

A tale of two Colliers

Halfway through Christmas break, after listening to the syrupy voice of play-by-play man Warren Swain gift wrap a Nebraska basketball win over a good Miami team and take the championship in the San Juan Shootout, this space was going to be reserved for one neat little sentiment:

This Barry Collier guy is good.

Matthew Hansen

Several weeks later, after Collier insulted in-state little brother Creighton, then proceeded to lose ugly to the Bluejays at home, then watched an NU upset bid sour late against erratic Missouri, the sentiment was slightly darker, as in:

Do you think Creighton's Dana Altman wants to move west down I-80?

Strangely enough, both sentiments are accurate. For being your basic God/Family/Country pillar of strength, or, as I like to call him, the anti-Nee, Collier sure has seen some peaks and valleys in his first months as NU's basketball coach. Here's a quick look at the two faces of Barry.

Good: Collier has most of the Huskers playing hard. The same players who sleepwalked through most of last season have apparently bought into Collier's system of intense defense coupled with a slowdown offense.

NU gave up less than 25 points to both Creighton and Missouri in the first half before slipping a little in the second. Which, of course, brings us to ...

Bad: NU lost both games. This is entirely excusable at this point. Both the Bluejays and the Tigers will partake in the Big Dance in March. Nebraska won't be there, primarily because...

Bad: Collier, like every other coach before him, can't seem to get Kimani Ffriend to live up to his enormous potential. Lincoln's tallest Jamaican has played like the Big 12's best center at times. At others, he hasn't played at all.

Against Creighton, a team he could've scored 30 points on, Ffriend sat fuming on the bench, because, Collier said, he hadn't played very well in the games preceding the CU match-up.

Right, Coach. Ffriend wasn't playing because he hasn't bought into Collier's system. He plays hard at times and loaf at others. Ffriend has more talent than any other Husker but can't, or won't, harness it.

It's clear that Ffriend will have some very good games against Big 12 opponents. It's also clear that he'll be in Collier's doghouse a time or two. That's really too bad, since...

Good: Nebraska has some guards. True, the Huskers often handle the basketball poorly. But additions Kevin Augustine and John Robinson, both able point guards, along with vastly improving Rodney Fields and Cary Cochran have turned NU's guards into at least adequate.

Cochran is hitting every shot he takes. Fields plays like a rabid dog on defense; on offense, he's transformed from the Human Turnover into a decent player. Collier deserves a large part of the credit for these improvements.

Good: Collier is not, never was and never will be Danny Nee. Double good. Of course ...

Bad: He's made some basketball decisions that make Nee look like a mastermind.

After shutting down Creighton by playing physical man-to-man defense for most of the game, Collier inexplicably put NU into a 1-3-1 zone. Nebraska had no idea how to play it. At times, all five defenders were on one side of the floor, allowing CU to set up easy jumpers and layups.

Remember this is Creighton. Collectively, they don't have as much brawn as Steffon Bradford. But they're 12 smart guys, who know how to eat up a zone.

Against Missouri, Robinson didn't play for the first 34 minutes of the game. He then played the last six with the contest hanging in the balance. Strange, indeed.

The final tally is Collier: 3-3, Nebraska: 7-7.

It adds up. And it's early. So Nebraska's newest coach has plenty of time to put some more in the win column.

Football player dons a new uniform

After the Alamo Bowl, the sophomore split end joins the basketball team as a guard.

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

Wilson Thomas couldn't resist the temptation. He had to come back.

"It's my first love," Thomas said.

It's tough to walk away from a first love. Thomas couldn't.

So Thomas, a sophomore split end for the Nebraska football team, went back to get reacquainted with the game he grew up with, pulling his best Bo Jackson/Deion Sanders imitation by joining the Husker basketball team.

The wide receiver turned roundball guard is ready for the challenge that juggling two sports will bring.

"When I came out of high school I expected to be doing this," he said. "My freshman year, I got injured and decided to concentrate on football. Last year, things just didn't work out."

"This year, though, I finally did it."

It was last summer when Thomas asked Nebraska Coach Barry Collier for a chance to play basketball for the Huskers after NU's bowl game.

"I just told him I was going to come out and work hard, and if I wasn't going to play there was no point in me coming out," Thomas said.

Collier was impressed with what he saw from Thomas.

Two days after NU dismantled Northwestern in the Alamo Bowl, Thomas was running wind sprints in the gym with the basketball team.

"It's just about getting in



Nate Wagner/DN

Wilson Thomas, who will likely be the football team's starting split end next season, decided to trade his deats for high-top sneakers for the winter. Thomas, NU's newest two-sport athlete, played 15 minutes against Missouri in his first basketball game Saturday.

Missouri last Saturday.

Thomas played a major role too, spending most of his time on the floor guarding Missouri's Kareem Rush, a sophomore forward and future NBA player.

"There was nothing to be nervous about," Thomas said of his first action. "You just go out there and play the game."

Thomas was up to the challenge, forcing Rush into a big missed shot with under a minute

in the game and the Huskers trailing by two.

"I thought he held his own defensively against a very good player and made it difficult for him to score," Collier said. "He can improve even more when he becomes more familiar with how we play."

Thomas said that he is also beginning to figure out things on the offensive end.

"There's a lot of intricate

parts, but after practicing those things for a while, things will be fine," he said.

Thomas said things are already fine chemistry-wise on the team, even with his mid-season appearance.

"We're all athletes ... We see each other around all the time ... We blend well, so we'll just go

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Sanderford: Focus is on K-State

Huskers want a break out performance against the Wildcats.

