

# Leigh Ann Walker bringing confidence back to NU

■ The Husker pitcher is filling the void left by Voss' departure.

BY VAN JENSEN

After a rocky start, the Nebraska softball team is on an 11-game winning streak, leaving the team with a 21-9 record and a No. 18 national ranking.

You have to look no further than the pitching of Leigh Ann Walker to explain NU's resurgence.

Walker has collected six of

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**Rhonda Revelle**  
NU softball coach

the last 11 wins, allowing only three runs in those six appearances. Against 20th-ranked Michigan, she pitched a com-

plete game, one-hit shutout in steady rain.

"I can't say enough about what (Walker) has done for the team," Coach Rhonda Revelle said.

Walker, a second team All-American last year, is 9-4 with a 1.20 ERA this season. She also has 134 strikeouts, which puts her nearly on pace to break the NU season record. For her career, Walker ranks in the top ten of six team categories.

Wins did not come so easy for Walker or the team at the

beginning of the season. Walker took losses against South Carolina and California, but had only one run supporting her in each game.

"We were frustrated," Walker said. "I wasn't happy with how I was throwing."

Walker also had to adjust to the new pitchers around her. Last season, Jenny Voss and Walker took almost all starts for the team. Voss ended her career with 110 wins, the most in school history, and a 1.44 ERA. Voss's graduation left Walker with big

shoes to fill.

"This year she has been the go-to (pitcher)," Revelle said. "She's stepped up and answered that call."

Walker had to go from learning under Voss to teaching the committee of younger pitchers and being a team leader.

According to Walker and Revelle, the turning point in the season came against Creighton on March 10.

Walker started the game and was perfect through three innings, but in the fourth, Blue

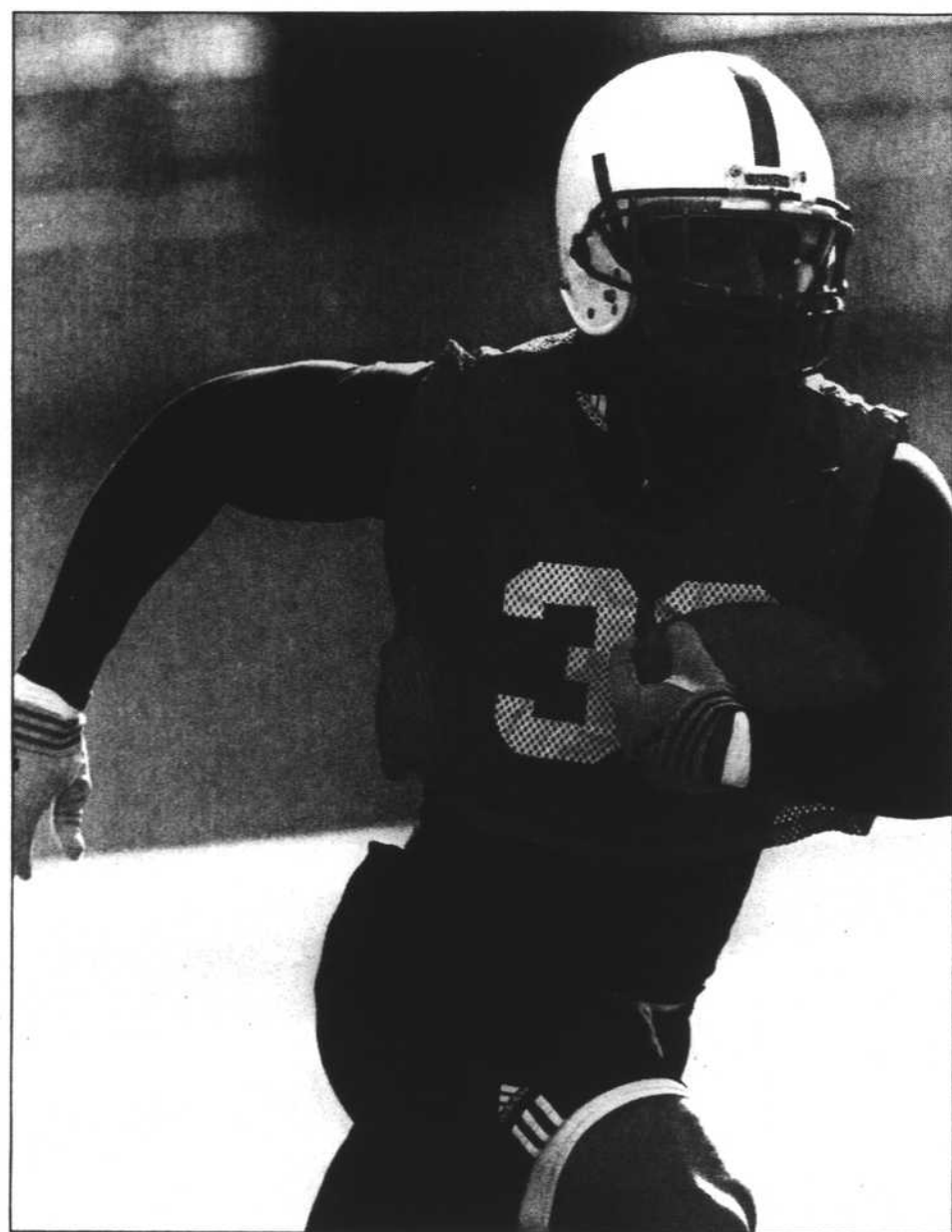
Jay Frenchy Nix hammered a two-run homer and gave Creighton the lead.

