

Spring is baseball time for NU

A breath of fresh air just swept on through the sixth floor of Memorial "Our Skyboxes Are Nicer Than Yours" Stadium and through the Nebraska sports world Tuesday — a breath of fresh air for media and fans alike.



John Gaskins

The baseball team held its preseason press conferences on the heels of its season opener, and you could feel the buzz. Listening to the coaches and players talk College World Series or bust left quite an exciting chill.

This team is going to be good. Fun to cover. Fun to watch. For the third straight year.

Wait a second. Time out. What in Bill Byrne's wallet is going on here?

They play baseball at Nebraska?

And they're supposed to be good? We're supposed to care? All the sportswriters and TV sportscasters show up at these press conferences? Sober?

In Nebraska, home of football and weather that would make any sane diamond talent bolt for beaches and sun?

Yep, Nebraska. I never thought I'd be saying this, but thank God for that.

Couldn't have arrived at a better time, considering the men's and women's basketball teams are muddling through mediocrity.

And, no, football signing day today will not feed our hungry-for-something-different souls. Frank Solich saying "tremendous" and "certainly" 50 times won't get the blood flowing.

But Dave Van Horn did on Tuesday. Imagine that.

No baseball season has ever been so anticipated. The team is ranked No. 5 and can hear that older-than-dirt Rosenblatt Stadium organ playing "Hail Varsity" for a reason.

Amazing, considering the way things used to be around here. John Sanders made the sport virtually invisible and could comfortably do so with the seemingly valid "poor us, we play in dumpy weather" excuse.

His players walked around campus wearing Georgia Tech or LSU clothing, too embarrassed to admit they played Nebraska baseball. Buck Beltzer Stadium would be filled with 10 people — one who won a free ticket from Tubby's and nine drunk guys who came to heckle Sanders.

Finally, Byrne fired Sanders — the best move of his brilliant personnel managing career — and hired this Van Horn guy from a Division II school in Louisiana, who tells us nonchalantly there's no reason NU can't compete with the southern big boys.

Is this guy crazy? Nope. Three years later, Van Horn is up in the skybox, telling reporters how good his team will be.

In three years, he swept right on in here and, without excuses, without whorish promotion, and with a get-your-uniforms-muddy attitude to go along with good humor and steely confidence, he's made believers of everyone.

This man can coach. And he can talk, and say the right things, and make everyone like him and respect him. And he handled the expectations and expected questions the media threw at him Tuesday like a pro, much better than Solich ever has.

Does the Stanford loss still eat at you? Not really.

Are you concerned about being ranked so high for the first time in school history? Not really.

Do you talk about making the College World Series a priority? Sure, why not. We should be.

Will it concern you if you lose some early games and drop in the polls? Not really. The most important performance comes

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Huskers not shying away from CWS talk

■ No. 5 ranking takes NU out of the role of the underdog against top competition.

BY SAMUEL MCKEWON

They're underdogs no more. The No. 5 ranking says so. The deep and talented returning pitching staff says so. The regular talk of playing this June in Omaha's College World Series says so.

Just three years removed from a decade of mediocrity, Nebraska is a major player in college baseball. After winning the last two postseason conference tournaments, the Cornhuskers are officially the team to beat in the Big 12. And the CWS is no longer a place to bleacher bum and eat funnel cakes, but a destination.

"I told the players a couple of weeks ago that we have to talk about the College World Series if we're going to get there," Coach Dave Van Horn said at Tuesday's annual Media Day luncheon.

Said junior second baseman and tri-captain Will Bolt: "We will be disappointed if we don't get to the College World Series. That is our goal."

NU came close enough to taste it last season, losing a three-game Super Regional to Stanford and ending a 51-17 campaign that served as a monument to overachievement and gutsy play. NU toiled as the underdog for much of the season, especially in Palo Alto, Calif.

The lunch-pail mentality stuck so much that nearly every Husker was caught off guard by the fifth-place Baseball America ranking and the No. 4 slot in Collegiate Baseball. A glance at NU's opening season weekend tournament in Houston, and

the matchups against Rice, Lamar and No. 1 Georgia Tech seem winnable if the rankings are right. By Monday, it's conceivable Nebraska could be No. 1.

And yet ... it doesn't seem that way. While the Huskers await a new stadium that could open by May (Van Horn said he's backed off talking about it until the opening pitch is thrown there) and rattled off several milestone wins last season, the team doesn't fit the Rolls Royce persona of a Louisiana State or Southern California. Not yet.

"In a sense, we still are the underdog," Bolt said. "We haven't proven that we can get (to the College World Series) yet."

Which may serve as an advantage. The case can be made that what Bolt, Van Horn, pitcher Shane Komine and designated hitter Matt Hopper all preach as baseball's get-dirty attitude — play harder, longer, more fundamental than the other team — has worked as well as any three-year plan could.

