

Success a struggle for Ffriend

FFRIEND from page 10

Getting there is a struggle that happens both right in front of Devaney Center crowds, and far from the spotlight. In Ffriend's low-post moves, and in his brain. It's essentially the same struggle, though. Every day, Kimani Ffriend, handed loads of potential at birth, chases that potential, held back by circumstances that were also his birthright. So far, there is no clear winner.

It doesn't take long to get a read on the basketball personality of Ffriend. It's simple — buy a ticket and enjoy the show.

It's Texas/Nebraska at the Devaney Center Jan. 13. The show is rolling. Ffriend makes a basket and is fouled. He swings both arms and tongue wildly as the crowd roars. It's not a scripted celebration.

Not three minutes later, the smile has vanished. Several Texas big men take turns playing physical defense on Ffriend. Nothing cheap or dirty, just a series of good old-fashioned bumps to the back and hip.

Most good centers ignore the banging and play on. But it bothers Ffriend to no end. He bangs back angrily. He flails and falls unnecessarily, hoping to draw a foul. Finally, he takes exception to one shove, and, as play stops, menacingly steps toward the defender, a look of anger on his face. Teammates step in. Coach Barry Collier briefly lectures him. Everything is fine until next time.

Ffriend gets a pained expression on his face when the incident, and others like it, are brought up.

"People make way too big of a deal about things like that," he said. "Because I'm a focal point for the fans and other teams, anything I might do gets blown out of proportion."

"Most of the time, those things are minor stuff. I'll get angry for a split second, and one of my teammates will come up and tell me to cool it. I'll already be cool, and I'll try to tell them that, but by then Coach Collier is calling me over and telling me to cool it. Everybody sees it, because everybody's watching, and I've been fine since the second it happened."

He does have a point. Ffriend looms large on the court, both because of his demeanor and his play. Those who know basketball obviously have a strong appreciation for his talent — he center was voted to the Big 12's Preseason All-Conference team.

But Ffriend's play, like his demeanor, has seen more twists and turns than your average soap opera. Ffriend doesn't miss many shots (he leads the country in field goal percentage at 70 percent) but misses way more than his share of free throws (47-110 this season). He's second in the Big 12 in blocked shots with 3.1 per game, while he unofficially leads the conference in goaltending calls by a wide margin.

Crowd pleasing dunks, unnecessary fall-away jumpers, the occasional amazingly quick low-post move that is inevitably followed by a turnover on a later move, bad passes, breathtaking alley-oops, missed free throws: It's all a part of the Ffriend basketball package.

"I have to get stronger, work on my fundamentals," Ffriend acknowledges, "turnovers, jumpers, free throws... a lot of stuff."

Ffriend is nothing if not a work in progress. "We've basically been working on the ABC's of basketball with him this season," NU Coach Barry Collier said.

It's easy to see why. Growing up, the tall Jamaican didn't play basketball. Ever. Soccer and track were the sports of choice. He was a standout at both.

But Ffriend just kept growing. He was 6-foot-4 in seventh grade, 6-8 as he entered high school. By his senior season, Ffriend was pushing the 7-foot mark by his senior year. He had taken up basketball earlier that year, and right away, he and the game had taken to

"You have to learn how to get along with people, understand their point of view and accept it. I've gotten a lot better at that since I've been here and even this season."

Kimani Ffriend
NU center

each other.

"It was just like I had a knack for the game," he said. "People started telling me I should go play college basketball in the States."

Ffriend liked the idea, but nothing happened until a meeting that seems pulled from the pages of a Hollywood script.

"I was at the bank, running an errand for my mom, and this guy came up to me and asked me if I played basketball," Ffriend said. "I told him I did, he gave me his number, I called him the next week and I had a place to play."

The basketball Samaritan was a member of the Jamaican Olympic Committee, and the school he had hooked Ffriend up with was Dekalb (Ga.) Junior College.

He stepped in and started right away at Dekalb, and while still learning the basics of the game, helped the time reach the JUCO national tournament.

But Ffriend, far from Jamaica, was homesick. He, in his own words, didn't study, and his grades were bad enough that he had to leave.

It wasn't hard to find another place to play. The national tournament had helped Ffriend get widespread exposure. Gulf Coast Community College was the lucky school, and Ffriend had a monster season, averaging 18 points, 10 rebounds and more than five blocked shots a game.

