

NU season doomed from start

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Oh, I can just hear the groaning out there. Groaning about a Nebraska women's basketball team that had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad 12-18 season.



John Gaskins

And there's plenty of groaning about Coach Paul Sanderford, a man who has won over 400 games and has more jewelry to show for it than Mr. T. A man who's hot-headed, quick-tongued sideshow maybe no longer entertaining to fans.

"What's wrong with Paul Sanderford? I thought he said he'd bring us a national caliber program in five years? Why is he so hard on his kids? Why is he such an egomaniac? Is he on the hot seat? Is he overrated?"

Believe me, I've heard them. Typical Nebraska fans. The football perfection virus seems to infect every sport now. When NU doesn't win and win big, the stars get misaligned, and the ground breaks beneath us.

It's as if a losing season is blasphemy, sacrilege. Was watching the Huskers play about as worthless as watching a Steven Segal movie? Oh yes, especially one that co-stars DMX. Is that a reason to march into Sanderford's office, tar and feathers in hand? Absolutely not.

Are there some things to question about his performance? Sure, to say the least, and he's been the first to admit that.

The man wasn't given a very good deck of cards this year. His top three scorers from last year were gone, including All-Big 12 guard Nicole Kubik, who down the stretch would single-handedly remove the revolver that was lodged down the Husker's throat just in time to make NU's third straight NCAA appearance.

This year the trigger was destined to be pulled from the start. It was pure suicide.

Working with 11 freshmen and sophomores with little college experience and all kinds of game, Sanderford opted to run a motion offense with very little structure. He and the players raved before the season on how this free-flowing offense would allow the super athletes on the floor to do what they wanted to.

What this allowed was for a bunch of up-and-comers to try to be Kubik when they had no business to. They all fought for playing time. They had to prove themselves. Besides trying to feed stalwart Casey Leonhardt the ball three-fourths of the time, which resulted in missed chipshots or disaster after Leonhardt would get in foul trouble, the young Huskers controlled the basketball with the composure of, well, freshmen.

Free flowing? No. Disastrous? Yes.

NU committed the most turnovers in the Big 12 and four times, four, went over the 30 turnover mark. Hardly ever were there any adjustments to correct that; they just kept hitting the wall.

Hardly ever did it seem like the players were on the same page. Hardly ever was there evidence of togetherness ... which was somewhat attributed to the fact that the NU bench was a revolving door. Sanderford, although he said mid-season he would do it, never instituted a rigid eight-player rotation. Without a go-to player or a combination of playmakers, that spelled disaster.

In other words, it never looked like a team was taking the court. Just five green players in red jerseys.

Sanderford also acknowledged his strategy of taking on the eighth toughest schedule in the nation was not the best confidence booster for his spring chickens. They had already been beaten up by the time they got to the Big 12 where the bruises only got darker and deeper.

That leads us to the final point of what went wrong in 2001. Nebraska stumbled into a bad year to be an inexperienced team in the Big 12. At one point, they played seven ranked teams

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Huskers must win without Ffriend

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND

When Nebraska faces Kansas State in its first round game of the Big 12 tournament, the Cornhuskers could be without the No. 1 reason they swept the Wildcats during the regular season.

Center Kimani Ffriend, who played major offensive and defensive roles in Nebraska's two wins over K-State, will most likely be relegated to the bench in tonight's 6 p.m. contest with a sprained MCL, suffered in practice last Friday.

The senior blocked three shots in the closing seconds of NU's 63-61 win in Manhattan and poured in a double-double in the Cornhuskers' 82-56 thumping in Lincoln.

Ffriend and Nebraska Coach Barry Collier wouldn't rule out a possible return to action this weekend for the Big 12 All-Defensive team selection, but both said it would be in a limited capacity.

"I really want him out there if he can go," Collier said. "I

don't know if a single minute would warrant playing him, but certainly, not the 30 minutes we've been playing him. If he's strong enough, maybe 10 minutes a half."

Ffriend was injured during Friday's practice at Iowa State's Hilton Coliseum when teammate Kevin Augustine fell into his knee, causing Ffriend to miss the 86-73 loss to ISU.

