

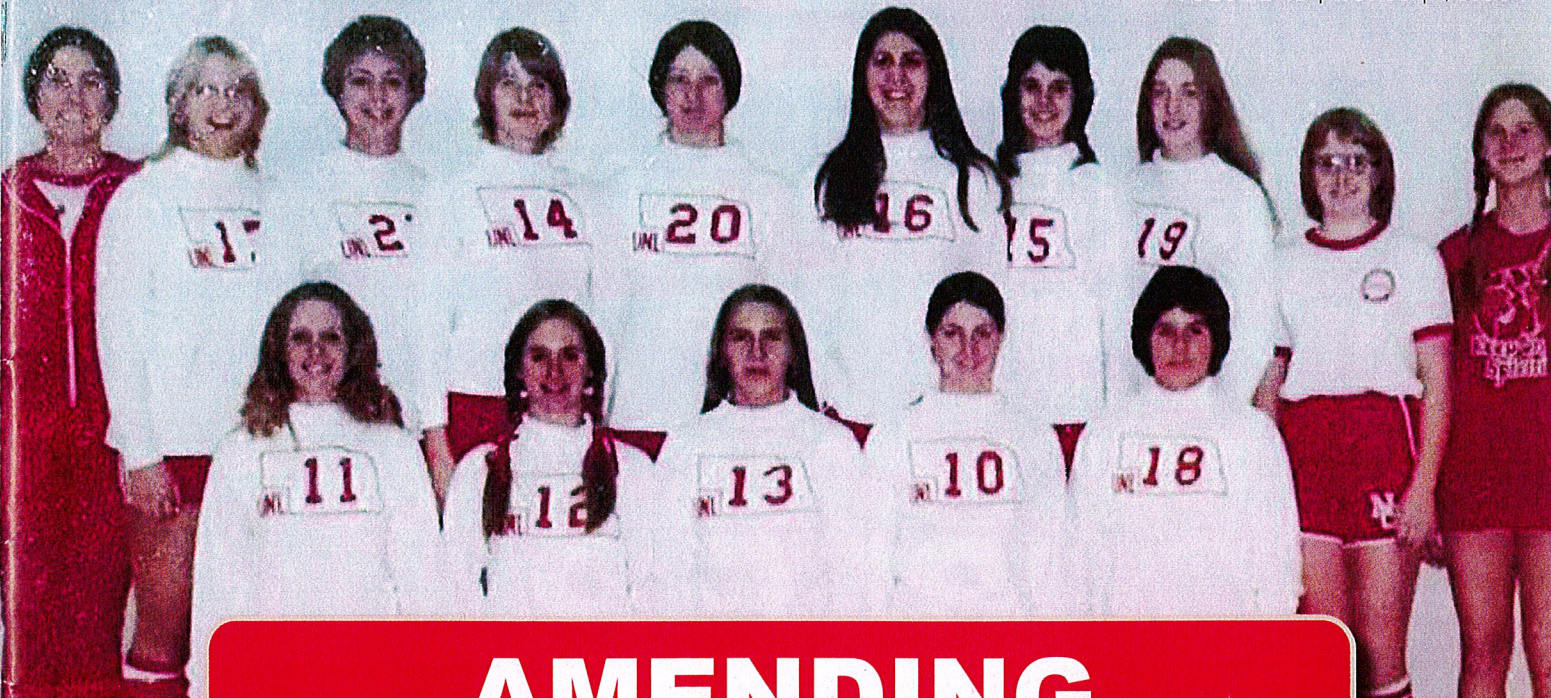
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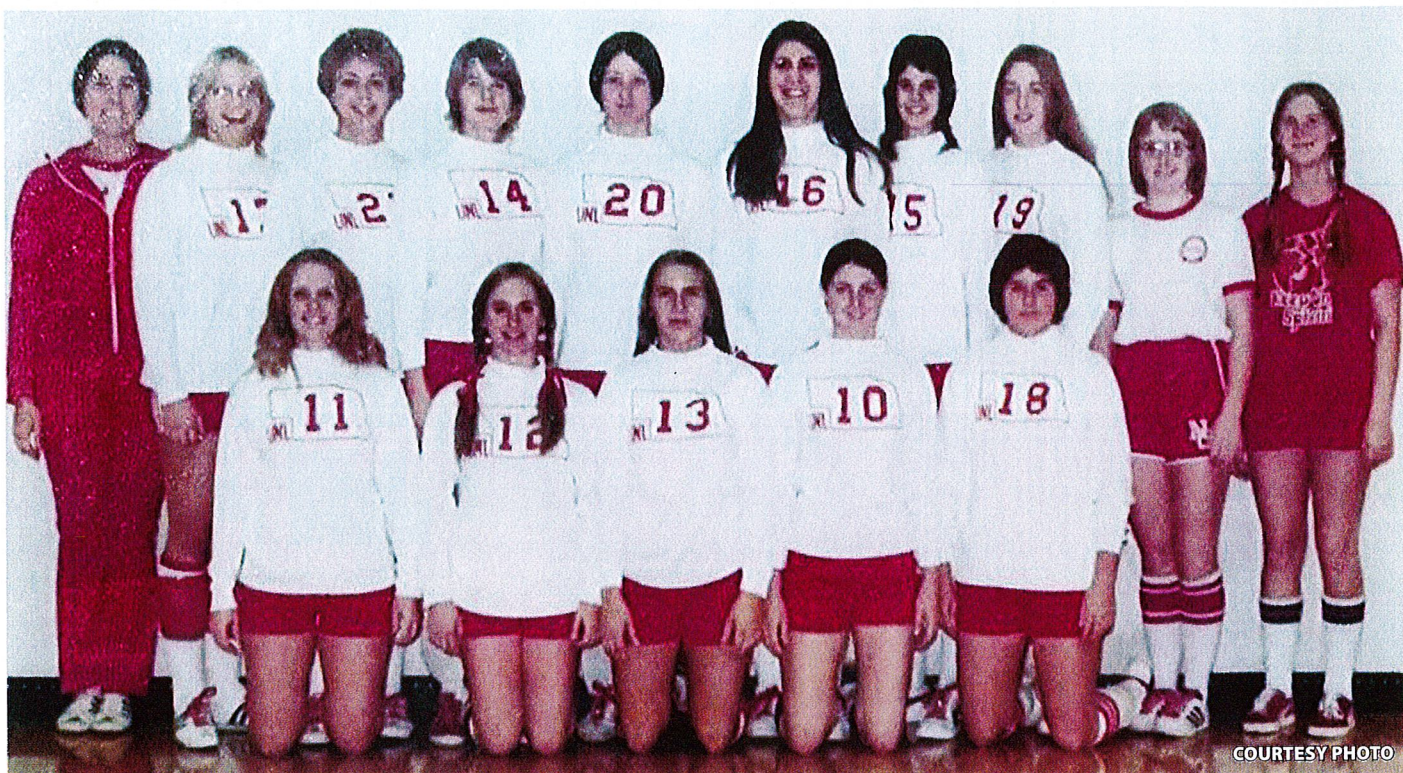
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AMENDING HUSKER HISTORY

