

2017



NEMESIS

Can a team reach greater
heights when it has a rival?



BY BRANDON VOGEL

THEORY

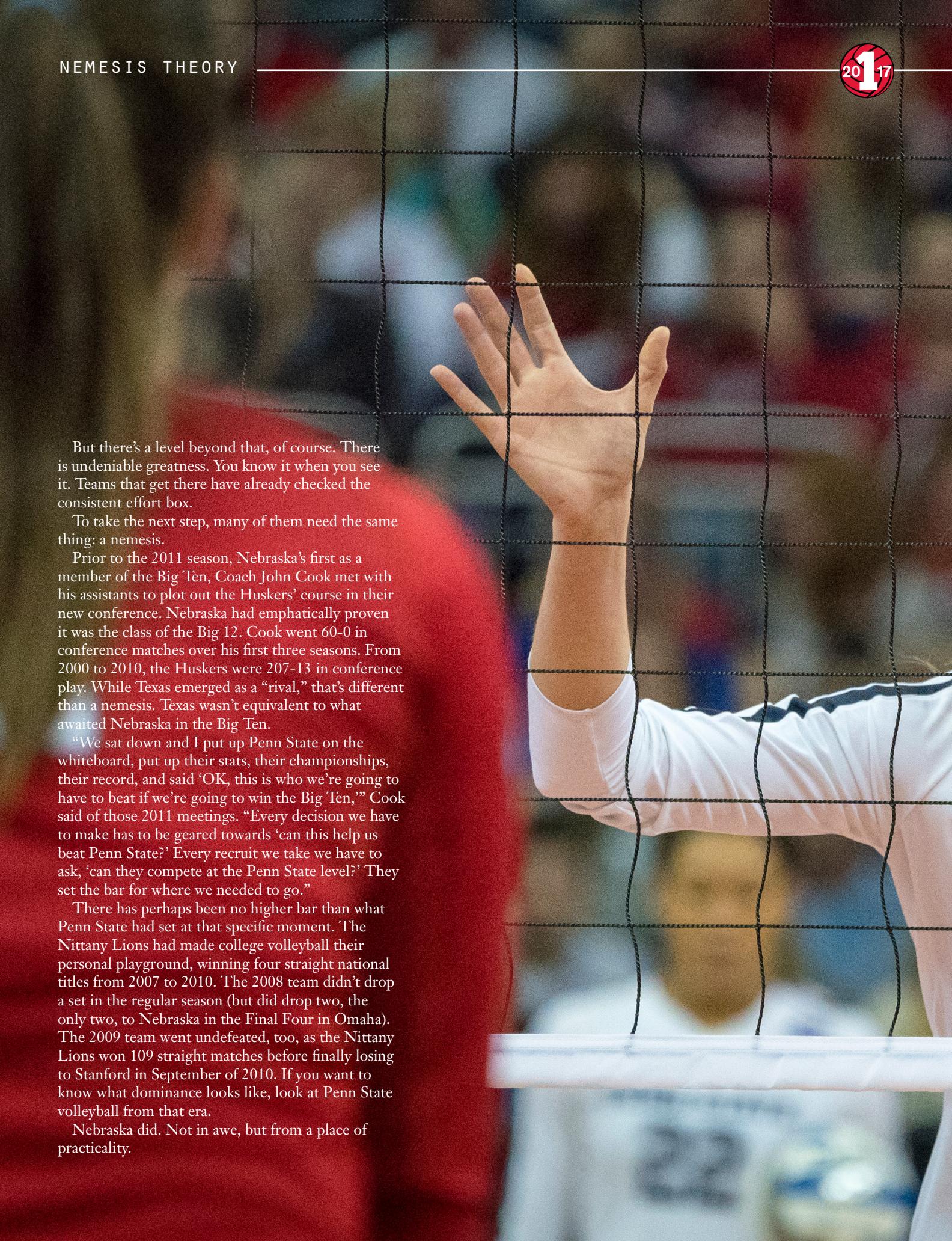
The easy thing to do as a coach is to just take it one game at a time. Or maybe it is just an easy thing to say. It's respectful of the opponent, no matter how good or bad the next one might be, and displays humility.

The one-game-at-a-time approach is harder in practice. Coaxing consistent effort, and hopefully results, out of athletes is what separates good coaches from average ones. The ones that can reduce randomness the best are the ones who get to keep moving up the career ladder and probably get to take home a conference coach-of-the-year award or two.



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KANSAS



But there's a level beyond that, of course. There is undeniable greatness. You know it when you see it. Teams that get there have already checked the consistent effort box.

To take the next step, many of them need the same thing: a nemesis.