Ffriend was fitted for a brace on Monday, which he said would take some getting used to if he were able to play against KSU or in the case of a Nebraska win, against Kansas on Friday.

"If we could make it to Friday or Saturday, that raises the possibility even higher," Ffriend said. "I could be pretty effective aside from getting used to the brace. I don't think the quickness will be there."

It was Ffriend's quickness that allowed him to block seven shots against K-State in their first meeting and score 17 points and collect 11 rebounds in NU's home-dribbling of the Wildcats. But

Nebraska has shown lately it has players capable of stepping up in Ffriend's absence.

Example No. 1 is senior guard Cookie Belcher, whose play in the last three games has been that of an all-league performer. Belcher averaged 23 points against Kansas, Texas A&M and Iowa State, while showing he could knock down the outside shot, hitting 13 threes in the games.

But while Belcher looks to pick up the slack from the outside, Steffon Bradford and Brian Conklin need to man the post with extra awareness.

"It's my job to help more than I had to do with Kimani," Bradford said. "With Conklin, he doesn't have that size, so it is my job to help him and then get back to my man."

Bradford collected 11 boards in the two teams' first meeting but hadn't been much of a factor offensively.

Conklin, on the other hand, played a major role in the win in Lincoln with 11

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DN File Photo

Nebraska will most likely be without shot-blocker Kimani Ffriend for its Big 12 tournament game vs. Kansas State at 6 p.m. in Kansas City, Mo. The senior from Kingston, Jamaica, is highly questionable with a sprained MCL.

Conner now complete

BY DAVID DIEHL

As his coach would say, Nebraska wrestler Ati Conner has finally kicked the door in.

When Conner, a 174-pounder, captured third place at the Big 12 championships last weekend in Stillwater, Okla., he capped a rather remarkable turnaround from previous performances against conference competition and qualified for his first NCAA championship.

Conner, a senior from Goleta, Calif., was one of six Cornhuskers to qualify for the NCAA tournament, March 15-17 in Iowa City, Iowa.

While it will be Conner's first NCAA bid, Husker All-Americans Brad Vering, Bryan Snyder and Todd Beckerman will be making return trips with Vering vying for his second consecutive national title. Freshman 125-pounder Jason Powell will also be making his first NCAA trip.

