

Women cope with league

WOMEN from page 10

Conference titles and the 1986 NCAA championship under Jody Conradt, who has won 649 games in 25 years.

■ Kansas, which had 11 consecutive 20-win seasons and 10 straight NCAA appearances before this one. Coach Marian Washington will gun for win No. 550 in her 28th year next season.

But the true charm of the league lies in its newest top dogs and the coaches and players that build them up.

Iowa State was 22-86 and played in a near-vacant Hilton Coliseum in the four years before Bill Fennelly took over in 1995. All he did was recruit All-American's Stacy Frese and Angie Welle and lead them all the way to the Elite Eight in 1999 and a top-10 ranking this season. The Hilton was filled with an average of 11,814 fans, fourth best in the nation last year.

Baylor had a serious inferiority complex after last season. Sonja Hogg, a former national champion coach at Louisiana Tech, couldn't revive a falling program and ran it deeper into the ground.

Enter first year Coach Kim Mulkey-Robertson, an assistant at Tech for 18 years and a Women's Basketball Hall of Fame inductee. In her final season at Tech, the coach recruited a junior college player and former All-American Sheila Lambert. When Mulkey-Robertson packed her bags for Waco, Texas, Lambert followed,

not caring about the Bears' troubled past.

With those two moves, Lambert is the league's top scorer, and Baylor has had the second greatest turnaround in Division I this year and is up for the school's first ever NCAA berth.

Finally, the shining beacon of newfound Big 12 success is Oklahoma.

This was a program that was almost put on the chopping block a decade ago and went 5-22 in 1996-97, it's first year under Coale, then a 32-year-old who looked more like 22.

"We were just lousy," Coale said. "I remember we played Nebraska at their place, and I swear we couldn't even get the ball past half court."

"To survive in this league you have to be tough mentally and physically, and we were neither of those when I took over. We have recruited intentionally some tough kids, not necessarily big and strong, but those with the intangible of resilience. I think that kind of becomes contagious with your other kids if you have one who can demonstrate it."

Like Stacey Dales, a Canadian national team member and this year's Big 12 player of the year. Her toughness, which rubbed onto her teammates, has earned OU's first two league titles in school history, a current 16-game winning streak and a 24-4 record. The Sooners won their first Big 12 tournament game on Tuesday.

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Sherri Coale
Oklahoma coach

"My first year at this thing I only packed one outfit," Coale said. "This year, I brought my whole wardrobe."

The catch about Dales and many of the Big 12's top players is they're sticking around. Only three of the leagues top 10 scorers and two of its top 10 rebounders are graduating, and star-gazing recruiting classes - including Nebraska's - are expected.

"It's easy to say that this is probably the best year the Big 12 has had," said Fox Sports Network women's basketball analyst Brenda VanLengen. "I don't think it is; I think next year will be."

That's mind boggling.

Give NU another chance

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in nine games.

Look at traditional powerhouse Colorado two years before this one. The Buffs played several rookies and lost to NU by 40 points and were miserable. Now they are among the league's elite again. I doubt many people in Boulder were breathing down 18-year coaching legend Ceal Barry's neck in the down times.

All I am saying is give Paul and his players a chance. Yes, he made mistakes. Is he too concerned with himself and his 400-plus wins? Maybe his once-charming act is getting old. Things tend to do so a bit faster when you lose.

But like he said over and over this year, he will go back to work. No one can argue with the talent he has - Greichaly Cepero, Shannon Howell, Margaret Richards, Shahidrah Roberts, Paige Sutton, Steph Jones and All-American recruit Katie Robinette.

Now it's a matter of fielding a team, something that never happened this year. I'd bet Sanderford's 15 NCAA tournament rings that he'll draw closer to that in 2001-2002.

If he doesn't, then we can all start groaning ... again.

Conner comes into his own

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But it didn't materialize as Conner went 1-2 at the Big 12 meet, failing to qualify for NCAAs. The injuries, Conner said, really defeated his 2000 season.

"It seemed more of a burden to wrestle than something to do for fun," Conner said.

This year, Conner started out the year stringing together five-straight wins, and he climbed in the national rankings to as high as eighth. Then, Conner said he lost focus and didn't put everything he had into his wrestling.

It showed on the mat. He started losing to lower-ranked wrestlers - like 3-1 to San Francisco's unranked Mauricio Wright and Oregon's No. 15 Nathan Coy, 2-1. To close the regular season, Conner dropped a 3-2 decision to Iowa State's eighth-ranked Perry Parks, whom he twice discarded of easily in 2000.

Conner didn't even notch a takedown against a conference opponent this year, not the best method to earn a high postseason seed.

"I think the majority of it might have to do with the fact that my mind wasn't too into wrestling," Conner said. "I was going through the motions you might say."

That approach isn't exactly abundant in the world of sports, and especially not in wrestling. So Conner said he got a quick kick in the pants from Assistant Coach Terry Brands, who was known widely for his intense approach to wrestling.

