

NEBRASKA VOLLEYBALL: A CHAMPIONSHIP TRADITION

By Mike Babcock

A bulletin advertising an opening for the head volleyball coach's job at Nebraska had been discarded in a wastebasket in the coaches' office at Louisburg College. Paul Sanderford, the first-year head coach of the women's basketball team at the North Carolina junior college, retrieved the bulletin from the wastebasket and handed it to Terry Pettit, the school's head volleyball coach.

Without that assist from Sanderford, Pettit, an aspiring English teacher with a background in creative writing and poetry as well as coaching, would not have known about the opening. If he had not known about the opening, he would not have applied. And if he had not applied and been hired, the history of Husker volleyball would have been altered dramatically, because he and Husker volleyball became one and the same.

Pettit was the Nebraska volleyball coach from 1977 to 1999 – all but two years of the program's first 25 years of existence. Pat Sullivan, the Huskers' first volleyball coach, compiled an 83-21 record in two seasons of competition sanctioned by the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women.

Before 1975, Nebraska didn't sponsor women's athletic teams. If women wanted to compete, they did so on loosely organized and unfunded club teams. It had been that way since the early 1900s, when a women's basketball team occasionally competed against teams from outside the University.

Basketball was introduced in the university's physical education classes for sophomore women in 1896, and as was the case with male students, class teams competed against each other.

Nebraska's first All-University women's team was organized in 1896 and included the best players regardless of class, according to the Nebraska State Journal. The team never lost, which should not be surprising, given how it was chosen and the quality of its intramural competition.

The first women's basketball game played before an audience was part of the University's sixth annual gymnasium exhibition in the spring of 1897, according to Phyllis Kay Wilke's "Physical Education for Women at Nebraska University, 1879-1923," published in Nebraska History in the spring of 1975.

Louise Pound seems to have been the driving force in women's basketball at Nebraska, organizing as well as playing on the earliest teams. She was captain of the first team to play against an opponent from outside the University in March of 1898. Pound, who also was the first All-University tennis champion, scored 11 points in a 15-7 victory against a team from Council Bluffs, Iowa.

In April of 1901, the university sponsored a women's state tournament under Pound's direction at Grant Memorial Hall. Nebraska was represented by an A team and a B team in a field that included teams from the Omaha YWCA, Lincoln High School and Wahoo High School. Nebraska's A team won the two-day competition and a month later won a rematch with the Omaha YWCA in Omaha.

In November of 1901, Nebraska played a team from the University of Missouri at Grant Hall, "the first intercollegiate match for girls ever played in the west," according to the Nebraska State Journal. Missouri was no match for its more experienced – and to that point undefeated – opponent, losing 31-4.

The Nebraska women did not suffer their first defeat until 1904, when they lost to a team from the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis after opening an abbreviated schedule by shutting out a team from the Lincoln YWCA. The Nebraska women avenged the Minnesota loss two weeks later in Lincoln.

The Nebraska women played games against the University of Minnesota, home-and-home two weeks apart, again in March of 1908, losing both, the second after a five-minute overtime.

Before the Minnesota games, Nebraska had defeated Nebraska Wesleyan to finish what was to be its final season



Nebraska's club volleyball program in the early 1970s set the foundation for the Huskers' early successes.

with a 1-2 record against outside competition. University women were not allowed to compete in basketball, as well as other sports, only in physical education classes after April 24, 1908.

In response to the concerns of faculty members, who considered such activity inappropriate, the University board of regents abolished intercollegiate athletics for women. If not for the passing of Title IX by Congress in 1972, there probably would not be women's intercollegiate athletics now.

Initially, "there wasn't an embracing of women's athletics," Pettit said. "It's like any civil rights movement almost. It's tolerated, and you have to educate the public as to what it means. Today if you asked on a ballot if women should have the opportunity to compete in sports, there would be an overwhelming majority of people who would support it. But that wasn't the case in the 1970s.

"One of the things that allowed Nebraska to be successful was that we jumped in with both feet," Pettit said. "Nebraska decided: 'Well, if we're going to do this, let's do it well.' Whereas some schools were hesitant to get going, Nebraska was one of

the first to offer scholarships. In any endeavor, if you're among the first, that gives you a tremendous advantage, and you continue to reap the benefits years later."

Under Pettit's direction, volleyball became to Husker women's athletics what football is to the Nebraska men's program. Pettit's teams advanced to the NCAA Semifinals six times, and his 1995 team won the national championship, defeating Texas in the final at Amherst, Massachusetts.

The 1995 Huskers finished 32-1, with their only loss coming against Stanford in the second match of the season. Senior Allison Weston was the AVCA Co-Player of the Year and among three first-team All-Americans from Nebraska. The others were Christy Johnson and Lisa Reitsma.

Weston, a middle blocker, earned first-team All-America honors three times, the first Husker to do so. But Nebraska consistently has been represented on All-America teams since 1980, when Terri Kanouse became the Huskers' first volleyball All-American, as selected by the AIAW. Three Huskers have earned All-America honors from the American Volleyball



The first Husker volleyball team, coached by Pat Sullivan (far right, back row), set the tone for future teams, compiling a 34-8 record and advancing to the AIAW regional finals in 1975.

Coaches Association in the same season 24 times since 1984.

After the 1999 season, Pettit turned the program over to his long-time friend and former NU assistant coach, John Cook. Cook arrived at Nebraska with impressive credentials after building the Wisconsin volleyball program into a national power, and he wasted no time making his mark at NU. In what was supposed to be a transition year, Cook led the Huskers to a perfect 34-0 record and the 2000 NCAA title.