Then, 24 games into the season, he walked. Ffriend and the coach — a Bobby Knight type, always screaming," Ffriend says — had clashed repeatedly during the course of the season.

Two years of college basketball, two teams, two coaches. Not a great track record. But Division-I coaches were clamoring for Ffriend's services. They saw the height, the speed, the raw potential. They all thought they could be the coach to harness it.

Ffriend, of course, chose Nebraska and Danny Nee, and the rest is a turbulent two-year history. Nee was fired after a 19-loss 2000 season. At times, Ffriend has clashed with teammates, Nee and Collier. He claims he's learned from all that.

"You have to learn how to get along with people, understand their point of view and accept it," he said. "I've gotten a lot better at that since I've been here and even this season."

The struggle continues, day by day. Collier benched Ffriend for most of the Creighton game, a Husker loss, because, Ffriend said, "he thought I wasn't playing hard enough."

Ffriend has responded with three good games, scoring a total of 47 points against Big 12 opponents Missouri, Texas and Kansas.

Time will tell if Ffriend can remain consistent, a basketball player focused on realizing his potential.

What is already clear is that the potential is there, before him, waiting to be fulfilled. Sometimes it isn't as easy as putting in extra time in the gym, though. In Ffriend's case, the struggle is about less tangible things.

"It's right there," Ffriend says, pointing to the thin air directly in front of him. "And it's real close. I just have to keep my head on straight, have to keep working. It's going to happen."

With that, Ffriend walks off. But everything else — the unrealized talent, the multi-million dollar NBA contract sure to follow if he realizes that talent, it hangs there, waiting to be grabbed, or stalling before it floats away.

Hardabura returns as team opens year

BY KRISTEN WATERS

The seventh-ranked men's gymnastics team will open its 2001 season today at the Rocky Mountain Open, a tournament that the Huskers have dominated in recent years.

Nebraska has competed in the last 10 Opens, held in Colorado Springs, Colo., and hosted by the Air Force Academy, and have walked away with six team titles.

But the heavy competition from No. 3 Oklahoma and No. 15 Air Force may leave some uncertainty for the young Huskers.

Coach Francis Allen isn't sure what to expect from the Big Red this early.

"I really don't know how we are going to perform this weekend. It'll be a test," Allen said.

What kind of test? "It's like having one foot in deep water and the other on a banana peel," Allen said.

The Huskers will be competing without senior co-captain Grant Clinton, who tore cartilage in his right knee in practice shortly after break.

Clinton is expected to be back in 10 days, before NU's first home meet.

"We definitely cannot afford

to get anyone else hurt," Allen said. "We're short as it is."

Leading Nebraska is senior co-captain Jason Hardabura, who sat out most of the 2000 season with a shoulder injury. However, the 1999 all-around and floor exercise champion is looking healthy and is ready to compete.

"He's looking pretty darn good," Allen said.

Junior Martin Fournier will join Hardabura in the all-around. Fournier competed last year but never performed to his full potential due to a wrist injury.

Junior Jeff Kelly will add depth to the team as he will see action in the rings, vault and floor exercise.

Joining Nebraska this season are freshmen Steven Friedman and Josh Rasile. Because NU is short people, the freshmen will play an important role.

The Huskers will begin competition today at 8 p.m. The top six individuals from each event will advance to compete Saturday at 2 p.m.

"We're just going to get out there and see what happens," Allen said. "I see us starting well and just continuing to improve all through the season."

Texas schools test swimmers

BY TOBY BURGER

Placid waters aren't likely for the men's and women's swimming and diving teams this weekend.

Today and Saturday both teams will be competing with some of nation's best programs in the Lone Star State. The women's team has a pair of duels, while the men will be in action at the Dallas Morning News Classic Invitational.

The men are battling against five ranked teams, three of which are in the top 10. The field includes: No. 3 Tennessee, No. 5 Auburn, No. 10 Florida, No. 16 Minnesota and No. 22 SMU. The NU men are the only unranked team in the invitational.

The women's team also has a hearty pallet of competition that starts today. First up is a duel with 11th ranked SMU this afternoon at 1 p.m. The team then travels to San Antonio to face Texas A&M in a 1 p.m. contest on Saturday. Texas A&M was rated 24th before dropping out of the top 25 this week.