"We're still the hardest working team in college baseball," Bolt said. "That hasn't changed."

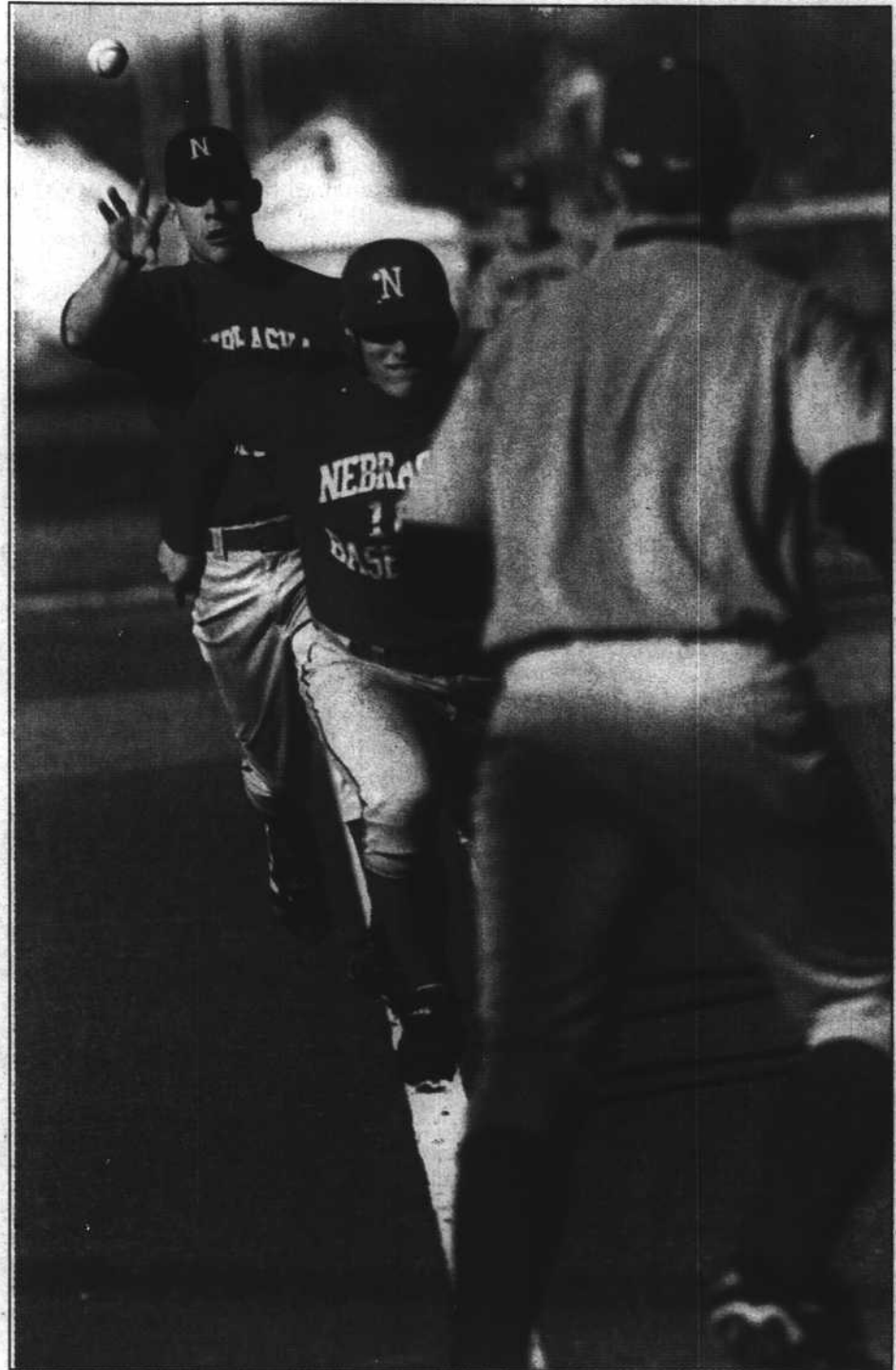
And neither has the formula for winning. It's a little like this:

■ Run and steal bases well, which NU did on 126 out of 162 attempts last season. Despite losing Jamal Strong (35 steals) and Adam Shabala (14), Van Horn said there were five guys who could do as well, if not better. The list includes Bolt (18 steals of 25 attempts), likely right fielder Adam Stern (12 of 15) and John Cole (16 of 20).

"We're not slow," Van Horn said.

■ Get pitching to the tune of

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Nate Wagner/DN

Mike Duren, a freshman outfielder, tries to outrun a squeeze play between third base and home plate during practice Tuesday. The Huskers are preparing for their first games against Rice, Georgia Tech and Lamar this weekend.