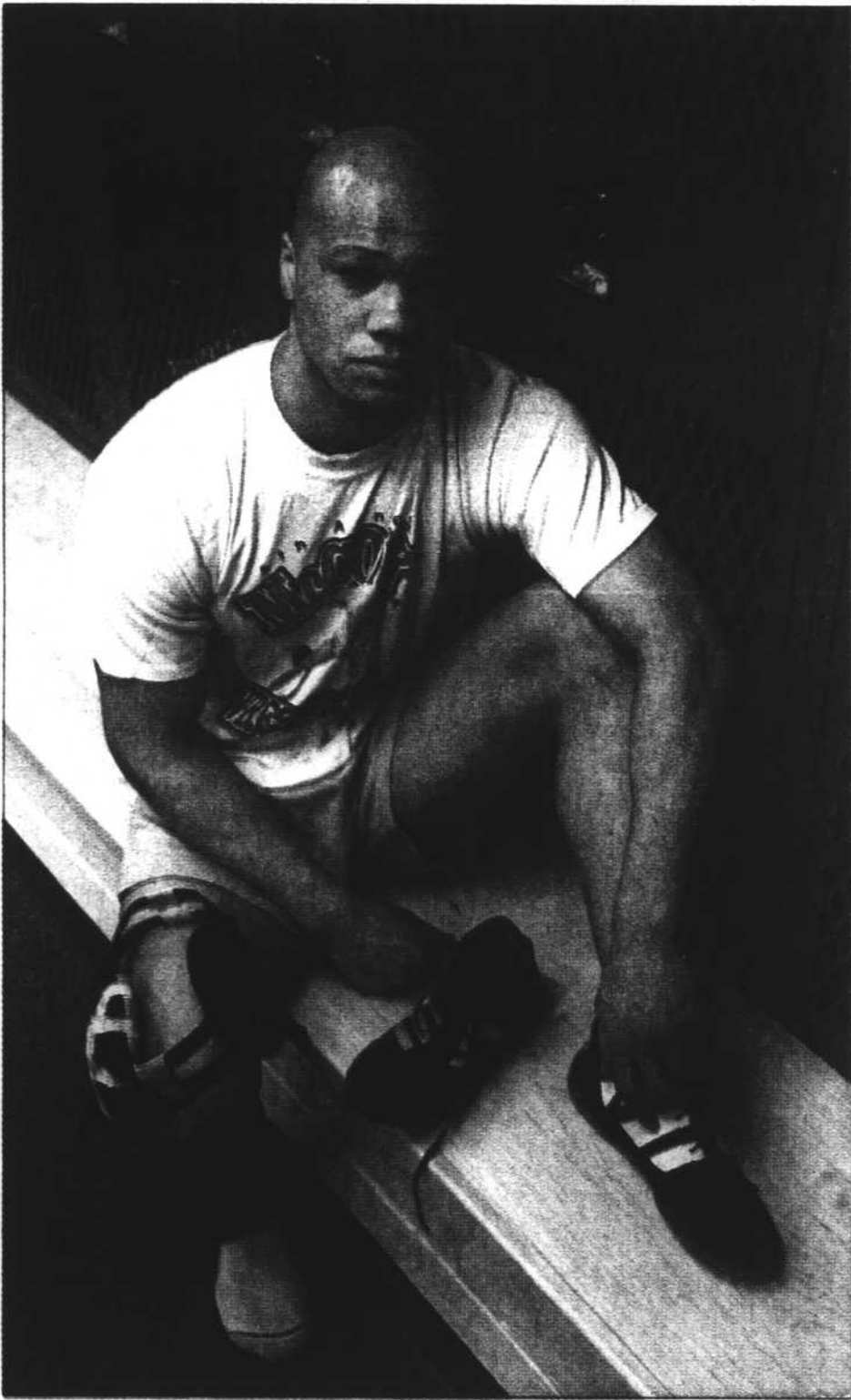
Seeded fifth and ranked No. 12 nationally for Big 12s, Conner stormed his way through the consolation bracket on his way to a third-place finish. In doing so, he defeated two higher-ranked wrestlers and avenged his opening-round loss to nearly pin Missouri's John Kopniski, then ranked 10th, in the consolation finals, winning convincingly, 9-4.

Nebraska Coach Mark Manning said afterward Conner could earn All-America status (top eight) with the caliber of wrestling he showed last week.

"That's the way we wanted him to wrestle," Manning said. "He wrestled real loose."

It was a stark contrast to Conner's previous performances in the Big 12 Conference. Last season, plagued by injured right and left shoulders, a twisted knee and constant battles with flu and cold bugs, Conner's wrestling still screamed of his potential with a 26-10 record and a ranking that you could feel begging to be higher than its debut at No. 16.

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Nate Wagner/DN

Nebraska wrestler Ati Conner has battled back from numerous injuries his junior year to qualify for the NCAA championships. A senior from Goleta, Calif., Conner placed third at the Big 12 championships last week.

Women's Big 12 has become dogfight

■ Baylor, Oklahoma and Iowa State, along with the traditional powers, make the Big 12 one of the nation's best leagues.

BY JOHN GASKINS

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Last year, Nebraska women's basketball Coach Paul Sanderford was asked to explain how in the world Kansas State could come within three points of being just the third team in 62 tries to beat Iowa State at home and also upset it the next month.

After all, KSU was the Big 12's eighth-place team that finished with a 6-10 record. Iowa State was an Elite Eight qualifier.

Sanderford, almost always a man of a thousand colorful words, shrugged his shoulders and gave a thorough, two-word explanation.

"Big 12," he said. This is one mind-boggling conference. How does a team like Baylor go from 7-20, losing 15 league games by an average of 20 points in 2000, to 20-7 and a No. 24 ranking in the latest AP poll? How do Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska dominate the Big Eight for 15 years then watch endangered species Baylor, Oklahoma and Iowa State eat them alive?

