

N 2018-19 NEBRASKA BASKETBALL HISTORY OF NEBRASKA BASKETBALL

By Mike Babcock

As near as anyone can determine, the University of Nebraska was first represented by a men's basketball team on Feb. 2, 1897, just six years after Dr. James A. Naismith set down the rules of the game at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Mass.

A team from the Lincoln YMCA was the opponent, and Nebraska posted an 11-8 victory at Grant Memorial Hall, the home of the Huskers for all but two seasons until the Coliseum opened in 1926. The same teams played in Grant Hall three weeks later with a similar result, as NU won 23-14. Nebraska had to rally in the second game. The Hesperian, a student newspaper, reported: "At the end of the first half the score stood 9 to 6 in favor of the visitors but during the second half our boys took a brace and some excellent work was done."

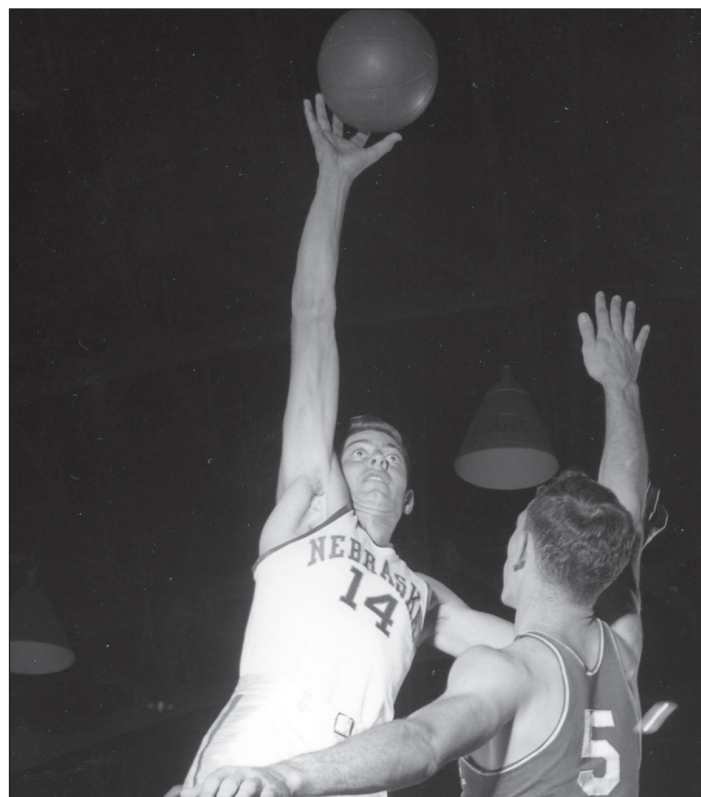
Such was the modest beginning of a program that has enjoyed its greatest success since 1980. In that span, NU has earned a 504-379 record and 18 postseason appearances, including six NCAA Tournaments, while adding a Phillips 66 Big Eight Tournament title in 1994 and the 1996 National Invitation Tournament championship.

Nebraska doubled its schedule in 1898, losing twice to the Lincoln YMCA and splitting two games with the Omaha YMCA. A 16-12 loss against the Omaha YMCA provided evidence as to why Nebraska finished 1-3 that season. According to The Hesperian account: "The great difficulty of the University team was mere recklessness. Our boys have been playing with a loose interpretation of the rules. The officials were strict and of course the resulting advantage was in favor of Omaha." Then as now, overly aggressive play had its drawbacks.

Nebraska played teams from other universities for the first time in 1899, winning two games against Nebraska Wesleyan and one against Doane en route to the unofficial state championship. The next season, Nebraska played an out-of-state opponent for the first time, defeating the University of Kansas, 48-8, at Lincoln. That game still ranks as the worst loss for a Jayhawk team and was the first for either school against a present-day NCAA Division I school and the first matching present-day Big 12 Conference institutions.

The Kansas team was coached by Dr. Naismith. The Nebraska student yearbook, *Sombrero*, wrote: "A closely contested game was looked for. The Jayhawkers were, however, completely outclassed, the score being 48-8." Based on the victory against Kansas and four other similarly decisive victories, "the basketball team for this year was undoubtedly superior to any in the west," the *Sombrero* concluded. It would be several years before such a claim could be made again.