"I was mad when I gave up the home run, but I knew that we were going to win," Walker said.

Walker shut Creighton down the rest of the way, and the Huskers scored three late runs to steal the game.

Nebraska plays Creighton again today, and Big 12 play begins on Saturday with a game against Missouri. The Huskers don't open at home until March 26 against Colorado State.

Junior I-back Dahrran Diedrick is poised to take over as a starter at the position after a redshirt season and two years of sitting behind the now-departed Dan Alexander and Correll Buckhalter.



DN File Photo

## No. 30 likes newfound limelight

DEIDRICK from page 10

appeared late in games as Diedrick was third string.

Mostly, he just sat behind his elders and waited his turn.

That turn began Monday, when NU's No. 30 stepped from the shadows into the starting I-Back position, one that's now his to lose. No more mop-up acts as the crowd thins out. Time to bask in the glow that shines on a feature back.

"I've been waiting for this," Diedrick said Monday as reporters crowded around following the Huskers' first spring practice. "I want the limelight."

Diedrick handled the first-day attention well, answering often-repetitive questions with patience and ease.

Four different times, he denied frustration over sitting behind the now-graduated Alexander and Buckhalter, who combined for more than 2,000 yards last season and are both likely selections in next month's NFL Draft.

A fifth question, though,

mentioned his 93-yard performance against K-State two seasons ago. The answer changed.

"It wasn't, um, I guess, um ... it was difficult, but I learned how to handle it," Diedrick said.

As quickly as the guard came down, it went back up. Diedrick isn't a bit player anymore, he's the guy. The guy isn't supposed to spout negativity.

"The younger guys are the ones taking the lead from me now," he said. "There's more responsibility there. I have to make sure I go hard all the time, set an example."

Those younger guys include sophomore DeAntae Grixby, much-ballyhooed junior Thunder Collins, suspended for the first week of spring, and sophomore Robin Miller.

Miller may experiment at a fullback position muddied by a back injury to the likely starter Judd Davies. Junior Paul Kastl will likely battle for the spot with Miller if Davies cannot return.

Dave Gillespie, NU's running backs coach, likes the crop

of backs, and Diedrick's chances to headline them.

Gillespie said 20-25 carries per game for Diedrick wasn't out of the question, but cautioned Diedrick must first show that he could handle the load. Last season Alexander (16.5 carries per game) and Buckhalter (9.6) combined for a little more than 26 carries per contest.

"Being a No. 1 back is just a lot different," Gillespie said. "You enter the game when it's in question and when there's uncertainty about the defense you're facing ... it's up to you to establish the flow of the game."

"With the third guy, the flow has already been established. I won't say a guy is ready for (the No. 1 position) until he does it."

Diedrick's success or failure at the position will play itself out in fall. For now, this spring, he gets to enjoy the perks of being the No. 1 I-Back.

"It was nice being first in all the drills and first when we ran plays," he said. "I'm really ready for this ... there's more of an excitement there for me now."

## Allen perseveres through gym program's down times

ALLEN from page 10

A primary and obvious reason for that would be Allen's razor-sharp ability to study, perfect and coach gymnastics. The man knows what he's doing, and it's quite evident in his demeanor.