Huskers Illustrated Unearths the NU Volleyball Team Lost in Time





The 1974 Husker volleyball team, Nebraska's first that played under the guidance of the athletics department with scholarship players. Front row: Vicki (Ossenkop) Highstreet, Laury (Harmon) Riley, Susie Heiser, Marcia Bartak, Ann Richardson. Back row: Coach Pat Sullivan, Janice Kruger, Cheryl (Nolte) Henry, Eldeana Edeal, Linda (Brown) Dutton, Denise Stange, Jan Zink, Ann Garrett, manager Sandy Stewart, manager Deb Van Fleet.

Rewriting History

The 1974 Volleyball Team Claims Its Spot in Husker Annals

By Lincoln Arneal

The 1974 Nebraska volleyball team exists in the pages of Cheryl (Nolte) Henry's scrapbook — filled with clippings of photos and stories of its exploits.

The team exists in the memories of first-year coach Pat Sullivan, the dozen players and the scant fans who watched them play home matches in Mabel Lee Hall.

The team also exists in a letter sent to Henry on Dec. 13, 1974, apologizing for the delay in her financial aid. It was the first time NU female student-athletes had received scholarships for participating in athletics. Nebraska had run into “snags which caused considerable delay and uncertainty” about the disbursement date.

However, the 1974 team does not exist

in the official record book of Nebraska volleyball. Despite being the first team supervised by the athletics department and awarded athletic scholarships, 1975 is the first season recognized in program history.

That means the wins and losses don't count in Sullivan's career coaching record, and the three seniors on that team — Henry, Vicki (Ossenkop) Highstreet and Denise Stange — are not recognized as letter winners in the media guide or on the wall outside the Nebraska locker room.

“We tell our kids this — we were the first, you know?” Henry said. “Then, we take them to Devaney, and our names aren't there.”

The reasons provided by the NU athletics department why the 1974 team

isn't recognized are a lack of records and tradition. In 2000, the athletics department celebrated 25 years of women's sports at Nebraska, commemorating 1975 as the first season. Also, a complete list of results for the first year didn't exist, so adding them to the record book was all but impossible.