Nebraska hired its first full-time coach in 1911. E.O. "Jumbo" Stiehm, who scored 24 points against Nebraska as a Wisconsin basketball player in 1908, coached both football and basketball. His first Husker basketball team won 14 of 15 games, its only loss coming



Bus Whitehead was a two-time All-Big Seven selection in 1949 and 1950. The court at the Hendricks Training Complex is named after Whitehead, who passed away in 2010.

at Minnesota, 40-15. The student newspaper, *The Daily Nebraskan*, blamed the loss on Nebraska's inability to adjust to the Gophers' "100-foot floor."

A *Daily Nebraskan* account of Nebraska's 29-28 season-ending victory against Kansas at Lincoln in 1912 provides evidence that some fans' behavior hasn't changed much over the years.

"The game as a whole was entirely unsatisfactory, being marred by rough tactics of the visitors, incompetent work on the part of the referee and interruptions by the audience, which were in part justifiable."

Nebraska shared the Missouri Valley Conference championship with Kansas in 1912 and 1914 and won the title outright in 1913 under Stiehm's leadership. The 1913-14 team was "so fast it took a movie camera to catch 'em," according to the *Cornhusker* student yearbook. It was described as a "point-a-minute" team, which wasn't quite accurate. Typically, games lasted 40 minutes (though that wasn't always the case), and Nebraska averaged 30 points per game. Guard Sam Carrier became Nebraska's first All-America basketball player in 1913. He and Carl Underwood led the Huskers to 17 victories in 19 games. Underwood was the Missouri Valley Conference scoring leader with 66 points in 10 conference games.

Nebraska won another conference title outright in 1916, after Sam Waugh replaced Stiehm as the *Cornhuskers'* coach for one season. Stiehm, who coached the first game of the season before giving way to Waugh, had planned to remain at Nebraska through the basketball season before leaving to become coach and athletic director at Wisconsin. But the Nebraska Athletic Board decided to replace him.

Waugh was succeeded by E.J. "Doc" Stewart, whose three *Cornhusker* teams had a combined record of 29-23. Nebraska was 22-2 in 1919-20 and 11-3 in 1920-21 under Coach P.J. Schissler. After the 1919-20 season, Schissler challenged the University of Chicago to a game, but to no avail. The *Cornhuskers* also were invited to a postseason AAU tournament in Atlanta but didn't go.

Schissler's teams played as independents. Nebraska lost its affiliation with the Missouri Valley Conference because of a decision to play a football game against Oklahoma in Omaha in 1919. Conference rules prohibited such games (Oklahoma had not yet joined the Missouri Valley Conference). Nebraska returned to the Missouri Valley Conference in 1921, and Owen Frank replaced Schissler as basketball coach. The remainder of the Roaring 1920s was, for the most part, undistinguished.

Basketball was rough and tumble. There was a center jump after every basket and no requirement to cross mid-court in 10 seconds or less. The ball was a lot different, too, more like a medicine ball, which contributed to some dull games.

The most significant event during the 1920s was the building of the Coliseum, which was dedicated on Feb. 6, 1926. The *Cornhuskers* dropped a 25-14 decision to Kansas in the first game at their new home, which was built at a cost of \$445,000 and seated 8,000 for basketball. Prior to that, Nebraska played most of its home games in Grant Hall, which seated about a fourth as many fans as the Coliseum and was located just to the north of where the Sheldon Art Gallery now stands.

Athletic Director Fred Leuhning arranged for Nebraska to play its home basketball games at the State Fairgrounds Coliseum in 1921, in order to accommodate more spectators. The *Cornhuskers* played two seasons at the Fairgrounds Coliseum, which had a wider court than Grant Hall.

The first game there was played on Jan. 14, 1921. Nebraska defeated conference opponent Grinnell 31-10 before an audience of 1,500, according to newspaper estimates. After two seasons, the *Cornhuskers* returned to Grant Hall, which had been remodeled, and continued to play home games there until the NU Coliseum opened.

Nebraska ended the decade with an 11-5 season under Charles T. Black, a former Kansas All-American in 1928-29. In the next 19 seasons, the Huskers had just two winning records, back-to-back campaigns under Coach W.H. Browne in 1935-36 and 1936-37. The 1937 team tied Kansas for the Big Six championship, after finishing second to the Jayhawks in 1936.

