

Distance Duo Helps Raise Expectations

By Brandon Gries, Nebraska Media Relations

Of all the forward movement that Coach Pablo Morales has made in the last six years with the Nebraska swimming and diving program, the step made last March may have been the most important.

At the 2006 NCAA Swimming and Diving Championships in Atlanta, Ga., Husker Lauren Bailey, competing in her junior season, swam to a ninth-place finish in the 1,650-yard freestyle. It put Nebraska's name on the scoreboard for the first time since 2001, but it was an All-American performance that was worth much more than the nine points awarded. It gave Nebraska a foundation for the 2006-07 season.

"It feels great to build on our success from last year's NCAA championships for the upcoming season," Morales said. "For Lauren to step up, score and earn honorable-mention All-America honors is not only a tremendous individual accomplishment for her, but also a great benefit to both last year's and this year's teams. It's certainly something we're going to try to build on."

Let the building begin on Oct. 12, when the Huskers host national power Texas at the Devaney Center Natatorium, just the second time Nebraska and Texas have ever met head-to-head. It will be a clash of traditional powers as the Longhorns have won the last seven Big 12 championships after Nebraska won the first three titles following the creation of the conference in 1996.

Morales has focused on improving and building his program to face Texas since he was named head coach in 2001.

"We don't always get an opportunity to duel the Texas schools even though they're in our conference, so the opportunity we have in October to duel a leader in the Big 12 Conference is outstanding," Morales said. "It's an opportunity to see where we are as a team and what direction we want to go in."

"The Texas schools (Texas and Texas A&M have women's swimming and diving) have been the leaders in our conference – and sometimes nationally – in recent years, so it's been our goal to narrow that gap. I think we've done that and now our athletes have an opportunity to race some amazing competition. To do it at home makes it even more special."

If Nebraska can perform well in its home pool, good things may be in store for the Huskers. NU hosts four of its first five meets on the 2006-07 schedule, including three in three straight days from Oct. 12-14. And for the first time since 2002-03, the Big 12 Relays will be held in Lincoln on Oct. 13, followed by a duel with national power Texas A&M the next day. SEC opponent Arkansas will return last year's trip by the Big Red with a duel at Nebraska on Oct. 28.

A stretch like that can be a tough hurdle for any team to overcome, so Morales is relying on another strong senior class to lead the way.

This year an eight-person class returns including Bailey and a second returning national championship qualifier, Kate Wheeler, who placed 21st in the 1,650-yard freestyle at the 2006 National Championships despite her 34th-place qualifying time. The Issaquah, Wash., native also won 12 races during the regular season and had career-high third-place finishes in the 500- and 1,650-yard freestyle events at the Big 12 Championships.

Side by side, the duo has made one of the more powerful distance tandems in the Big 12 Conference, and possibly in the nation.

"We are incredibly excited to have Kate back for one more year," Morales said. "She is coming off a great meet at the NCAA Championships after working extremely hard to get to that point. Her work ethic is unbelievable which not only affects herself but also her teammates."

A large class of eight freshmen could benefit from Bailey and Wheeler's experience in the future, two of which were

high school All-Americans (Kaitlin Arntz and Colleen Criss). The Huskers will also welcome newcomer Dani Millis to the team, a diver who previously competed for the Nebraska gymnastics squad.

"This young group of athletes has a chance to do some great things at Nebraska," Morales said. "They are accustomed to winning ways from high school and are



Lauren Bailey qualified for the 2006 NCAA Championships where she picked up Nebraska's first All-America award since 2001 with a ninth-place finish in the 1,650-yard freestyle.

focused to help us do that here also. We're very excited to have them here."

Millis and the other divers will have some tough shoes to fill on the boards as 2005 NCAA qualifier Amie Buoy was lost to graduation, one of eight 2006 seniors that represented Morales' first recruiting class.

More importantly, that group with Buoy helped Nebraska get to the point the program is at today, a spot much further ahead than four years ago when the Huskers struggled to a combined 3-10 record in the 2001-02 and 2002-03 seasons. Since then, Nebraska has made an incredible turnaround with a 23-5 mark in dual meets over the past three seasons and put the 2006-07 team in a position to show the swimming public that Nebraska is back in the national spotlight.

"Overall, our main objective is to get more individuals qualified for the NCAA Championships," Morales said. "We've shown that if we can qualify our athletes and get them to improve at the national championships like Lauren and Kate, it can do big things for our program."

"Last year's 36th-place finish was incredible and we want to get into the top 25 this year. Our recent success has made it possible for us to that this season and we want to make more steps in that direction beginning this October."



Kate Wheeler had a solid performance at last year's NCAA Championships and helps Nebraska post one of the top distance teams in the conference.