“We just kind of fell through the cracks,” Highstreet said. “It's like they were trying to catch up, and they really didn't catch up.”

According to Nebraska media guides, the first official season of competition for most women's sports happened during the 1975-76 academic year, including volleyball, gymnastics, tennis, softball and swimming and diving — even though all those sports competed the previous year. Women's basketball is the outlier and cites

the 1974-75 team as its inaugural season, going 9-7 under Jan Callahan.

However, for the first time, the complete results of the first volleyball team with scholarship student-athletes have been compiled through newspaper archives. In 1974, the Huskers went 25-10-1 and finished second in the Nebraska state tournament and sixth in the AIAW, or Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, regional tournament.

Now with those records and conversations stemming from a reunion last fall to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the passing of Title IX, members of the 1974 team can be included in the storied history of Nebraska volleyball.

“Can I live without being recognized? Well, that’s fine. But if you’re going to recognize it, let’s do it historically accurate,” Stange said. “Why are you ignoring us if we got scholarships? We’re no different than the next year – ’75. They were not the first class. The names are all over, starting with ’75. Their names are engraved on the walls at the Devaney Center. We aren’t that much of an ego people, but if you’re going to tell the story as a university and tell it historically, let’s do it accurately.”

The Coach

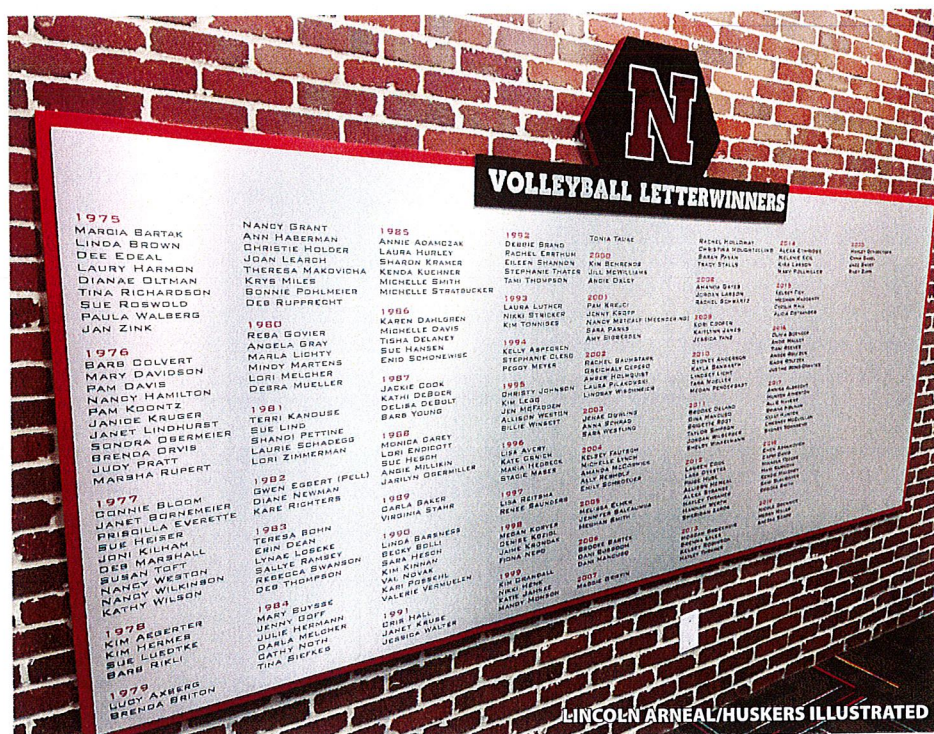
Sullivan was on the job hunt in 1973. She was about to finish her master’s degree at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, when she traveled to Minnesota for a national physical education conference hoping to find a place to start her career.

While there, she ran into Gail Whitaker, who had graduated from Smith College a year earlier and was the tennis coach at Nebraska. Whitaker connected Sullivan with Madge Phillips, the head of the NU PE department, who was looking for someone to teach and coach swimming. After an interview, Sullivan was offered a job.

After some hesitation, Sullivan received encouragement from friends on the East Coast. Seek out new experiences, they said.

“So I did, and I took their advice and would be forever grateful for that advice,” Sullivan said. “Because it was so different. It’s so different from the Northeast, and it opened up lots of doors and provided new experiences. I just put myself out there.”

After Sullivan’s first year, the volleyball coach position opened after Margaret Penney, the coach of the team that operated under the PE department, stepped down.



The Nebraska volleyball letter-winners board at the Devaney Center does not list members from the 1974 team.