"You gotta kick that door in," Conner said Brands would tell him.

Soon followed was Conner's third-place finish at Big 12s turning his whole season around and breathing new life into All-American hopes. The finish gave Conner the confidence he needed going into NCAAs, he said, as the 174-pound weight class was one of the most stacked in the conference.

Three of the five Big 12 wrestlers are in the Top 10, Oklahoma State's Tyrone Lewis tops the list at No. 5 and Parks is No. 8.

Conner is now 10th after his Big 12 finish and Kopniski ranks 11th and Oklahoma's Michael Barger is No. 12.

Now, as he enters the NCAA championships, Conner said he was glad he kicked that door in since his lackadaisical slump, especially since this was his last year.

"That was a big difference," Conner said. "I wanted it more."

Tech, K-State, A&M not Big 12's best bet

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their NCAA chances riding on that game possibly.

Texas (23-7, 12-4)

The Longhorns have been as good as anyone in the conference as of late. The Horns are athletic, but really in best form when senior guard Darren Kelly finds his shot. The Longhorns' seed is on the rise, and a good showing in Kansas City could really shoot them up the NCAA charts.

Oklahoma State (19-8, 10-6)

The Cowboys are maybe on the proverbial bubble for the NCAA, but they should probably clinch a spot if they beat twelfth-seeded Texas A&M on Thursday. A win over Texas on Friday, and the Cowboys would be a lock, going 10-6 in the conference through the turmoil of a team plane crash. The Cowboys have kept a float with the play of junior guard Maurice Baker, the go to guy in the OSU offense and leading candidate for Big 12 newcomer of the year.

Missouri (18-11, 9-7)

The Tigers must beat Texas Tech on Thursday and might need to beat Oklahoma on Friday to claim an NCAA spot. Mizzou has slumped without sophomore forward Kareem Rush. Rush is now recovered from his broken hand injury, but was ineffective in his comeback against Kansas on Sunday. Sophomore guard Clarence Gilbert is leaving nothing to chance, saying MU needs to win the tournament to get to the big dance.

Nebraska (14-15, 7-9)

No Kimani, maybe. But NU is 2-0 vs. their first-round opponent Kansas State and senior guard Cookie Belcher has been as good as any player in the conference of late. If NU survives

Thursday, don't be surprised if senior center Kimani Ffriend tries to Willis Reed his way onto the floor against Kansas on Friday. Without Ffriend against KU, Nebraska stands little chance inside against Gooden and sophomore forward Nick Collison.

Baylor (17-10, 6-10)

The Bears are probably going to the NIT, sporting only a 6-10 conference mark after an undefeated nonconference season. Baylor will look to senior guard All-Big 12 guard Terry Black to beat Colorado in round one, but if they do, Iowa State awaits and probably the NIT after the Cyclones get done with Baylor.

Colorado (15-14, 5-11)

CU is in pretty sad shape of late, falling to Kansas State at home on Senior Day last Saturday. The Buffs will rely on senior forward Jamahl Mosley, but also would be faced with a second-round brawl with ISU if they beat Baylor.

Kansas State (10-17, 4-12)

KSU is surely smiling big at the thought that Ffriend may be out of commission against them on Thursday. It was Ffriend who blocked three shots in eight seconds in Manhattan to preserve the victory for Nebraska. You can be sure first-year Coach Jim Woolridge wants at least a win over Nebraska to help ease the questions from the alumni this off-season.

Texas Tech (9-18, 3-13)

The Red Raiders are about the bottom of the barrel in the conference. Three wins and 13 losses. Pretty much playing out the string.

Texas A&M (10-19, 3-13)

See Texas Tech. But on a side note, Coach Melvin Watkins was named best-dressed coach in the NCAA. Way to go GQ Melvin.

Without Ffriend, NU must step up

FFRIEND from page 10

points and 17 rebounds and showed against Baylor on Feb. 10 that he was capable of putting the ball in the hole.

The redshirt freshman scored 18 points on five of seven 3-point shooting in the 69-58 loss to the Bears.

Bradford, who said he enjoyed the high-low game he and Conklin shared with Conklin's knack for passing, said confidence was all the versatile player needed.

"If Conklin's shot is going, there are not too many big men that can go out there and guard him," Bradford said. "We have to get him to shoot it more."

And if the 6-foot-11 Conklin doesn't look for his shot more?

"I told him I'm going to punch him," Bradford said.

It's almost a given if someone doesn't step up and fill the shoes of the Jamaican Jammer and his 14 points and eight rebounds per game, NU will be scrapping for its life.

Any finish short of the

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

Steffon Bradford
NU forward

championship game this weekend, and Nebraska won't have the required record for a postseason berth.

Nobody, including Collier, wants this season's journey to end in the next couple of days.

"I really want to keep playing," Collier said. "That is probably the best thing at the end of the year if you have a team that is putting out effort and trying to do the things we are asking them to do."

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