Prior to the 2011 season, Nebraska's first as a member of the Big Ten, Coach John Cook met with his assistants to plot out the Huskers' course in their new conference. Nebraska had emphatically proven it was the class of the Big 12. Cook went 60-0 in conference matches over his first three seasons. From 2000 to 2010, the Huskers were 207-13 in conference play. While Texas emerged as a "rival," that's different than a nemesis. Texas wasn't equivalent to what awaited Nebraska in the Big Ten.

"We sat down and I put up Penn State on the whiteboard, put up their stats, their championships, their record, and said 'OK, this is who we're going to have to beat if we're going to win the Big Ten,'" Cook said of those 2011 meetings. "Every decision we have to make has to be geared towards 'can this help us beat Penn State?' Every recruit we take we have to ask, 'can they compete at the Penn State level?' They set the bar for where we needed to go."

There has perhaps been no higher bar than what Penn State had set at that specific moment. The Nittany Lions had made college volleyball their personal playground, winning four straight national titles from 2007 to 2010. The 2008 team didn't drop a set in the regular season (but did drop two, the only two, to Nebraska in the Final Four in Omaha). The 2009 team went undefeated, too, as the Nittany Lions won 109 straight matches before finally losing to Stanford in September of 2010. If you want to know what dominance looks like, look at Penn State volleyball from that era.

Nebraska did. Not in awe, but from a place of practicality.



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"We didn't dwell on 'this is Penn State,'" Cook said, "it was more here is who leads the conference in attack percentage, here's who leads the conference in opponent attack percentage. It's Penn State. Here are the numbers. We've got to be first in this category, we've got to be first in that category. Who gets aced the least? Penn State. We've got to be better than them on that."

Penn State had clearly built a successful model for winning in Nebraska's new conference. To not examine it would have been an error of either pride or negligence. But recognizing that requires a certain level of confidence on its own. To say something somewhere is the best means that whatever you're building, whatever you've done, perhaps isn't in the current context. It also might fly in the face of what, when taken too far, can verge on performative humility, the classic,

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no-one-questions-it, one-game-at-a-time approach.

For the team that feels it can reach a higher level, the willingness to admit that it can be better, that it doesn't care how that looks, might be its biggest advantage. There are numerous examples of that throughout the history of sport, but Nebraskans have seen their own examples up close over the years.

Following Nebraska's 7-3 win over Oklahoma in 1988, linebacker Broderick Thomas told reporters that the Huskers had been practicing against the Sooners' vaunted wishbone offense every Monday since the start of fall camp. Players from a few years earlier than that have recalled devoting time each week to wishbone preparation, but this was perhaps the most public acknowledgement that, yes, Nebraska wasn't just thinking about Oklahoma often, but

thinking about how to beat it.

Oklahoma was the classic nemesis during the Barry Switzer era. Prior to the win in 1988, Tom Osborne was 5-11 against the Sooners and had lost the previous four games in the series. In that era in the Big Eight, Oklahoma was the barrier standing between where Nebraska was and where it wanted to go. Why not acknowledge it?

Decorum, mostly. Every Monday practice spent working against the wishbone was a practice not necessarily spent preparing for Kansas or Iowa State or whatever opponent was on the schedule. But if a coach could be confident of avoiding many slip-ups thanks to a singular focus – and Nebraska did for the most part – the only thing at stake was optics. How does it look if Nebraska, a great program in its own right, is practicing to beat Oklahoma every week?



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That can be a tough mindset to shake. In this case, it was perhaps a reluctant realization.

“Our identity has become tied to this game,” Osborne said after the win in 1988 in a still striking bit of transparency. “It’s almost out of proportion. I wish we could take it back to a one-game approach, but we probably never will.”

Resigned or not, the results seemed to support the decision to place a lot of eggs in the Oklahoma basket. After dropping seven of his first eight meetings with Switzer’s Oklahoma, Osborne went 4-5 against the Sooners starting in 1980 – the first time there were mentions of the Monday wishbone practices – and 1988, Switzer’s final season in Norman.

Around that same time another school was making a point of applying nemesis theory. Bill

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McCartney wasted little time making the Huskers his focus when he arrived at Colorado for the 1982 season. Coming from Michigan, which had Ohio State as a measuring stick, it just made sense to McCartney and for him it wasn’t just a strategy, but a PR campaign. He told anyone that would listen that the Buffs had their sights set on Nebraska. He put a red box around the game on the schedule in Colorado’s locker room, but banned the color everywhere else in the athletic department.

And it’s hard to argue it didn’t work during McCartney’s 13 seasons in Boulder. Colorado never got over the Husker hump for any extended period of time – McCartney was 3-9-1 against Nebraska – but it won (or tied) games at the right times to join the national conversation. Colorado,

which had won two Big Eight titles prior to McCartney, won three while he was there, including a national title in 1990. Colorado, which has been ranked in just 27 percent of all the Associated Press polls since 1936, was ranked in every poll during McCartney’s final six seasons.