The Nebraska administration knew Sullivan had volleyball coaching in her background, so she readily agreed to add another sport to her duties.

“I really wanted to be involved in the volleyball world,” Sullivan said. “That was really where I felt like I belonged.”

Despite feeling at home on the volleyball court, juggling her duties was challenging. For two years, Sullivan pulled double duty, coaching volleyball and then switching her focus to swimming. A few times, the sports overlapped.

Sullivan recalled one weekend when Nebraska was hosting a volleyball tournament in Mabel Lee Hall, and the swimming team was competing in the Big Eight relays in Kansas. Sullivan left the volleyball team in the hands of a local club coach while she accompanied the swimmers to Lawrence, Kansas.

On the volleyball court, Sullivan inherited a large group of talented players from the PE supervised team. According to a 1974 season preview in the Lincoln Journal Star, the team went 14-3, winning the state title and eventually placing sixth in the regional tournament. Behind a talented group, she helped NU improve on the court and achieved a winning record as an athletics department team.

“I was biting off a big chunk when I went to Nebraska, but we just built,” Sullivan

said. “We were very successful in Year 1 and just kept on going, and I just kept on learning. You don’t ever quit.”

Although the team was successful in the PE era, Sullivan added more credibility. Practices became more structured and intense. The group began doing different drills. Everything had a purpose. Individual development led to team development.

“Practice definitely went up a level,” Highstreet said. “The intensity – that definitely grew with her coming. She had the strategic mind for it. I think that legitimized what we were doing a little bit more.”

While she was only five years older than some of her players, Sullivan commanded the room and earned the players’ respect. She didn’t talk down to players if they didn’t understand a concept but would break it down into steps to help them master it.

Janice Kruger, a sophomore on the 1974 team, described Sullivan as a player’s coach and quite skilled at teaching the nuances with new techniques. Sullivan used motivation to keep improving and pushing her players forward. She’d take a simple concept like adding a short set to the middle blocker, teach the setter the move, implement the footwork for the attack and work on the timing between the two players.

“She keeps everybody rowing in the same direction, and it was managed in such



NU COMMUNICATIONS (2)

Pat Sullivan, the first Nebraska volleyball coach, waves to the crowd at the Nebraska-Maryland match in October when the 1974 and 1975 Husker volleyball teams were recognized at the Devaney Center. Each player was introduced after the second set as the approximately 8,000 in attendance gave them a standing ovation.

scholarship players and those not receiving aid, Sullivan ensured it didn't get in the way of any relationships. The low-key nature of awarding the first scholarships was part of her general approach. Sullivan tried to keep what was happening on the court separate from what was happening in the outside world.

On the court, it was smooth sailing for most of the 1974 season. The Huskers went unscathed through the first few weeks, winning their opening nine matches against in-state competition. After dropping a match to Chadron State, NU faced its toughest battles of the year at a tournament in Kansas. NU beat Missouri but split sets against Drake before losing to Kansas and regional power Southwest Missouri State.

The Huskers finished the regular season 14-4-1 before the state tournament. NU suffered its second loss of the year to Nebraska-Omaha but rebounded to make the title match against Kearney State. The Lopers controlled the match and won the title, but with a runner-up finish, the Huskers qualified for the AIAW Region VI tournament. NU went 4-2 in pool play to advance to the top eight. However, it stumbled on the final day and finished in sixth place with another loss to Kansas.

While reminiscing with players during the reunion, Sullivan pulled back the curtain for the first time on what was happening behind the scenes that first season. She was constantly working on getting all she could to support her team. She talked about

how they got kicked out of the UNL Rec Center racquetball courts, even though they had keys to the building. Sometimes, small details get overlooked when you're launching an athletics department – like keeping records. However, whenever she could, Sullivan was there fighting for her players.

Support beyond the court was nonexistent. If a player needed an ankle taped, she better get in line to have a coach do it or learn how to tape it herself. If a player wanted to work out, she could use one universal weight-lifting machine, but she'd have to develop the workouts herself.

The players who had played as part of the PE department team didn't know about the transition until it was almost complete.

"It was unbeknownst to us at that time that (Sullivan) was an employee of the athletics department and fighting new Title IX battles for our team," Stange said. "As oblivious college seniors, we just continued to practice hard and improve as a team just as in the previous years because we loved the sport of volleyball."

The Legacy

The history of Nebraska volleyball begins before 1974.

As alluded to several times above, the sport was played under the supervision of the university's PE department for four years before transitioning to the athletics department and awarding scholarships. The team often played nearby schools and

participated in now-defunct AIAW regional tournaments. During the 1960s, many women's athletic competitions that existed as intramurals began evolving into club and extramural competitions.