Howard, the coach's right-hand man for 26 years, has known Allen for over 40 years. They both grew up in Lincoln and competed against each other in high school, then co-captained NU's 1965 team.

Howard said Allen was cocky, free-spirited and knew how to make people laugh.

And ultra-determined to be the best.

"Nothing has changed," Howard said.

Allen became an assistant to Coach Jack Grier after he graduated and took over the program in 1969. With Howard's arrival as his assistant in 1976, the two built a dynasty, winning five straight NCAA titles from 1979-83.

Allen was top dog during the thick of the sport's prime, and many believe he still is.

He was named coach of the 1980 Olympic Team (of course, it didn't compete that year) and again in 1992. He was the first white man to set foot in the Chinese gymnastics headquarters. Currently, he's the President of the College Gymnastics Association.

Allen, also NU's Director of Gymnastics, went with the women's team to their meet in Arizona this past weekend and did some recruiting.

"He is an ambassador to our sport," Kendig said from his office as Allen helped coach elementary girls outside it. He does that every night after spending the whole day coaching his team.

"He is Nebraska gymnastics."

Of course, Allen and anyone in his program know he doesn't do it alone. Recruiting became easy after he became a household name, but his best two recruits may have been Howard and Chmelka, another NU alumnus who has been an assistant for 15 years.

All three have their own roles.

"Francis is the motivator, always on the forefront," Hardabura said. "Howard is more of a technician, always telling you what's right, what's wrong, calling you a dumb ass if you're screwing up and helping

*"Some of my best trophies have been my gymnasts and what they've become."*

**Francis Allen**  
NU gymnastics coach

you get better. Chuck is the young guy who the young guys relate to best. He's always the head of the game with techniques, as well. We respect them all in different ways."

And as a collective whole?

"It's like they can read each others' minds," junior Martin Fournier said. "When they see something wrong, they don't even have to say anything to each other. They don't have to yell at us, either. You can tell when they are unhappy."

Fournier, like many, said Allen's deep intensity and sharp mind were masked by his jovial charm most of the time.

"The funny thing about Francis is he doesn't really look like he's working," Fournier said. "He doesn't need to do anything as far as tell us rules, behavior, how our attitude should be. That's transmitted through the gymnasts."

"He's like an orchestra conductor - he gives us a rhythm, but rarely makes interventions."

Said Allen, who not only walked around like a jester during practices, he even did it during meets: "To me, the most efficient coach is one that does the least. (The gymnasts) are already doing it. They're already trained, and they do it."

What Allen does better than anything is lead by example. He hasn't changed his system and hasn't panicked the past two years because he's confident, he knows his gymnasts know he's confident, and that confidence naturally channels into his athletes.

And he cares about his people. Hardabura credits every lesson he's learned about life the last four years - being a gentleman, a scholar and attacking life with a cool vengeance - to Allen, the coaches and past Husker gymnasts.

Which is what Allen strives for more than anything else in his athletes. It's what has kept him from changing despite NU's struggling times and the lack of trophies he's won the last eight years.

"Some of my best trophies have been my gymnasts and what they've become," he said. "One of them had a boss that came to me and told me he was the hardest working guy, the guy that beats everybody else."

"He beats all these graduates from all these goddamn schools that have high visible degrees. He's the best-liked guy. And you know why? Because he was in college sports, where you have to be in front of a crowd, and he knew how to handle it."

"Crowds don't bother him. You ask him a question at an office meeting, he just stands up and kicks ass around the room. And knows what it means to be a team player."

"So his boss said I'll take any of your graduates. You call me anytime you need a job, and I'll get them a job. Your boys produce."

"Those things are the kind of things that you can take to the grave with you. You can't take a trophy to the grave with you ... It'll poke you in the back."

But don't kid yourself. Allen, Howard, Chmelka and their gymnasts don't show up in a room seeped with tradition just to tumble around. The Huskers would love nothing more than to get back on top.

Although it probably won't happen this year, Hardabura and Allen are confident it will happen again soon. Hardabura said he didn't mind that future gymnasts would be the ones to attain the team glory his teams never did.

"What Nebraska gymnastics was, it will be again," Hardabura said. "And I'll be so proud because when you win a ring for yourself, you win a ring for every gymnast who has walked in this door. That's the greatest thing about Nebraska gymnastics."

Said Allen, who was confident he had three blue-chip recruits lined up:

"If the three guys I'm looking at come, I'm back in the mix again."

