

NU Volleyball takes strange route to title

SEASON from page 12

In the weeks leading up to Nebraska's first match of the season, John Cook made his first major decision as coach of Nebraska.

Cook announced that All-American outside hitter Nancy Meendering would redshirt.

The preseason pollsters let Nebraska have it, ranking them as low as No. 11 to start the season.

Judging by his comments in Nebraska's preseason press conference, it's safe to say Cook felt his team was better than a No. 11 ranking.

"If there's 10 teams better than us, it's going to be a hell of a year in college volleyball," he said. "I think we're pretty good."

It didn't take long for Nebraska to show the country exactly how good they were Meenderingless.

"I think it was after the Colorado State game that we knew that this year could be special," senior right-side hitter Angie Oxley said.

Colorado State was Nebraska's third match of the season. CSU came to the NU Coliseum hot, having knocked off preseason No. 1 UCLA a week before.

Nebraska spotted the Rams a 1-0 games lead, but would rally and win the match in four games.

A star was born that day. Sophomore outside hitter Laura Pilakowski led the way with 25 kills.

Confidence was brewing. Nebraska traveled to Notre Dame the following week for the Notre Dame Tournament.

There, the Huskers took down three ranked teams, including UCLA. By Monday of the next week, Nebraska was the No. 1 team in the nation.

Nebraska liked gripping the top ranking so much that they never let it go.

After their team grabbed the top spot, Cook had his players tote around Nebraska's 1995 national championship trophy everywhere they went.

"We had a good idea we would win the national championship, and I wanted our players to start visualizing it," Cook said. "At that point there wasn't another team in the country in a position to think about it or that would probably talk about it everyday. I wanted our players to visualize it."

The doubters were beginning to dwindle.

Big 12 romp

For most of the Big 12 season, Nebraska was bored stiff.

Practice was the hard part. Going against each other was intense. Winning matches was easy.

Nebraska went through the first nine matches without losing a game.

"I haven't played a whole lot of No. 1 teams, but they play like a No. 1 team," Oklahoma Coach Kalani Mahi said after Nebraska manhandled his team in late September. "They have the complete package."

The Nebraska match was always a night opposing conference coaches used as a "stepping-stone match." It gave them "something to build on," it was "a learning process."

It became other team's goals to make Nebraska at least break a sweat.

Nebraska outscored conference opponents 958-471 in points. Nebraska won 60 games and lost five.

There was much shock and amazement throughout the NU Coliseum in a September match against Texas, when the Longhorns almost beat Nebraska in a game but lost 16-14.

Colorado players and coaches seemed happy as a kid on Christmas after losing in a late-season sweep to Nebraska.

"We don't like to reveal our trade secrets," CU junior outside hitter Sonja Nielsen said.

Trade secrets? Didn't the Buffaloes get swept?

Sure, but they forced Nebraska to work. It was a win in their book.

Nebraska would lose only three games throughout the conference schedule until they traveled to Kansas State for the final match of the regular season.

The Wildcats took the Huskers five games, but Nebraska won, even with Pilakowski sitting out the match after having her appendix taken out.

The wake-up call

"The Kansas State game was a good confidence builder, but South Carolina was the turning-point game for us," Cook said. "We knew we'd have to step it up to win the championship after that game. So thank you Lady Gamecocks."

It was the Gamecocks who came within a whisker of ending Nebraska's season in early fashion in the NCAA tournament's second round.

South Carolina led the Huskers 2-1 in games and found themselves leading 12-8 in game four, three points away from a truly monumental upset.

But behind a deafening home crowd, NU rallied and advanced to the Sweet 16.

Cook called that match a "wake-up call."

He labeled it correctly. Nebraska awoke from its slumber and swept Ohio State and Arizona the next weekend, earning a Final Four spot.

The Awards

Before the Final Four began, Nebraska stole about every post-season accolade given in the college volleyball world.

NU had three sophomore All-Americans. Holmquist notched a spot alongside Pilakowski.

That dynamic duo joined Cepero, who was also named college Player of the Year by the American Volleyball Coaches' Association.

Cepero would also rack up a Final Four MVP when the tournament was said and done.

"The most rewarding one was winning the championship," Cepero said of her honors. "For me no individual accomplishment is greater than winning as a team."