Yet, such stiff competition on both sides doesn't worry Interim Coach Paul Nelsen. His focus and the aim of the coaches is for the athletes to prepare themselves rather than concentrating on the competition.

"The level (of competition) there is only a factor when they make it a factor and get oohed and aahed by it," Nelsen said. "Our job as coaches is to say 'put together your race for you, not for the other people.'"

Nelsen is realistic about competing with teams of such high caliber. He maintains improvement is more crucial than placement.

"If I sat here and got caught up in winning every meet, I think I would be cheating myself and cheating the kids," Nelsen said.

Nelsen and his teams should encounter friendlier home waters after returning from Texas. NU men and women will host Kansas next Friday and Missouri next Saturday at the Devaney Sports Center Pool.

The two duels are the first home action for the teams in nearly two months.

Revenge a factor for NU

BY DIRK CHATELAIN

Hilton Coliseum was the scene of Nebraska women's gymnastics team greatest disappointment last spring. NU will attempt to erase that feeling tonight.

Iowa State snapped the Huskers' string of six straight conference championships last March at the Big 12 Championships. NU, 2-1 on the season after beating Oregon State on Sunday, expect a challenge from the Cyclones.

"It has always been a close meet when we have traveled to Ames," Nebraska Coach Dan Kendig said. "They feel like they got a little retribution for the Big 12s at the NCAAs, but our goal is to hit all 24 routines. To win, we will need to go up there and put together four nice events."

Consistency on each event will be key. Nebraska, ranked eighth in the country, has struggled on the balance beam in the first two meets.

"I think the team recognizes what's going on and they have the mentality to work through it and improve," Kendig said. "It will be something we need to fix this week because we close on the beam at ISU, and in past

Sanderford, team in tough stretch

BY LINCOLN ARNEAL

After the women's basketball team lost to No. 9 Texas Tech 66-50, sophomore forward Steph Jones was not eager to look to the future.

When asked what she thought of the Huskers' (9-8, 1-3 Big 12) next opponent, No. 17 Texas (14-5, 2-3 Big 12), Jones let out a large sigh, and hung her head. She knew NU's road wouldn't get any easier.

"It's frustrating," she said. "We're young, and we are learning the hard way."

Jones and her teammates could use a break from the grueling schedule. The 7 p.m. game in Austin, Texas, will mark the third straight game against a top-20 team.

Coach Paul Sanderford said there is nothing the Huskers can

do about this stretch, except try to do the best they can.

"You try to keep working," he said. "You can't change the schedule, you can't change the players and you can't change the results. You go through tough times and you have to work through them."

The next team the Huskers will try to work through, Texas, will be difficult to stop. NU won't be able to key on one player as the Longhorns have four players that average double figures. Freshman Stacy Stephens leads the team with 11.4 points per game.

Texas will be trying to rebound after a 72-63 loss to Kansas State, a team NU defeated 67-58 on January 10.

The Longhorns pose a mismatch for the Huskers' because UT excels in the areas that NU does not.

"They pressure you and they

rebound, and our two major problems have been handling pressure, turnovers, and rebounding," Sanderford said.

The Huskers' ball-control problems have been hurting them more than normal recently. They committed a season-high 33 turnovers against Texas Tech and gave it up 29 times against No. 7 Iowa State.

Sanderford said that if his team can cut down on those numbers and control Texas on the boards, they will have a shot.

"If we can take care of the ball and limit their offensive rebounds ... we will be in the game," he said.

UNL Rodeo Benefit Dance

with **Full Choke**
The PLA MOR
Saturday, January 20th

6600 W 'O' St.
475-4030
Doors Open at 8:00

Swing Dancing
Every Thursday
Doors open at 7:30
Lessons begin at 8:00

Lincoln's Best Country
Music Every Sunday
Night with 2 Live Bands!

COME SAIL WITH THE CAPTAIN AT

EVERY FRIDAY & SATURDAY

Captain Morgan
ORIGINAL SPICED RUM

8-10pm \$1.75

Mich & Mich Lt. Night

Sun., Jan. 21st

\$1.75

Bottles PLUS t-shirts & other prizes

GET IN THE CYCLE OF SAFE SEX

Planned Parenthood® of Lincoln
2246 "O" Street Clinic • 441-3300
3705 South Street Clinic • 441-3333
Education & Administration • 441-3332
www.plannedparenthood.org • www.teenwire.com

www.springbreak.sopadre.com