"I've never thought about (never winning another NCAA title). I don't know. I'm hoping the numbers will turn around. I'm an optimist. I'll never get tired of this."

And, with that, Allen sends you off with a handshake and a "pleasure was all mine. Come again."

After that kind of treatment and enlightenment, you want to come back. And that feeling, just like Allen, will never change.

## With more NCAA success, Gonzaga no one's Cinderella

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK - Three straight appearances in the third round of the NCAA tournament warrants being labeled better than a "mid-major" team, Gonzaga feels.

"Mid-major is a misnomer," Coach Mark Few said during a conference call Tuesday, three days before the Bulldogs play defending national champion Michigan State in the South Regional semifinals at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta. "That just shows the ignorance out there. That's just an ignorant statement to make."

"You can call our conference (the West Coast Conference) mid-major because we don't have the money to build big football stadiums. People are so used to waxing on about people from football conferences, they don't do their homework. That's very shortsighted."

"You shouldn't throw out labels. This team has been high-major the last three years and should be referred to as that."

Gonzaga has proved its high

*"Mid-major is a misnomer. That just shows the ignorance out there."*

**Mark Few**  
Gonzaga coach

stature the past three seasons.

In 1999, the Bulldogs reached the round of 16 by beating No. 2 seed Stanford and got as far as the final eight before losing to Connecticut. Last year, they advanced to the regional semifinals with an upset of No. 2 St. John's, and this season they made it by surprising No. 4 Virginia in the opening round, then defeating Indiana State, the first time they've played a lower-seeded team.

Gonzaga's penchant for surprise victories has endeared them to basketball fans across the country ... the little school that could.

Dan Dickau, the high-scoring guard, likens the Bulldogs' fascination to that of the Dallas

Cowboys, America's team.

"I think so," Dickau said when asked about Gonzaga's appeal to just the average fan.

He noted several fans went from Spokane, Wash., home of the 4,700-student school, to Memphis, Tenn., to watch the Bulldogs in their first two South Regional games, adding that "a lot of times in Memphis, the (other) fans there got behind us."

"Some fans can relate to us," Dickau said. "They realize they could have been us when they were younger."

For the third straight year, the Zags were a double-digit seed in the tournament, and again they have befuddled the so-called experts.

"I didn't think we were a No. 12 seed," Dickau said, "but there's no sense complaining. It got us to the Sweet 16, so we won't complain anymore."

The Bulldogs are decided underdogs again, 9 1/2 points against the Spartans, but aren't awed by the prospect of facing the powerful Spartans, the nation's best rebounding team for the second straight year.

Michigan State has a plus 16.2 rebounding margin, Gonzaga is only plus 5.8.

"We've used their rebounding as an advantage to our guys," Few said. "We've pointed out how their guys go to the boards with reckless abandon and pursue every loose ball."

Dickau also said Michigan State's rebounding would be a challenge.

"We also feel that rebounding is one of our strengths, but they've taken it to another level," he said. "We'll have to rebound very well to keep up with them."

"Anytime you're about to play the defending national champions and No. 1 seed, you should be glad to be in the tournament. It's more motivation to us that they've been there."

"We have great respect for what they did last year and what they've done this year. I don't know how much confidence they'll have playing us, but we respect them. They're the team that's supposed to win this game."

That hasn't always mattered to Gonzaga.

## Shockers deal Huskers fifth defeat in squeaker

BASEBALL from page 10

Stadium in Wichita, Kan., handing the Huskers a 6-5 loss and the seventh straight WSU (11-8) victory over Nebraska (16-5) at home.

Husker starter Jamie Rodrigue got the loss to fall to 2-2 for the season; he gave up four runs and seven hits in 4 1/3 innings. Shocker starter John Tetuan (1-1) only threw five innings but scattered just three hits and gave up zero runs for the win.

NU rallied in the eighth after it gave up two runs in the third and four in the fifth. Both third

baseman Jeff Blevins and Dan Johnson had RBI singles. Catcher Jed Morris, who's caught fire after a slow start, made the most of a first pitch, knocking a three-run homer to cut the lead to one.

The Huskers threatened in the ninth with two outs, as NU first baseman Dan Johnson walked and John Cole singled to put runners at first and second. But John Tetuan recorded his fourth save of the season by striking out Blevins to end the game.

WSU was led by third baseman Brent Bergamy, who was two for four with a homer and five RBIs.

