

Delivered From Nowhere

"Nebrasketball" is here to stay— and it isn't folklore

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1982 was a big year for the state of Nebraska.

The University of Nebraska football team, under the guidance of coach Tom Osborne, had played themselves to a 13-1 record and a third place ranking in the national AP poll. They defeated thirteenth ranked LSU in the Orange Bowl, completing a season in which they also won the Big Eight Conference regular season title.

In other Nebraska news, it was Bruce Springsteen's album entitled *Nebraska* that forever immortalized the state in a now monumental cultural artifact. Springsteen took his acoustic guitar and recorded sparse, still tracks in his Colts Neck, New Jersey rental house. The songs reflected Bruce's relationship with his father, as well as his identity as a result of that relationship. The title track was inspired by the 1973 movie *Badlands*, which depicted a fictional serial killer inspired by real life serial killer Charles Starkweather, who hailed from Lincoln, Nebraska. The album, a drastic departure from Springsteen's typical anthemic rock and roll, was received well critically and is now a quintessential singer-songwriter album.

Modern day Nebraska, believe it or not, is having a mirrored cultural moment almost 44 years later. *Deliver Me From Nowhere*, the biopic of Bruce Springsteen during the recording of *Nebraska*, was released in late 2025. Jeremy Allen White portrayed Bruce in all his suffering as he tackled whatever inner demons he had yet to face, while writing the songs that would end up on *Nebraska*.

It is not the football team that accompanies this Nebraskan resurrection, though. That's right, Fred Hoiberg's Nebraska men's basketball team has officially arrived. More aptly, they have been delivered— from nowhere.

The Nebraska men's basketball program has an unfortunate distinction: they are the only power conference program to have never won an NCAA tournament game.

Their history is long, with their program dating all the way back to 1897. The modern era of the NCAA tournament began when the field was expanded to 64 teams in 1985. Ever since then, Nebraska has been selected to the Big Dance just eight times. In four of those first round losses, they were the higher seeded team and lost in upset fashion. Their most recent appearance came in 2024, when they lost to ninth seeded Texas A&M by 15 points.

It is not supposed to be easy to be Nebraska's head coach. A recent poll of coaches within the Big Ten conducted by the *Field of 68* media network saw Nebraska voted 13th out of 18 possible teams in the Big Ten. The criteria, while left up to the voters themselves to decide, would generally involve some combination of recruiting base, facilities, location, and most of all, NIL allotment. All in all, among the league's coaches, the Nebraska head coaching job is not looked upon favorably.

So, how has Fred Hoiberg done it?

And by it, I mean begin the 2025-2026 season with *20 straight wins*. As of this writing, Nebraska sits at 20-1. They are currently 5th in the SM 25 Hard, 5th in the AP Poll, 5th in the Coaches Poll, and 10th at KenPom. Their one loss came about 24 hours ago, a three point road loss— without two starters— at fourth ranked Michigan.

Nebraska's roster is somewhat of a hodgepodge. Their most effective player this year is Rienk Mast, a six foot ten forward from the Netherlands. Mast is classified as a senior in his fifth year of eligibility. After three seasons at Bradley, he transferred to Nebraska last season, where he averaged 12.3 points per game and 7.5 rebounds per game. This season, Mast has been even more effective. His 14.6 ppg/6 rpg/3 apg slash line has helped him become the focal point of the frontcourt. When the Huskers aren't shooting threes, it is likely Mast who has the ball in his hand.

However, there are not many moments when Nebraska is *not* shooting three pointers. They rank 16th in all of America for three pointers taken. Pryce Sandfort leads the charge in that department with a 40.8% 3PT. He is also the team's leading scorer at 17.4 points per game. Sandfort played two seasons at conference foe Iowa before coming to Lincoln this year.

Braden Frager (12.2 ppg, 3.9 rpg, 37.3% 3PT) is Nebraska's mainstay freshman. Jamarques Lawrence (10.8 ppg, 2.5 rpg, 38% 3PT) is what we call a "boomerang transfer." He began his career at Nebraska for the 2022-2023 season and stayed for two years,

before playing last year at Rhode Island. He has now returned to Lincoln for his senior year.