The 1930s produced four more *Cornhusker* All-Americans: center Don Maclay in 1931, guard Steve Hokuf in 1933, guard George Wahlquist in 1936 and guard Robert Parsons in 1937. Maclay was the Big Six scoring leader in 1930, scoring 112 points in 10 league games.

Harry Good was hired as head coach in 1946 and after two losing seasons, turned Nebraska's fortunes around. In 1948-49, Good's Huskers went 16-10, tied Oklahoma for the Big Seven regular-season championship and defeated the Sooners, 57-56, in a conference playoff to qualify for an NCAA playoff game. The NCAA Tournament was structured differently then, and the *Cornhuskers* needed to win that playoff to advance into the NCAA field. They lost to Oklahoma A&M, the Missouri Valley Conference champion, 52-35, at Kansas City, Mo. Coach Henry P. Iba's Aggies went on to finish second to Kentucky, coached by Adolph Rupp, in the NCAA Tournament.

In 1949-50, Nebraska again won 16 games and shared the Big Seven crown with Kansas and Kansas State. That marks the last time the conference had a three-way tie at the top. "We were King in our day," Claude Retherford once told a newspaper reporter. "They were firing



Claude Retherford was the leading scorer on NU's 1949 Big Seven Championship team.

football coaches left and right, but we packed 'em in. Oh, people were interested in football, but basketball was THE game on the Nebraska campus when we played." Retherford earned All-Big Seven recognition in 1949 after leading the conference in scoring with a 12.4 points-per-game average.

The Cornhuskers had another first-team All-Big Seven performer in 1949, Milton "Bus" Whitehead. The 6-10 center from Scottsbluff, Neb., also earned all-conference honors in 1950, when he averaged a then-school-record 15.7 points per game. Whitehead was named to the District V All-America team by

Collier's Magazine. Whitehead also was the first Cornhusker selected to play in the East-West All-Star Game in New York City's Madison Square Garden. When he graduated, Whitehead held nine school scoring records.

Nebraska basketball experienced another drought beginning in 1950-51, with 15 consecutive losing seasons. Despite playing for a team that finished last in the Big Seven in 1952, Husker guard Jim Buchanan earned All-America and all-conference honors. And even though the late Jerry Bush, dubbed the "Big Bear of the Coliseum," never produced a winning team in his nine seasons as head coach at Nebraska, his colorful personality and uncanny ability to fashion upsets kept Cornhusker fans entertained.

The most dramatic upset during Bush's tenure as coach came on Feb. 22, 1958, against Kansas. The Jayhawks featured 7-foot center Wilt Chamberlain and were ranked fourth in the nation when they came to Lincoln. Earlier in the season, the Jayhawks had defeated the Huskers, 102-46, at Lawrence, Kan., with Chamberlain matching Nebraska by scoring 46 points. Nebraska scored a 43-41 victory in the rematch, when 5-9 guard Jim Kubacki hit a 15-foot jump shot with two seconds remaining.

But that's only part of the drama. Kubacki, a senior from Toledo, Ohio, spent all but the final 6:53 of the game sitting on the bench in street clothes, forced there by a knee injury and the kind of fate from which legends are built. When the Cornhuskers' captain, Gary Reimers, left the game with leg cramps, Kubacki convinced Bush to let him suit up. Four minutes and seven seconds later, Kubacki went into the game. Two minutes and 44 seconds after that, he hit the winning shot.

Bush also had the distinction of coaching the school's first 1,000-point scorer, guard Herschell Turner, who came from Indianapolis, Ind., where he was rated the second-best high school player in the state as a senior, behind only crosstown-rival Oscar Robertson. Turner earned All-America honors in 1959 and followed with All-Big Eight honors in 1960 and ended his Cornhusker career with 1,056 points.

Following the 1962-63 season, Bush was replaced as head coach by Joe Cipriano, who brought the nickname "Slippery Joe" and up-tempo basketball to the Coliseum. His teams pressed full-court and ran a fast-break offense, which led the Big Eight in scoring average in 1966, 1967 and 1968.

Cipriano's first two teams had a combined record of 17-33. But his third team, in 1965-66, was one of the most successful in school history, finishing 20-5 and second to Kansas in the Big Eight. All-Big Eight guard Grant Simmons, the first Cornhusker to earn academic All-Big Eight honors, was the team's leader.

