 19 kills to end game three, it looked as if the Big Red of the North might laugh last.

"We were passing and scrapping defensively, and that's the kind of ball we play best," Wisconsin Coach Pete Waite said. "We were making them chase us with our block."

Nebraska had rallied from behind before, overcoming a 2-1 deficit in the second round of the NCAA tournament against South Carolina, but NU

seemed to be displaying championship nerves, struggling to even pass the ball consistently.

The nerves never seemed so obvious as when NU's senior rightside hitter Angie Oxley, one of the best passers on the team, gave the Badgers two free aces by mishandling serves.

"I was not relaxed at all," Oxley said.

Please see VICTORY on 9

2000 title start of Cook, NU dynasty

Those dadgum corn-fed Nebraska girls have shaken up the volleyball world.

There's an eerie sense around the country that the Nebraska 2000 national championship run wasn't a one-time deal.

Nebraska has always been a top-flight volleyball program, but one Hawaii media member said it best as he watched this Nebraska ensemble dog-pile each other after concluding a perfect 34-0 season.

"Dynasty." Quite a word to throw around. Dynasty. It seems so Chicago Bulls to say.

But when you're talking women's volleyball right now, you're talking about Nebraska.

You're talking about its coach, John Cook. Cook said he came to Nebraska to win a national championship.

But in one year? And without a loss? Combined with the Coach-of-the-Year award?

The only problem facing Cook is how he tops this inaugural season of butt-kicking.

Maybe Cook will tie the girls' hands behind their backs next year just to make things interesting.

Unlikely though. Nebraska figures to be shooting for perfection again next year and the year after and.... Cook wouldn't have it any other way.



Brian Christopherson

Please see DYNASTY on 9

NU comes up just short against Mizzou

■ The Cornhuskers control most of the road contest, but a season-high 24 turnovers, including seven by Cookie Belcher, doom Nebraska.

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND

COLUMBIA, Mo. - For the second straight road game, the Nebraska basketball team received a crash course on the importance of taking care of the basketball.

As is the norm this season, the Huskers did not do it and paid for it dearly - dropping their conference opener 68-66 to Missouri on Saturday night behind a season-high 24 turnovers.

"We have the talent to play with anybody but you can't win any games turning the ball over like we did," guard Cookie Belcher said.

Despite the turnovers, Nebraska still had several chances to shock the 13,496 fans at the Harnes Center in the final seconds.

Down 68-66, the Huskers got another shot at a win or tie after Steffon Bradford turned it over

Missouri	68
Nebraska	66

on their previous possession when Mizzou guard Clarence Gilbert missed the front end of a one-and-one with 10.6 seconds remaining.

Following a timeout, John Robinson's three-point attempt was knocked out of bounds by Mizzou's Brian Grawer with 1.7 seconds left.

Missouri Coach Quin Snyder chose to place Tajudeen Soyoye, a 6-foot-9 forward, in front of the inbound pass and it paid off as Robinson's lob to Kimani Ffriend was picked off by Soyoye in midair and the Tigers escaped with the win.

"We came into what could be the toughest place to play in the Big 12 Conference, and we had a shot to win it," said Cary Cochran, who was five of five on 3-pointers for 15 points in the game. "If you asked every team in America coming into this game what they would ask for, that is what they would want."

But the Huskers almost got more than they asked for as it was NU that stunned the crowd while consistently keeping Mizzou at arms length for much

of the first half.

The Tigers led briefly - for only 18 seconds to be exact - in the half after Kareem Rush's 3-point play made it 16-14 MU at the 9:19 mark. But Brian Conklin responded with a jumper and NU capped a 16-4 run with Cochran's fourth 3-pointer of the half to take a 30-20 lead over Mizzou. NU led 34-26 at the half.

"I thought we played great defense in the first half," said Collier, whose team limited Mizzou to 27-percent shooting from the field in the opening stanza. "In the second half we didn't stop them and I thought that (Kareem) Rush's penetration was really big for them."

Indeed, Rush, the Big 12's leading scorer at 21.6 points per game, did come up big for the Tigers with 30 points.

But as much as Rush hurt the Huskers, NU poured salt on its own wounds, committing 16 of its 24 turnovers in the first half when it had a chance to extend its lead.

Belcher was guilty of seven of the 24 giveaways, the result of a physical matchup with Mizzou's Gilbert. Nebraska's

Please see MISSOURI on 11

Raiola hears NFL call, leaves NU

BY SEAN CALLAHAN

On Dec. 15 All-American center Dominic Raiola said he had no intentions of skipping his senior season to enter the NFL draft.

But from his home in Honolulu, Hawaii on Thursday, Raiola decided the best thing for him to do was to forgo his senior season and enter the NFL draft.

"Without question, this was by far the hardest decision I have ever had to make," Raiola said. "I have gotten so attached to this university. The players and coaches have done so much for me. I have wonderful memories from Nebraska, and I'll always be a Husker."

"But I feel it is in my best interest to leave at this time. It is certainly not anything against the university or coaches, this is just a lifelong dream for me, and I'm anxious to get started on my NFL career."

Raiola is projected by most draft experts as a late first- to early second-round selection.

In the past eight years, only one center has been drafted in the first round.

After doing his homework and talking to many experts,

Hanging It Up Early

Dominic Raiola
Ahman Green
Lawrence Phillips
Calvin Jones
Derek Brown
Johnny Mitchell

These Cornhuskers left for the NFL after their junior years.

DeJan Lonowski/DN

Raiola said his stock as an NFL center really can't get any higher.

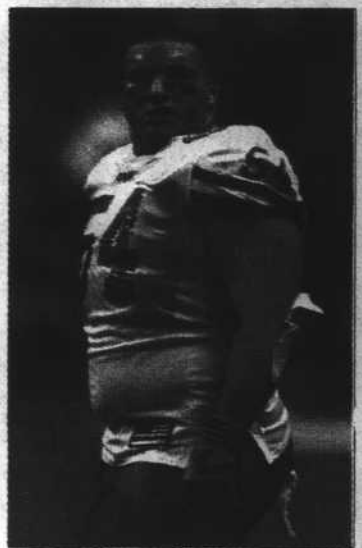
"I think it's a lot harder for a center to get drafted in the first round," Raiola said. "I understand the center position in the draft lately, and when it comes down to it you have to play through your first contract."

"Look at Grant Wistrom. He played through his first contract and now he's going to get another big contract."

Nebraska Coach Frank Solich calls Raiola one of the best centers to ever play the game for the Huskers.

Solich said his spot will definitely be a hard one to fill.

"We are sorry to see Dominic go, but we wish him the best,"



Scott McClurg/DN

Nebraska junior center Dominic Raiola announced Thursday that he will be eligible for this spring's NFL Draft.

Solich said. "I am sure he will have a successful NFL career. He has been outstanding for us at the University of Nebraska—one of the best centers we have ever had."

"His athleticism and his leadership have played an extremely important role in the years that he has played for us at Nebraska."