Nebraska never totally reciprocated Colorado’s singular focus during those years. There were big games, sure, but red-letter games? That was McCartney’s game. In a 2005 interview with the Associated Press he said that didn’t bother him. As he understood it, Osborne was more of a one-game-at-a-time guy.

Guess McCartney missed the stories of those wishbone practices in Lincoln while he was busy rebuilding the Buffs.

The key to not letting nemesis

theory consume a team may have less to do with the opponent than what the opponent represents. Cook never banned the color blue when he was holding Penn State up as the model of winning in the Big Ten. He didn't devote time throughout the season to looking at what the Nittany Lions liked to run.

What he has done is asked his middles to go against three blockers in practice. "Will they ever do that in a game? No," Cook said. "But if they have to go against Haleigh Washington and Simone Lee, that's as tough as it gets. We want to make it tougher in practice than what they might see in the game."

He took a stats-based approach to assessing the field and used it to inform his strategy. "We used Penn State more as a measuring stick statistically on how we were evaluating our team and where we needed to be," Cook said. "The number one stat is opponent attack percentage, and whoever has the lowest wins the Big Ten." Either Penn State or Nebraska has led the Big Ten in that category since 2011 and has claimed five of the seven conference titles over that span.

From a motivation and preparation standpoint, that makes Penn State the practical pinnacle of toughness. Unless Nebraska is, of course.

The Huskers' win over the top-seeded Nittany Lions in the 2017 Final Four was Nebraska's seventh straight in the series, a streak that covers the last three seasons. Kelly Hunter, the Huskers' All-America setter, never lost to the Nittany Lions as a starter. Nebraska was the only team to beat Penn State from November of 2016 to the end of 2017, and did it three times. Since the Huskers joined the conference, Penn State has lost 34 matches total, 10 of them to Nebraska.

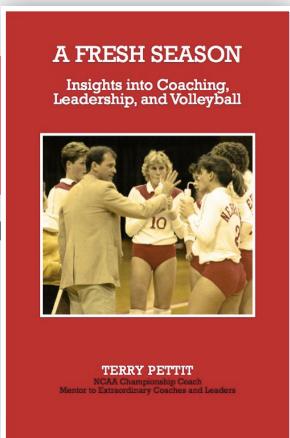
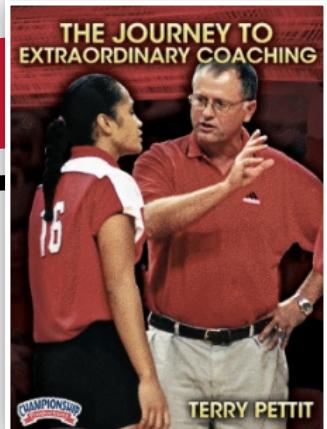
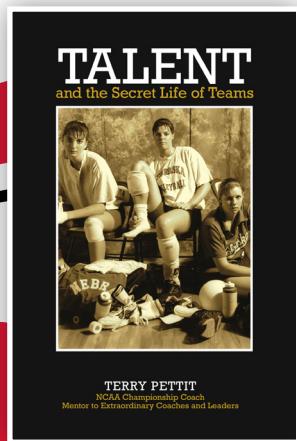
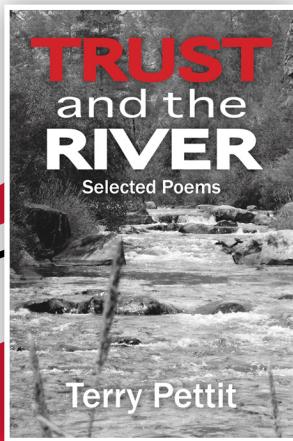
"We say they're the team to beat," Hunter said after recording

47 assists and 23 digs in the win over Penn State in the Final Four. "But Nebraska might be the team to beat, too."

Nebraska volleyball was plenty good before it ever set out to summit Mount Nittany, but that's not the question. The question is if Nebraska reached greater heights through its confident and calculated acknowledgment of the greatness of Penn State. It was never about Penn State, really, but rather what a program playing like Penn State had proven it could achieve.

The results – two of the past three national titles, back-to-back championships in the toughest volleyball conference in the country – offer a pretty resounding answer. 

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"I don't know of anyone who has more insight into coaching and teambuilding."

John Cook, Head Volleyball Coach at Nebraska

"A good story can always make you think, and these are stories that can change your life."

Christy Johnson-Lynch,
Head Volleyball Coach at
Iowa State