The 1966-67 team finished 16-9 and made the school's first appearance in the 16-team National Invitation Tournament, played at New York City's Madison Square Garden. Guard Stu Lantz was a two-time All-Big Eight pick and led the Cornhuskers in scoring and rebounding in both 1966-67 and 1967-68.

Guard Marvin Stewart and center Chuck Jura earned All-Big Eight honors for Cipriano in 1971 and 1972, respectively. Guard Jerry Fort, who finished his career with a then-school-record 1,882 points, was the first Nebraska player chosen first-team all-conference three

times, from 1974 through 1976. With Fort's leadership, Nebraska began a string of 14 winning seasons.

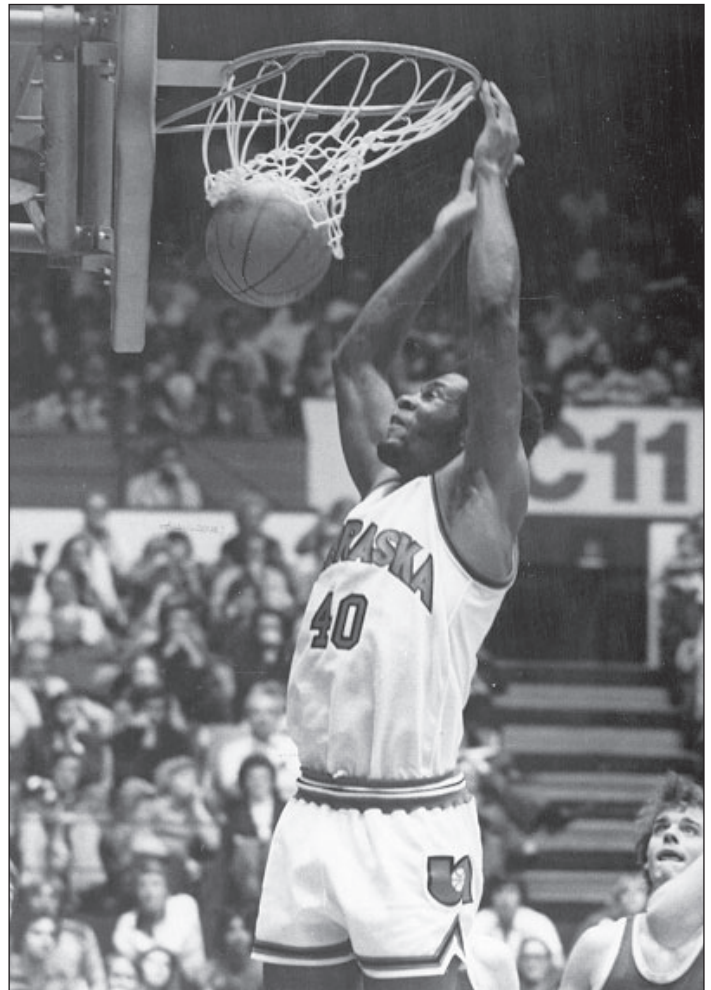
In the fall of 1976, Cornhusker basketball moved out of the Coliseum and into the state-of-the-art Bob Devaney Sports Center. Located on the State Fairgrounds, the \$13 million athletic complex was financed by a special cigarette tax.

Cipriano coached Nebraska to another 20-victory season in 1977-78. The Cornhuskers, led by All-Big Eight guard Brian Banks, finished with a 22-8 record and advanced to the second round of the NIT. Despite failing health – a battle against cancer that he finally lost – Cipriano shared coaching duties with his assistant, Moe Iba, in 1979-80, and took Nebraska to the NIT again. For their efforts, the duo shared United Press International Big Eight Coach-of-the-Year honors.

Cipriano brought Nebraska into the modern era, coaching 17 seasons and 450 games. His record was 253-197, and those 253 victories represent nearly one-fifth of Nebraska's all-time total. Following Cipriano's death, Iba was named head coach, and he continued Cipriano's winning ways. In Iba's six seasons on the bench, Nebraska was 106-71 and advanced to postseason play four times.