The following season, Cook again guided the Huskers to the NCAA Semifinals, where they lost to eventual national champion Stanford. After two regional finals and a regional semifinal, the Huskers returned to the national title match in 2005 and won the school's third NCAA title in 2006, defeating Stanford, 3-1, in front of a then-NCAA record crowd of 17,209 at the Qwest Center. Nebraska added its fourth national title in 2015, beating Texas 3-0 at the CenturyLink Center in Omaha, and its fifth in 2017 after a 3-1 win over Florida in Kansas City.

In 24 years, Cook has guided Nebraska to a 689-100 record, four national titles, 11 NCAA Semifinals appearances, nine Big 12 championships and four Big Ten titles. During the Big 12 era, Cook's teams were an amazing 207-13.

The tradition that Cook continues to build began in 1978, when Kanouse and Shandi Pettine were the first Nebraska volleyball players to be recruited with full scholarships. By 1981, Pettit could award 12 scholarships.

"We had a full complement," he said. "And that put us ahead of some schools."

Those first Nebraska teams included primarily in-state athletes. But Kanouse was from Indiana and Pettine was from Colorado, evidence not only of Pettit's interest in expanding the Huskers' recruiting base, but also of the respect his program was earning beyond the state's borders.

Fiona Nepo, a three-time All-American setter from 1996 to 1998, came from Honolulu, Hawaii.

Karen Dahlgren, an All-American in 1985 and 1986, and Lynae Loseke, whose career was cut short by a knee injury, walked on, another element of the volleyball program's consistent success shared by the football program.

"We don't have 50 walk-ons, but if we can get one good one a year, it pays off," Pettit said.

The 1981 and 1982 recruits, which included Cathy Noth (from Iowa) and Mary Buysse (from Minnesota), gave the Huskers "two really good classes in a row," Pettit said. And, except for Dahlgren, who redshirted, they helped get Nebraska into the NCAA Tournament for the first time.

NU had qualified for the AIAW National Tournament in 1978 at Tuscaloosa, Ala., but "there was no excitement because nobody here got to see the matches," Pettit said.

That changed in 1982, when Nebraska defeated a Penn State team coached by Russ Rose (Pettit's assistant in 1978 and 1979) in the NCAA Tournament's first round before a large and enthusiastic crowd at the NU Coliseum.

"That was a dramatic step for the program," Pettit said. "It was the first time we really had an opportunity to market something. I don't think anything changes the perception of an athletic program like hosting an NCAA event. From then on, we were always playing, always hosting."

The Huskers have qualified for 42 consecutive NCAA Tournaments, which "may be our biggest achievement is the consistency. We're always very competitive," Pettit said.

Nebraska reached the NCAA Championship match for the first time in 1986, Dahlgren's senior season, defeating Stanford in the semifinals but losing to Pacific on its home court.

Three seasons later, the persistent Huskers were back in the NCAA title match, losing to Long Beach State (after defeating top-ranked UCLA) at Honolulu, Hawaii. Pettit realized then that his program had progressed to a point where winning the national championship was a realistic goal.

Several other factors contributed to the success of the Nebraska volleyball program, including the Coliseum, which was refurbished and reconfigured specifically as a volleyball facility in 1992.

The intimacy of the Coliseum was a significant factor in growing fan support, which has kept Nebraska among the nation's leaders in attendance for decades. Nebraska sold out its last 181 straight matches at the 4,030-seat Coliseum, dating back to 2001.

The Huskers moved into the newly renovated Bob Devaney Sports Center for the 2013 season. Nebraska sold out nearly 8,000 season tickets in the reconfigured Devaney Center for its inaugural season and led the nation in attendance in 2013 with an average of 8,175 fans per match. The Huskers led the nation in attendance for the 10th straight season in 2023 while stretching their regular-season sellout streak to 319 matches. Nebraska's fans have consistently shattered volleyball attendance records. Of the 10 largest crowds in NCAA women's volleyball history, all 10 have featured the Huskers. Nebraska set a world record for largest attendance at a women's sporting event as a crowd of 92,003 watched Nebraska and Omaha play a match outdoors in Memorial Stadium on Aug. 30, 2023.

"They know what type of effort they're going to see," Pettit said. "The fans are only 10 or 15 feet removed from the playing court, so they can tell whether or not there's enthusiasm, whether or not people (the athletes) are communicating. That's what they really come to see. It certainly helps that Nebraska wins. The winning gets you there the first time. But you can't have a great enterprise, whether it be a business or an athletic team, unless you have an identity."

"People have that feeling about Nebraska volleyball. They know exactly what it is. They know what type of athlete is on the court. They know the style of play. They know the effort. They know the consistency. They know that she's a good student. And they know that she's a solid citizen when she goes on to her career after volleyball."

The attraction wasn't immediate. Though the program has been successful from the beginning, it experienced some lean times as far as interest and support.

"It's been a slow, consistent growth," Pettit said. "I think that fits Nebraskans. They aren't real impressed with flash or something that just happens in the short term. What they want to see is progress over the long run. 'Show me that you'll continue to get the job done.' If you do that, then they'll ride with you even when things aren't so good."



Two-time All-American Christy Johnson led the Huskers to their first NCAA title in 1995.



Terry Pettit, pictured with Kim Behrends, led NU to six NCAA Semifinals and the 1995 national title. The Devaney Center court was named in honor of Coach Pettit after a generous gift from Bill and Ruth Scott.



The Huskers celebrate match point against Wisconsin to win the 2000 NCAA title. Nebraska went 34-0 to earn its second national title.