

Cook's preparations unusual but effective

■ **Breathing exercises help Nebraska relax and remain efficient while under stress.**

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SAN ANTONIO — This looked more like kindergarten recess than final four preparation.

Following Nebraska's Wednesday practice, John Cook's Huskers lay flat on their backs, feet up in the air against a wall, and blew as hard as they could. Pink balloons inflated.

Cook's motivational techniques are as peculiar as they are effective, but this one seemed right out of Bozo's act.

"It's just little stuff, not hard stuff to do, and it makes the biggest difference," said Melissa Elmer, NU's threetime All-America middle blocker.

The little stuff has never been more important to a team whose national championship dreams may come true tonight. That's why Ron Hruska flew from Lincoln to San Antonio Friday to make certain the Huskers "could breathe."

Hruska, a physical therapist who operates a clinic in Lincoln, is a biomechanical consultant to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, under the division of athletic medicine. His focus: postural restoration techniques.

"The body has to work a certain way," Cook said. "What happens is in volleyball, they do the same movements repetitively over and over, so they develop patterns and their body gets out of balance."

For example, a right-handed pitcher who can't throw as effectively left-handed is unbalanced. Volleyball players develop similar asymmetrical tendencies. That imbalance manifests itself in pain and injuries, in fatigue and in concentration lapses, Hruska said.

Hruska, who meets with some Huskers — Elmer and Christina Houghtelling — as often as once a week, repatterns the body by designing a specific program for each player based on her movements. NU trainers then administer those programs.

He might suggest a footwear change. He might teach an exercise or stretch unique to their pattern.

Hruska can pick out certain problems simply from observing athletes. Elmer battled knee pain earlier this year. Hruska

gave her an inner-thigh exercise.

"A week later, it's gone," Elmer said. "He's definitely an amazing guy."

Hruska and Cook stress proper breathing as much as anything. "Correct breathing keeps unnecessary tension off the neck and back," said Hruska, a Ulysses, Neb., native and University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate.

The Huskers take balloons on road trips. They blow them up every day during the season. Elmer said athletes from other sports give her odd looks

when they see her in the Nebraska training room blowing balloons, but the exercise expands the lungs.

It's especially important for Elmer. In long rallies, Hruska noticed the school's all-time leading blocker held her breath. That restricts arm swing and reach.

Hruska's role is uncommon in college volleyball, and in most sports. He works with other Husker teams; football and track and field are two examples. But few people understand the work he does, he said. Few but Cook. Cook is sold on it.

"If it gives us a one-point edge or a two-point edge," Cook said, "it's certainly worth it."

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