Center Andre Smith was the 1981 Big Eight MVP and twice earned All-Big Eight honors. However, it was the late Jack Moore, a 5-10 playmaker from Muncie, Ind., who captured the hearts of Nebraska fans from 1980 through 1982. Moore earned All-Big Eight honors in 1982, when he won the Naismith Award, given annually to the nation's top player under 6-feet tall. The first three-time academic All-Big Eight pick in Nebraska history, Moore scored 1,204 points and hit .901 from the free throw line during his career.

The cornerstone of Iba's teams from 1983 through 1986 was Omaha, Neb., native Dave Hoppen, a three-time All-Big Eight center and the first Nebraska basketball player to have his jersey number (42) retired by the school. In 1982-83, Hoppen's freshman season, the Cornhuskers were 22-10 and won three games in the NIT before losing to DePaul in the semifinals at Madison Square Garden. The Cornhuskers returned to the NIT each of the next two seasons, advancing to the second round both times.



Andre Smith was the Big Eight Player of the Year for Nebraska in 1981.

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Hoppen's college career, though, was ended by a knee injury he sustained in a game at Colorado on Feb. 1, 1986. He finished as the school's all-time scoring leader with 2,167 points and broke or tied 19 school records during his four-year stay. After Hoppen's injury, Iba's team regrouped and went on to earn the school's first-ever "official" NCAA Tournament berth. Nebraska lost to Western Kentucky in the first round of the Southeast Regional, 67-59. Following the game, Iba announced his resignation.

On March 27, 1986, Danny Nee was officially introduced as Nebraska's 24th basketball coach. During a news conference to announce his hiring, Nee said a "new era" in Cornhusker basketball was beginning.

Nee's 14 teams appeared in postseason play 11 times and topped the 20-victory mark in seven seasons. In his first season, Nebraska was 21-12 and finished third in the NIT.

After a 13-18 record in his second season, the Cornhuskers got back over the .500 mark with a 17-16 record in 1988-89 and advanced to the second round of the NIT.

Nebraska missed the school single-season record for losses by one in 1989-90 (10-18), then won a school-record 26 games, with only eight losses, in 1990-91. The Cornhuskers reached the Big Eight Tournament championship game for the first time and advanced to the NCAA Tournament, losing to Xavier 89-84 in the first round of the regionals at Minneapolis, Minn.

The 1990-91 team included two first-round NBA draft picks, senior Rich King and redshirt freshman Eric Piatkowski. The 7-2 King was the tallest player in Cornhusker history.

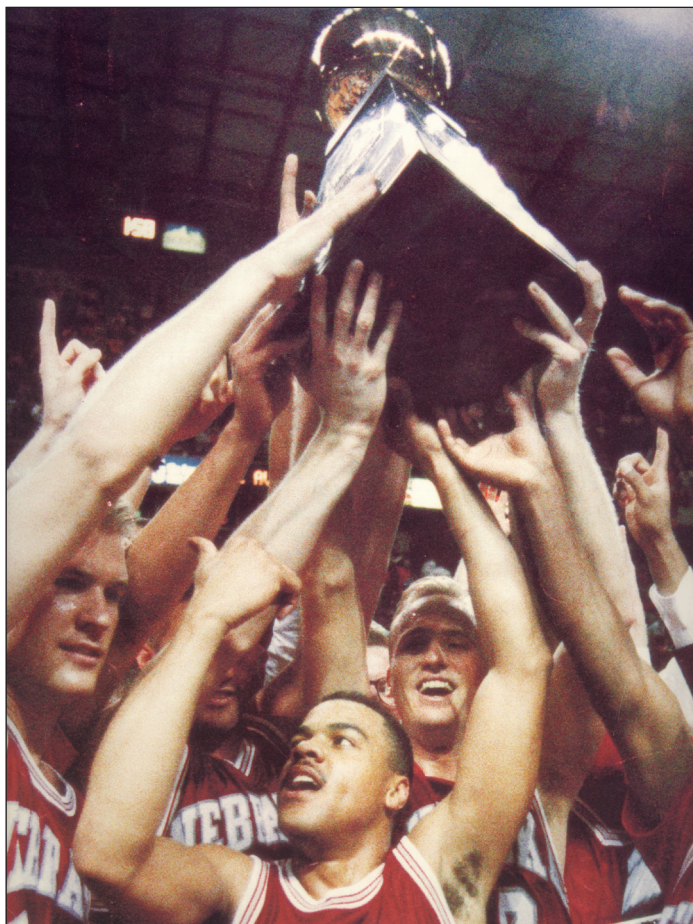
Piatkowski, Nebraska's sixth-man in 1990-91, went on to win first-team all-conference honors twice. He ranks second on the Cornhuskers' career-scoring list with 1,934 points, and he is the only Nebraska player to finish with at least 1,900 points, 600 rebounds (669) and 300 assists (322). In 2006, Piatkowski became the third Husker, joining Hoppen and Stu Lantz (No. 22), to have his jersey number (52) retired.