How does Kansas upset 12-4 Iowa State

one night and turnaround three nights later and fall to 4-12 Nebraska?

Pure Darwinism. Every game. "This league is so tough on your mind and body as a player," Nebraska guard Amanda Went said. "You have to bring your hard hat every night, and you'd better not be afraid of anything. Anybody can beat anybody. We have to beat each other up in practice every day and hit the weight room with a vengeance because if we don't, we're going to get beat."

More mind boggling is what is going on this week at the Big 12 tournament in Kansas City's Municipal Auditorium.

Six teams are ranked in one of two major polls, eight have been ranked at least once and all 12 have received votes at one time. This explains why NU, which managed to beat just two teams in the league, is still ranked No. 77 in power rankings despite a 12-18 record. All eight teams above the Huskers are in the top 51.

"What I think makes the Big 12 so tough is there are no patsies, no gimmies," Oklahoma Coach Sherri Coale said. "Every game is a struggle. Some of those other leagues you've got five or six teams that you really hook up with and then you have five or six teams where you just win by 40 points and play your subs. That doesn't happen in

our league."

Such is the sign that the Southeastern Conference, which houses dynasty program Tennessee and two other top 10 teams (No. 4 Georgia, No. 10 Vanderbilt) may not be reigning queen conference of women's basketball, the unwritten title it has held for a large portion of the sport's history.

"I remember playing Georgia in the NCAA's one year, and their coach told me that their playing in the SEC would help them against a Big 12 team such as us," said 18th-year Colorado Coach Ceal Barry, whose team won four Big Eight titles and finished second in the first year of the Big 12 before finishing eighth, eighth and 10th from 1998-2000.

"That's when I knew this league was good."

The reason for the Big 12 boom is simple: exceptional coaches, both young and veteran, who recruit exceptional players.

When it started in 1996-1997, the league already had its staples:

■ Texas Tech, which won three straight Big 12 titles from 1998-2000 and the NCAA championship in 1993. Coach Marsha Sharp has won over 450 games in just 19 seasons.

■ Texas, which won 10 Southwestern

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Madness: It's just starting

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

Now the real fun begins. March Madness.

Lose, cry and go home. That's the harsh reality that faces seven of the teams in this year's Big 12 Conference tournament. For teams like Missouri and Nebraska, survival is based on winning. For teams like Kansas and Iowa State, this weekend is about improving seeding and tuning up for the big dance.

It's 11 games of basketball, Thursday through Sunday. Beautiful. Here's a quick guide, a little background if you will, to this year's Big 12 tournament teams.

Iowa State (25-4, 13-3)

The Cyclones are towering over the conference right now. ISU won the Big 12 regular season crown this year for the second straight time. The boys from Ames, Iowa, also hold the title as last year's tournament champions. The Cyclones are maybe playing in the same rec league as Delta Upsilon if it isn't for senior guard Jamaal Tinsley. Tinsley makes the ship go, although sometimes he can get a little too cool for the gym. But expect the best player in the conference to show up when the lights come on in Kansas City, Mo. And with a tourney championship, ISU could claim that all-important No. 1 seed in the Midwest region.

Kansas (23-5, 12-4)

The Jayhawks are a little grumpy. KU isn't used to playing second fiddle to anyone in this conference when it comes to basketball. KU has won three of the first four Big 12 tourney titles, and might be the favorite this year with the return of sophomore center Drew Gooden to the lineup. KU whipped Missouri 75-59 on Sunday with Gooden back at full speed and will carry the home court advantage that Kemper Arena often provides them. Also factor in that ISU has beaten Kansas twice this year. A third time would be a difficult task, even for Tinsley.

Oklahoma (23-6, 12-4)

Oklahoma wins ugly. "We go out there, roll up our sleeves and go to work," Oklahoma Coach Kelvin Sampson said of his blue-collar team. The Sooners seemed to be dead when junior guard J.R. Raymond was suspended indefinitely from the team. But sophomore guard Hollis Price has picked up the slack to close the season. He averaged 18.5 points per game last week en route to Big 12 player of the week honors. OU could face a tough first game against Missouri though on Friday. If the Tigers win on Thursday, they will be hungry for a win with

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