Cook was named AVCA Coach of the Year before his team played in the Final Four.

Cook said the spotlight seemed to fall at a bad time for him. Cook and Cepero both had to attend a banquet honoring them the day before the Final Four began.

He, like Cepero, had bigger fish to fry.

"I gave a horrible speech because I was so focused on the match," Cook said.

Finalizing perfection

On the day before the Final Four, Cook directed his team through a furious practice.

After 45 minutes, Cook stopped the practice.

"You're ready to play," Cook said. "You think you're playing Hawaii today or something?"

The next day his team marched all over No. 2 Hawaii in four games.

The win set up the uncomfortable matchup with Cook's old team, Wisconsin.

Cook had left the Badgers' program only two years ago to assume a top assistant position at NU, and the eventual coaching gig.

"We knew they'd be fired up to play against Coach Cook," senior outside hitter Kim Behrends said.

"Wisconsin had nothing to lose," Cook said. "They were just hitting the lights out of the ball. But once they went ahead, the pressure shifted to them."

Nebraska would come back, of course.

And the history books will look favorably upon NU's 34-0 season.

The Huskers joined only Long Beach State in the perfect season category. LBSU compiled a 36-0 record in 1998.

Cook said this perfect season probably blind-sided most of the country.

Nobody would have ever thought this Meenderingless team could reign over college volleyball.

"If you would've asked anybody at the beginning of the year if they thought Nebraska would go undefeated and win the national championship, they would have said, 'no way.'"

Except Greicha, of course.

Nebraska on verge of several more titles

DYNASTY from page 12

This is the same guy who can scowl at a stat sheet after a three-game victory. Why? Because he didn't feel his team played at a national championship caliber.

This is the same guy who was openly talking about winning a national championship back in September.

Most coaches choke on their gum when the words "national championship" are brought into a conversation. Not Cook.

He had a blank picture frame above his desk throughout the 2000 season. Why was it blank? He was just waiting to fill the frame with a nice color photo of his 2000 championship team. Confident chap, ain't he?

He has good reason to be. Cook might as well put a few more blank frames up there.

Let's look ahead to the 2001 season. Nebraska will be starting four All-Americans.

Amber Holmquist, Laura Pilakowski and 2000 Player-of-the-Year Greichaly Cepero all return.

Then throw in the return of Nancy Meendering, who redshirted this season and, well, it's just plain cheating.

Most people considered it a kamikaze act when Cook elected to redshirt Meendering. Now, Cook is laughing all the way to the

next Final Four in San Diego.

If you take the binoculars and look way down the road, you will see that Nebraska will still have three All-Americans on the 2002 squad with only Meendering and Jenny Kropp graduating next season.

And don't doubt that Cook doesn't have his eye on a young small-town Nebraska high schooler who will prove to be the next Meendering or Pilakowski.

Cook is always planning, always looking at every detail. He demands perfection, and his work ethic has caught on with his players.

Attention to detail with tremendous athletes is too tough for anyone to topple.

Ask Wisconsin.

"You're cooked John," a Wisconsin grandmother had yelled with her team leading Nebraska 2-1 in games in the championship match.

Shortly after this cute statement, Cook was celebrating his first national championship.

Afterwards, Nebraska's coach looked drained for the first time all season, admitting that the Final Four weekend was still a blur to him.

No worry. There was this feeling, a scary one to some, that Cook would grow quite used to this championship spotlight, and would probably be basking in it again sooner rather than later.

NU wins national title

VICTORY from page 12

Nebraska's powerful block also wasn't nearly as dominating as it had been two nights prior in a four-game semifinal victory over Hawaii.

Still, Cook believed his team would take the match.

"Even after the third game, I still felt confident," he said. "I've seen this team come back several times. They rise to the challenge."

Cook's team also had no intention of letting its new coach lose to his old team.

"That was in the back of our mind," Nebraska senior outside hitter Kim Behrends said. "We wanted to win for Coach Cook. He made a big step to come here. He believed in us."

Before game four began, Nebraska's starting six huddled on the Richmond Coliseum floor, slapping hands, seemingly loose for the first time all day.

"Wisconsin tightened up, and we actually relaxed a little bit. Specifically, Angie relaxed," Cook said.