Three more NCAA Tournament appearances followed the record-shattering 1991 season. In 1992-93, the Huskers registered their highest league finish under Nee by tying for second in the Big Eight.

In addition to reaching the NCAA Tournament for a fourth consecutive season and recording back-to-back 20-victory seasons for the first time in school history, Nee's 1993-94 team made history by winning the school's first Phillips 66 Big Eight Tournament title. The Cornhuskers defeated Oklahoma, Missouri and Oklahoma State, in that order, to earn the tournament championship.

Nebraska's NCAA Tournament run ended at four in 1994-95, but the Huskers kept their postseason streak alive with an NIT berth, advancing to the second round. The 1995-96 team struggled down the stretch but was back in the NIT and capped its season with a run to the tournament title.

The Huskers won two games on the road and scored more than 80 points in four of their



Nebraska won its only Big Eight Tournament title during the 1994 season as the Huskers won three straight over Oklahoma, No. 3 Missouri and No. 23 Oklahoma State.



Nebraska won the 1996 NIT title at Madison Square Garden. It was the third time since 1980 that the Huskers reached at least the NIT semifinals.

five postseason games. They finished with a 60-56 victory against St. Joseph's at Madison Square Garden.

"The NIT run was incredible when you look at the teams we beat and how we beat them," Nee said after the remarkable run. "I don't care what anybody says, it was domination."

The 1996 NIT championship team was one of the most talented in school history. Two future NBA players, Erick Strickland and 1998 first-round draft pick Tyrronn Lue, were in the backcourt. And two other players on the team scored 1,000 career points, Jaron Boone and freshman Venson Hamilton, who would finish his career in 1999 as the school's all-time leading rebounder and shot-blocker.

Lue's contributions as a freshman to the NIT championship team were only a preview of what was to come. The lightning-quick, 6-0 point guard finished his career as the seventh-leading scorer in school history, and he ranked in the top 10 in 12 other career categories. His leadership carried the 1996-97 Cornhusker team, the first to play in the Big 12, to another NIT appearance.

Behind a late-season run, which included Nebraska's longest conference winning streak in 20 years, Nee's 12th team finished fourth in the Big 12 and returned to the NCAA Tournament. The bid was the Cornhuskers' fifth during the 1990s and extended the school-record postseason run to eight.

The streak reached nine in 1999, as the Cornhuskers just missed an NCAA Tournament bid and advanced to the second round of the NIT. In the process, NU reached the 20-victory mark for a second consecutive season, and Hamilton was named Big 12 Player of the Year.

The optimism that preceded the 1999-2000 season, Nee's last, quickly faded with the loss of guard Cookie Belcher, who was sidelined by a wrist injury and forced to take a medical redshirt. The Cornhuskers were off-balance almost from the beginning of the season and fell far short of expectations.

Even though Nee became the winningest coach in school history in 1999-2000, getting victory No. 254 to pass Joe Cipriano in the Cornhuskers' final home game against Colorado, his final team finished with an 11-19 record. The 19 losses tied for the most in school history.

With then-Director of Athletics Bill Byrne setting his sites on bringing NU basketball back



Venson Hamilton was the second Husker to be named conference player of the year when he earned the award in 1999.

to national prominence, he hired Barry Collier as the Cornhuskers' new coach on April 5, 2000. In Collier's first season with the Huskers, Nebraska finished with a 14-16 mark as Belcher returned to the lineup and earned second-team All-Big 12 Conference honors while finishing third in NCAA history for career steals with 353.

In Collier's fourth season, Nebraska ran to an 18-13 record and its first postseason bid in five years. Nebraska won its first two games in the 2004 NIT, including an exhilarating 71-70 road victory over in-state foe Creighton in the opening round. After a home-court victory over Niagara, the Huskers' season came to an end three days later in a valiant effort at Hawaii when NU came back from 17 points down at halftime to tie the game at the first media timeout of the second period before eventually falling by a point.