Sam Hoiberg (9.2 ppg, 4.2 apg), the son of coach Fred Hoiberg, has gradually increased his minutes per game in the four years playing under his father. Hoiberg has turned himself into a valuable offensive asset, leading his team in assists per game. Turkish forward Berke Buyuktuncel (7.4 ppg, 6.1 rpg) is another valuable piece for the Cornhuskers who spent his freshman year at UCLA before coming to Lincoln for last season.

Transfers, freshmen, and direct lineage of the head coach have all combined for Nebraska's best start to a season in program history. Their fifth ranking in the AP Poll is the highest they have ever been ranked. In 1991, they received their highest NCAA tournament seed in program history. They were seeded 3rd in their region, before losing to 14th seeded Xavier by five points in the first round. They are set to shatter that record this year— a number one seed is one thousand percent in play.

Fred Hoiberg, a ten year NBA player and former Chicago Bulls head coach, was born in Lincoln. His grandfather, Jerry Bush, coached the Cornhuskers from 1954-1963. He previously coached at Iowa State before heading for the NBA. He is now back home in his seventh season, coaching his son, and on his way to making history in Lincoln.

Last night's game against Michigan was believed to be a major litmus test for Nebraska. Up to this point, they have had a few memorable victories. Their most impressive non-conference wins are a home win against Creighton and a neutral court win over Kansas State in the Hall of Fame Classic. In conference, they defeated Illinois on the road and Michigan State at home for their strongest wins.

Their game in Ann Arbor, however, was supposed to be the real test. Michigan began the season on fire. They cruised through the Players Era Festival, defeating San Diego State, Auburn, and Gonzaga by an average margin of 36 points. Around the holidays, when the Wolverines were still undefeated, many outlets and talking heads wondered aloud if we were potentially seeing the best team in the last decade taking shape, en route to a dominant NCAA tournament run. Citing KenPom numbers and other data, many analysts were on the way to crowning the Wolverines the best team in America by Christmas.

For what it's worth, Michigan has come back down to Earth in terms of victory margin. They even suffered a home loss to Wisconsin, proving once and for all that (1) the season is not over in December, and (2) the game is played on the court, not on

KenPom. Still, this would be Nebraska's toughest test to date: a monster Big Ten game, without two starters, on the road, at a perennial national title favorite.

Nebraska, despite their loss, ended up proving their worth. Whether it's the name on the jersey or the style of play, it is hard to tell whether or not people have been taking Nebraska seriously as a national title contender. There are not many power conference teams that could begin the season 20-0, rank top 25 in both offense and defense, have notable wins on their schedule, and *still* be believed to be pretenders. And yet, Nebraska may be the lone exception.

The Huskers showed they are for real and then some. They rained threes on Michigan in the first half, and led by as many as 11. It ended up coming down to a late game layup by Michigan's Trey McKenney, who converted with 1:07 still to play. With the final possession, Nebraska had a chance to tie from three and could not convert. They were undefeated no more, but everyone could agree that the Huskers were no fluke.

The season now rolls on for Nebraska, who play host to 7th ranked Illinois in three days. Illinois will be a second straight top ten game. The Big Ten is one of the country's deepest leagues this season, so no games will come easy. This season, for the first time in a long time, Nebraska will be one of the teams that people circle on their schedule as a team to watch out for.

It is not 1982, but *Nebraska* is still a somewhat relevant album— how can a multi million dollar movie be made about an album if people *don't* care about it?

In the same vein, Nebrasketball is something to be cared about. They are no fluke, they are no jive. Do they have a rabbit's foot? A horseshoe up their you know what? More likely, they have built a program of prominence through careful acquisition of effective transfers, homegrown talents, and highly recruited freshmen.

When Springsteen asked to be delivered from nowhere on "State Trooper," even he may not have known what it meant. It is almost certain that he was not referring to the Nebraska men's basketball program, but a story like this one needs a little juice.

Let's pretend he was talking about the Cornhuskers. After all, everyone else is.