Signing day begins amidst questions

BY SEAN CALLAHAN

With national football letter-of-intent day upon them, the Nebraska Cornhuskers appear to have 16 seniors willing to head to Lincoln this fall.

It's the few players who aren't certain which college jersey they want to wear next season who are making things interesting for NU.

As high school players make their college allegiances official today, the Huskers are waiting to see if the final pieces of their 2001 recruiting puzzle will fall into place. If they do, it will finish off what many recruiting experts consider a top-10 class.

Macon, Ga., standout LeKevin Smith, rated as the No. 14 defensive tackle by Rivals100.com, is one of the players the Husker coaching

staff will be waiting on.

Newspaper reports a week ago said Smith committed to NU, but people close to Smith said those reports weren't true.

"He's going to announce it in the school gym," said Betty Jennings, Smith's guardian. "I don't really have a clue what he's doing because he's not telling anybody."

Along with Nebraska, Smith is considering Auburn and Florida State.

The other two players the Huskers hope to receive letters of intent from are Davenport, Iowa, running back Marques Simmons and Los Angeles cornerback Terrence Whitehead.

Simmons said he had already made a decision on what he wanted to do, but wouldn't make it public until a noon press conference today.

Simmons has narrowed his choices to NU and in-state schools Iowa and Iowa State.

Whitehead planned on giving his commitment to Nebraska until a last minute visit to Oregon this past weekend.

One of the deciding factors for Whitehead is where he will play.

Nebraska wants him at safety, he said, while the Ducks want to use him on both sides of the ball, as a wideout and defensive back.

"It would be easier if there was one thing about each school that stood out, but they're both so equal in every way that it makes it so tough," Whitehead said. "Both have great facilities, both schools have great coaches

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Softball seeks both strong start, finish

BY JOHN GASKINS

Through all her team's success in the last two years, there are a couple of trends ninth-year NU softball Coach Rhonda Revelle said she could do without in 2001.

Namely, starting a season with few sparks and flaming out in the NCAA Tournament.

Revelle was her usual optimistic self at her 12th-ranked team's season-opening press conference Tuesday, as she should be. Her last two teams have been among the Big 12's best — NU won the league tournament over eventual national champ Oklahoma last year and made it to the Sweet 16.

But despite losing the school's best all-time pitcher Jenny Voss and third-best all-time hitter Jennifer Lizama, Revelle said she wants more. The top priority is making the College World Series, something that has eluded the Huskers the last two years after trips in 1997 and 1998.

"Anything less than a trip there would be a disappointment," Revelle said. "We talk about it quite a bit. Most of the players on this team weren't here in '98, and we play the highlight tape (of that season) for them."

Senior co-captain Jamie Fuente is one of three who last

experienced the CWS, and don't want to go out missing it again.

"In my eyes, we won't be happy with ourselves if we don't make it," she said. "The rest of the team feels the same way."

OU taking the CWS crown last year was both encouraging and frustrating for the Huskers, but, most of all, it was motivation.

"To me, that means we could've won the whole thing," 1999 second-team All-American Leigh Ann Walker said.

But the CWS is months away. Revelle said the Huskers were focusing just as much right now on starting the season with a bang as they were going out with one — another thing they've failed to do the last two years.

Against stiff competition, NU wobbled to a 13-15 start in 2000 before winning 39 of its last 45 games for a school-record 52 wins.

"This team has made a reputation for itself starting off slow and ending up a great team," said Revelle, whose last six teams have qualified for the NCAA tournament. "Part of our mission statement this year was to not be known for that anymore."

That won't be easy. NU starts the season on Friday in Tempe, Ariz., where they will play four top-20 teams, including No. 3 Arizona (4-0) and No. 5 Washington.

Athletes balance work, sports

■ Despite hectic schedules some students find part-time work essential for experience.

BY TOBY BURGER

Nebraska sprinter Lesley Owusu burns up tracks regularly, but she also scorches up the phone lines.

When Owusu isn't blowing away the competition, she works as a UNL operator, providing students and faculty with phone numbers they are searching for — and usually in under 10 seconds.

Owusu is one of a handful of Cornhusker student athletes who hold part-time jobs during

the school year.

According to Theresa Becker, assistant compliance coordinator, approximately 120 student athletes have been employed in the current academic year.

Owusu has worked as an operator since September of last year. The sprinter is on a full track scholarship, but she said the work was for the experience. But she doesn't shy away from the paychecks that help with the things her aid doesn't cover.

"I am very fortunate to be on full scholarship," Owusu said, "but I still need additional money for my own personal



DN File Photo

Guard Rodney Fields and Nebraska are striving to get off to a quick start against Oklahoma State.

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