Stange is grateful for the dozens of women who played volleyball as part of the PE department before she arrived on campus. She called those players the true pioneers, playing the sport even before Title IX.

"It wasn't like there was no volleyball at UNL until '74 or '75," she said. "That's why we don't want to step on their toes either. It was just by chance of timing and our age that we were in that first group. It's nothing special we did."

Volleyball also existed on the high school level in Nebraska long before the first NU team took the court. Having a foundation of high school players allowed the Huskers to pack rosters with Nebraska natives and win most matches early on. That early success has allowed Nebraska never to have a losing season in program history.

Sullivan said the high school coaches produced strong, fundamentally sound players. So when she got them in the gym at Nebraska, she wasn't starting from scratch. Then, when she did start recruiting, she stayed local and didn't have to travel far to find high-level players, and it helped that Nebraska kids wanted to go to Nebraska.

"I don't know that I was smart enough to know what I was doing was what needed to happen," Sullivan said. "At the time, we



Members of the 1974 and 1975 Husker volleyball teams huddled just off the court after being honored. “I’m really pleased with the way the university handled their part to honor those people,” Sullivan said. “It was really about them and their contributions to the early days of Nebraska athletics.”

were going to move fast because pretty quickly, other people were going to catch up. So we needed to lay that groundwork. We needed to hold on to the kids from Nebraska. I needed to get better fast.”

Women’s athletics would continue to expand at Nebraska. With Swofford’s hiring in 1975, one of her first initiatives was to start a women’s sports information department – which might explain why records for 1974 teams don’t exist. Women’s sports employed their own athletic trainers, and Stewart assisted with fall sports. Golf was added for the 1975-76 school year. Scholarships and the budget continued to grow and women could begin lifting weights in Schulte Field House, where the football team worked out.

As time passed, the original Nebraska volleyball team moved on and spread out while continuing to impact the volleyball world all over the country.

Sullivan stepped away after the 1976 season and went into administration as an assistant athletic director. She thought it would be a long-term career move. The following year, she set up the first academic support system for women student-athletes, ran tournaments and provided support for whatever the women’s programs needed.

After helping out with a regional club volleyball team, Sullivan realized she still had a passion for coaching. She left Nebraska and headed back East to become the volleyball coach at George Washington. Sullivan led the Colonials for nine seasons,

accumulating a record of 289-140. After retiring from coaching in 1987, she earned her doctorate in higher education from GW in 1989 and was inducted into the school’s athletics hall of fame in 1995. She remains the winningest coach in program history.

Sullivan wasn’t the only person from that first team who went on to coaching success.

Kruger coached at Nebraska-Omaha and led the Mavs to a trio of third-place finishes in the NCAA Division II tournament and won two AVCA national coach of the year awards. She later worked at Maryland for 20 years and became the all-time winningest coach in the Atlantic Coast Conference with 363 victories.

After short stints as an assistant at Houston and LSU, Stewart coached Iowa from 1982-88, winning 136 games. The Big Ten coach of the year in 1983, she is still the winningest coach in Hawkeye program history.

Many others coached at the high school level or worked as referees. Their passion for the sport shouldn’t be a surprise as many early players weren’t recruited and chose to play the sport independently. Plus the coaching path was natural since many were physical education majors and were going into teaching.

For now, the 1974 team’s legacy isn’t found in any record book at Nebraska, but they know they set the program on an early path to success. After Sullivan left, Nebraska hired Terry Pettit, who would eventually win NU’s first national

volleyball championship in 1995, just more than two decades after the original Huskers played in front of family and friends with ankles they taped themselves.

Sullivan said she is proud of the groundwork those early teams laid. However, she’s also passionate that all the players get credit for their contribution, especially that 1974 team. She regrets not correcting the oversight earlier.

When she returned for the 25-year celebration of women’s athletics at NU, Sullivan noted the 1975 team was recognized as the first. Alarm bells went off in her head, but she didn’t know how to correct the record.

“I feel like we’ve got a window here to make something happen,” Sullivan said. “Had I not been coaching somewhere else and heavily involved in like a million other things in my career, I would have taken care of that way back in 1977. I would have made that happen then, but that wasn’t high on my list. We weren’t posting stuff online. There weren’t media guides that everybody was looking at. We didn’t have that. I just took it for granted.

“I remember when we went back for 25 years, even at that point, they were saying ‘75 was the first team. I just thought, ‘Well, you’re wrong.’ But what am I going to do about it now? Yeah, I should have jumped on it. I should have, would have, could have, right? But it’s not too late.”

Consider the record corrected.