"And once that started happening we got our middles involved, and once that happened we knew they wouldn't be able to stop us."

Nebraska wasn't stopped, dominating game four in every phase.

The Cornhuskers block forced Wisconsin into a horrid .026 hitting percentage. Meanwhile, NU was hitting on all cylinders, notching a .400 hitting mark.

When it was all said and done, Nebraska had won the game 15-2 and had forced a rally scoring (every serve counts as a point) game five.

Nebraska hit on all cylinders in the final set, thanks largely to a much improved passing game compared to games two and three.

Cook said the improved passing game allowed Greichaly Cepero, sophomore setter and National Player of the Year, the chance to distribute the ball to the best matchups favoring Nebraska.

Cepero isn't Player of the

Year for nothing, wisely spreading the ball to various Nebraska attackers, but ultimately relying on her All-American sophomore outside hitter Laura Pilakowski.

Pilakowski knocked home five of her match-high 23 kills in the deciding game, including two in a row which pushed the NU lead to 4-0.

Wisconsin chopped the lead to 4-3, but a Badgers' net serve gave Nebraska a free point.

NU's sophomore defensive specialist Lindsay Wischmeier then served three consecutive points, the last coming on an ace, which gave the Huskers an 8-3 advantage.

Junior setter Lizzy Fitzgerald said coming back from an 8-3 deficit in rally scoring, especially against Nebraska, is a tall task.

"There's no room for error in rally play. Nebraska came out real strong," Fitzgerald said. "We did a good job in decreasing the spread, it just didn't work out for us."

The Badgers edged the score down to 13-9, but Behrends hit a huge kill to give Nebraska a 14-9 lead and championship point.

"You try not to pay attention to the score, but you see the scoreboard up there after every point," Oxley said.

One point to go for NU, and the Huskers completed perfection on a very familiar looking play.

Nebraska served, Wisconsin returned, but there was a dig by Nebraska, a pass up to Cepero, Cepero to Pilakowski and the kill.

"I don't even remember the play," a relieved Cook would say following the match. "Is that what happened?"

Forgive Cook for the foggiest that surrounded the moment.

In his first year as coach of Nebraska, he had achieved Coach of the Year honors, a national championship and perfect season.

"I'm just very thankful," Cook said. "This team maximized every ounce of ability they had to accomplish this."

Freshmen step up for women's gym in Hawaii

BY JASON MERRIHEW

The Nebraska women's gymnastics team benefited from strong freshman performances as the Huskers finished second at the Maui Invitational in Wailuku, Hai.

NU finished with a team score of 194.95, trailing only top-ranked UCLA. The Bruins won the invitational with 196.20 score. Eleventh-ranked Arizona State finished third with a 191.525 showing.

NU was paced by the success freshman Alecia Ingram had in the all-around. Ingram won the individual all-around title with a score of 39.425.

"I didn't know I won the all-around until the end of the meet," Ingram said. "I just wanted to go out and hit all of my routines."

Nebraska's Coach Dan Kendig felt the team's success hinged on the play of the newcomers.

"Alecia and the rest of our freshman really did a nice job for us," Kendig said. "They stepped into some pressure-filled situations and performed. On beam, we had missed our first three routines, but Alecia came up and nailed her routine to get us going. It was good to see them (the freshmen) step up for us tonight."

Freshman Gina Bruce came off the bench to fill in for Bree Dority O'Callaghan, who suffered a knee injury on her first event.

"I think Gina's beam routine turned it around for us tonight," Kendig said. "We got off to a good start on uneven bars, but struggled on beam after Bree's injury, missing our first three routines. Gina really came through for us. She didn't warm up on the event, but she came in and hit a big routine."

The lone senior on the squad, Amy Ringo, also turned in a stellar performance for NU. Ringo tallied a career best on the balance beam with a 9.925 score. Ringo also tied a school record on the floor exercise with a 9.95 score.

"Amy put together two nice routines on floor and beam," Kendig said. "She is our only senior, and we are counting on her to come up big in situations like tonight, and she did."

The Huskers competed without the service of NU top all-arounder A.J. Lamb (back), and junior Laura Goss (ankle) and Dority O'Callaghan (knee) saw limited action.

Nebraska will make its home debut Sunday as they host Oregon State in a dual at the Bob Devaney Sports Center.

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