Nebraska struggled the following season but an influx of young talent helped the Huskers move forward. Aleks Maric made an immediate impact as he broke the NU freshman rebounds record and ranked in the rookie top 10 for blocked shots. Maric was a force in the paint as he tied the school freshman record for double-doubles. It was a sign of good things to come as he finished his four-year career ranked fifth all-time in scoring and was only the second Husker ever to record at least 1,000 career rebounds.

NU made its second postseason appearance in three years in 2006 before finishing with a 19-14 record. It was the most wins under Collier and the first time his Huskers won a game at the Big 12 Championship as NU reached the semifinals of the conference tourney for the first time since winning the Big Eight Tournament title in 1994.

Collier looked to have a solid base in place for 2006-07 before abruptly resigning in early August to take the position of athletic director at his alma mater, Butler University, ending his career at Nebraska with an 89-91 overall record.

The late opening posed little challenge for Nebraska as one week later, on Aug. 8, 2006, Kenneth 'Doc' Sadler was introduced as the 26th head coach in program history.

Nebraska finished first in the Big 12 and 18th nationally in scoring defense in 2007-08, allowing just 60.7 points per game. Sadler's specialty was highlighted again in 2008-09 as the Huskers proved it was no fluke, claiming another first-place defense in the league while ranking 22nd nationally by giving up just 60.4 points per contest. It was the second-lowest total in the Husker record book since 1951, giving Sadler-coached squads three of the top four Husker scoring defenses in the past half century.

The Huskers' 20-13 record in 2007-08 included a 7-9 record in league play, after starting the Big 12 campaign with an 0-4 mark. In 2008-09, Sadler helped Nebraska continue its upward trend with eight league victories, marking NU's first .500 record in conference play in a decade. Nebraska's 2010-11 season was highlighted by wins over three ranked teams, including No. 3 Texas, as the victory over the Longhorns was marked the highest ranked team Nebraska had defeated since 1994.

The 2011-12 season began a new era for Nebraska basketball, as the Huskers joined the Big Ten Conference. That season also marked the opening of the Hendricks Training Complex, an 84,000-foot facility for the Husker basketball program which includes practice courts, locker



Aleks Maric finished his career ranked fifth all-time in scoring and second in rebounding, becoming only the third player in Big 12 history to record at least 1,600 points and 1,000 rebounds in a career.

room, team lounge, offices as well as strength and nutrition areas, giving Nebraska one of the best facilities in the nation.

In March of 2012, Nebraska moved in a different direction as then-Athletic Director Tom Osborne chose Tim Miles to run the basketball program. Miles guided a short-handed roster to 15 wins in his first season, including the program's first-ever Big Ten Tournament win, and has worked tirelessly to build Nebraska's basketball brand.

The 2013-14 season was a rebirth for the Husker program. Nebraska moved into the \$179 million dollar Pinnacle Bank Arena in downtown Lincoln in August of 2014 and presold the entire season six months before the opener. The Huskers flourished in their new home, going 15-1 including a win over ninth-ranked Wisconsin in front of a record crowd of 15,998. The Huskers went 19-13 on the season and earned their first NCAA appearance in 16 years. Terran Petteway earned consensus All-Big Ten honors while Miles was named Big Ten and National Coach of the Year after leading the Huskers to the NCAAs following a 1-5 start in Big Ten play.

Since the opening of Pinnacle Bank Arena, Husker fans have been coming out in record numbers, as the program broke its attendance record for the second straight year in 2014-15 and is one of nine NCAA programs to average at least 15,000 fans per game in each of the past five seasons.

In 2017-18, the Huskers exceeded expectations, winning 22 games, including a pair of wins against ranked Big Ten teams, and finished fourth in the conference with a 13-5 mark. The 13 conference wins was a school record while the 22 wins were the most since 1990-91. Newcomers James Palmer Jr. and Isaac Copeland both earned All-Big Ten honors, as Palmer garnered first-team accolades by averaging 17.2 points per game to rank fifth in the Big Ten.



A crowd of nearly 2,500 were on hand to celebrate with the Huskers on their first NCAA berth since 1998.