BY JOHN GASKINS

A home game against Kansas State tonight couldn't have come at a better time for the Nebraska women's basketball team.

The Cornhuskers (8-6, 0-1 in the Big 12 conference) need a win like a George W. Bush Cabinet appointee needs a background check. NU has plenty of reasons to lick its chops as the Wildcats (10-3, 0-2) roll into the Bob Devaney Sports Center for a locally-televised, 8:05 p.m. tip-off.

The KSU visit is sandwiched between three consecutive losses and three consecutive games against top 15 teams with a combined 35-6 record - Saturday at No. 7 Iowa State (11-1), home against No. 11 Texas Tech (11-2), then at No. 14 Texas (13-3).

NU's first two games in Big 12 play were supposed to be the easy W's to offset its brutal upcoming stretch.

Instead, NU collapsed in the waning minutes in a 67-65 loss at Texas

A&M Saturday, which makes beating KSU - a team that suffered two beatings in a row at home to open its conference slate - that much more crucial.

"It's too early to talk about what games are more important than the other," NU Coach Paul Sanderford said. "We're practicing for Kansas State. In this league you have to play with resilience every game."

What will give NU the most trouble is K-State's shooting. The Wildcats are ninth in the nation in 3-point shooting (41.3 percent), and senior guard Kim Woodlee - the all-time KSU 3-point leader - is fifth nationally.

But, if they miss their shots, the Wildcats bring a much-needed opportunity for the Huskers to improve their rebounding, which Sanderford said cost the Huskers the A&M loss. KSU is last in both offensive and defensive rebounds in the Big 12.

Nebraska has owned K-State the last four years. KSU Coach Deb Patterson is 2-6 against NU and has

"We're right there. Coach says he can taste it.

...We're going to break out; we're just looking to find the day."

Amanda Went
senior guard

lost all four games she has coached in Lincoln. NU swept KSU last year.

Senior Amanda Went said the Huskers' chops are getting awfully wet for a breakout performance.

"We're right there," Went said. "Coach says he can taste it. We have 15 games left. We're going to break out; we're just looking to find the day. It could be tomorrow, it could be at Iowa State, it could be against Texas Tech. I wish I knew when."

Winter Sports Preview

Season starts injury-free

The men's gymnastics team ready to rebuild with the return of Jason Hardabura.

BY KRISTEN WATERS

The Nebraska men's gymnastics team will be looking to make a 180-degree flip in 2001 after a disappointing 2000 season, marking a place in the record books as possibly the worst year in NU history.

The Cornhuskers struggled last year after team leaders Jason Hardabura, Marshall Nelson and Blake Bukacek sustained injuries. Nelson was national champion in 1998 and Hardabura won the title in 1999, while Bukacek earned All-American honors.

"Last season, if we had not had the injuries that we did, there is not a doubt in my mind that we would have been a top competitor for the national championship," Coach Francis Allen said.

Instead, despite recording its second highest score of the season at 226.4 and finishing the qualifying meet for the nationals in fifth place, Nebraska couldn't do enough to qualify for the team competition at nationals.

"We finished in ninth place nationally, but we would have finished a lot higher had it not been for the injuries," Allen said.

With a little luck this time around, this season's squad is looking to improve on last year's instability.

"Last season made us stronger as a team," junior Jeff Kelly said. "We had a lot of guys picking up events that they normally don't do. We just had to pull through."

Hardabura, the 1999 NCAA all-around and floor exercise champion and MPSF gymnast of the year, returns after sitting out most of last season with a torn labrum muscle in his shoulder.

Hardabura is coming back after a quick recovery from a surgery that fixed the tendon that connects his right shoulder to his

socket. Though he is not 100 percent healthy, he will lead the way for NU as co-captain and is expected to be an all-around competitor.

"Jason is headed the right way, but he is still recovering from his shoulder surgery," Allen said.

Junior Dusty Jakub will also play an important role for the Huskers in the 2001 season. Jakub concentrated on mastering the pommel horse and parallel bars last season. His hard work paid off as he took home All-American honors after finishing in fifth place in the parallel bars at the NCAA Championships in April with a score of 9.662.

Senior co-captain Grant Clinton, who sat out most of February 2000 with shoulder and back soreness, will compete in five events this season. Last season, Clinton advanced to the NCAA finals in the high bar where he placed a score of 9.6. He

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Kendig: Team will be fine sans Brink

BY LINCOLN ARNEAL

Coming off its most successful season in team history, the women's gymnastics team is not content to bask in last season's glory. The Huskers have bigger and better plans to improve on their fourth place finish at last season's NCAA championships.

"Outside looking in, people are going to go 'What are they going to do?'" Coach Dan Kendig said. "But if you know our team, you know what is going on: This team has the capabilities to have even a better team than last year."

It won't be an easy task as there are several hurdles the Huskers must clear.

One hurdle is the lack of upperclassmen. The Huskers have only one senior and one junior on their squad.

"We hope (the lack of upperclassmen) won't be a problem,"

Kendig said. "Maybe leadership initially because there aren't a lot of upperclassmen, but some of the sophomores are starting to fill those rolls."

The deficiency of older gymnasts may not be as big of a problem for Nebraska as it could be for other schools.

"It is not like we have a team captain, we've done things by committee here forever it seems like," Kendig said.

Stacked on top of the lack of upperclassmen, the team will be facing a difficult task in trying to replace last season's national all-around champion Heather Brink. However, the team is confident that it can do so.

"Heather was only one person on this team, but she wasn't the team," senior Amy Ringo

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