



waiting to bloom

Kimani Ffriend was born with the talent to make the grade in the NBA, but every other circumstance has made his road to stardom tougher

story by matthew hansen
photos by scott mockurg

Maybe God was smiling the day Kimani Ffriend was born. Maybe Ffriend cashed in on a sort of Darwinian genetic lottery and maybe, at birth, the kid was just plain lucky.

Whatever the case, the newborn would grow to become a shade under 7 feet tall, with the athletic ability of a person much smaller.

He has slender arms that go on for weeks and big, soft hands. He's got speed and plenty of it, enough to run a 40-yard dash in 4.5 seconds, fast for a running back in football, absolutely unheard of for a 7-foot center.

By his own estimation, he has the complete, physical package. In his own words, "I'm the most athletic big man in the country."

"I've been truly blessed," Ffriend said, sincerity in his eyes.

Indeed. But Ffriend's Creator, his genetic code, his good fortune, they all have a flip side.

A God who appreciates irony. A genetic check and balance. Some bad fortune to temper the good.

Ffriend was born in Jamaica, a nation that doesn't give a whit about the sport he was preordained to play. Unlike most college basketball players, he wasn't groomed for greatness or, for that matter, even encouraged to play.

Then, there is the personality, quick to smile, quicker still to upset. To watch Ffriend play is to hitch a ride on a one-man emotional roller coaster, a ride that may have been avoided had he one central basketball figure to listen to.

But he's never had that kind of guidance. What's the fun in that? Instead, in five years of basketball, he's had five different coaches, some good, most not. The only constant has been change.

Blessed?

"It has been hard," Ffriend said. "I know everything, the talent, the future, is all right there. It's getting there that's tough."

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Kimani Ffriend, Nebraska's sometimes-dominant and usually emotional center, smiles while running to the offensive end where he shoots 70 percent from the field, a number that leads the nation.

'Trash man' may be spark against ISU

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND

As frustrated as Cookie Belcher was on Thursday after Kansas defeated Nebraska 84-62 on Wednesday night, the senior could do little more than look at the positives and move on.

Belcher said despite being down 38-20 at the half, his team battled back and never quit, losing the final 20 minutes to KU only by the count of 46-42.

"We could have given up and got blasted by 40," said Belcher, who said NU's turnover total of 23 and offensive rebounding woes were the biggest disappointment in the loss.

The reason Nebraska battled back, Belcher said, was due to a renewed effort by everyone — including this season's spark off the bench — Craig Wortmann.

Wortmann did not play in the first half against KU but was plugged into the lineup to provide his usual workman-like attitude.

"Even though we were down by 20, he played his heart out," Belcher said.

Belcher called Wortmann "our trash man," but the senior walk-on doesn't mind. In fact, he takes the name in stride and has relished his role this season.

"That is what I am trying to do this year," Wortmann said. "I know that I don't have to make all my shots and I just need to get in there and get loose balls and get after it."

Kansas would most likely agree the 6-foot-4, 195-pounder got after it against them, continuously hounding the Jayhawks while collecting three steals and numerous floor burns in 10 minutes of action.

Wortmann added six points, three personal fouls, two rebounds and two assists in his second half playing time.

"I was fresh and everybody else wasn't, so I kind of took advantage of that," he said.

Wortmann has been taking advantage all season long, averaging 14.5 minutes per game after seeing the floor in only four contests last season. He has compiled single-game highs of nine points against Creighton and five rebounds against UMKC.

NU's next opponent, Iowa State, presents many of the same challenges Kansas did, Wortmann said.

When the 8-8 Huskers and the 14-3 Cyclones square off in Lincoln on Saturday at 12:45 p.m., Wortmann expects to see a good shooting team with athletic big men like the Jayhawks.

Belcher said No. 23 ranked ISU, which has all five starters averaging in double figures, represented a near must-win situation if NU had hopes of playing past the Big 12 Tournament.

Belcher expects to guard ISU point guard Jamaal Tinsley, who is regarded as one of the best guards in the country, and is looking forward to the match up.

"I am just going to play my normal game and try to be more aggressive than I have been in the past," Belcher said.

"Even though we were down by 20, he played his heart out,"

Cookie Belcher
on Craig Wortmann

Wrestlers head to tough Duals

BY VINCE KUPPIG

After falling to No. 2 Minnesota last week, the competition doesn't get any easier for the eighth-ranked Nebraska wrestling team.

The 9-1 Cornhuskers are looking to rebound at the Cliff Keen NWCA National Duals in University Park, Pa., this weekend.

The National Duals features 16 top-caliber schools across the country, including eight of the top 10 teams.

"We need to be ready to go because this is a tough tournament," NU Coach Mark Manning said. "It's got all the top teams, and this is a tournament we need."

Senior All-American and third-ranked Todd Beckerman loves the feel of the Duals.

"It's almost like the NCAA tournament for a dual meet," he said. "In a lot of weight classes, the top five guys are there."

One of the top teams competing is Minnesota, who defeated Nebraska 26-12 last Thursday, handing NU its only loss of the year. The Huskers will get a rematch with the Gophers in the second session should both teams win their first meets.

The potential for a rematch has Beckerman and Bryan Snyder hungry to avenge their only individual losses of the year. Beckerman fell to now second-ranked Brett Lawrence, and third-ranked Snyder lost a one-point decision to fifth-ranked Luke Becker.

"I'm ready for this weekend," Beckerman said. "I know it's going to be a tough weekend, but I'm mentally ready. (The loss) is going to help for the NCAAAs in March."

NCAA Champ Brad Vering and freshman Jason Powell have been leading the way for NU recently.

Vering is off to a 16-0 start at 197 pounds, and Powell, who started the season unranked, has climbed the polls to a current ranking of fourth with a 14-3 overall record, including nine wins in a row. Last week, the 125-pounder came away with 13-11 upset over then fourth-ranked Leroy Vega.

The Huskers will be without true freshman Dusty Spaulding, who injured his shoulder this week. Thursday, Manning was unsure who would wrestle at 141 pounds.

Regardless, he said the team would need to have the right mentality.

"We're not going there to put on a good performance," Manning said. "We're going there to win it."