

Memories from a Nebraska basketball writer's first season on the job — without the dream ending

LINCOLN — There is an unspoken, unwritten rule to covering Tim Miles.

Just wait. He'll make time.

So inside a ballroom in downtown Chicago at Big Ten media day in October, I leaned against a door while Miles finished an interview with a national reporter. I juggled questions in my head for one of my first stories on my new beat. The plan was to catch him and, like a "West Wing" episode, we'd walk and talk to see how much I could get out of him in the 45 seconds between TV interviews.

Miles finished and saw me. I began stride for stride with the head coach down the maroon carpet in the creme hallway.

"Hey so ... "

"Does my breath smell?" Miles said, cutting me off. Without warning — and to the horror of the communications woman with BTN — he leaned in close and exhaled into my face.

I grimaced. Coffee mixed with peppermint.

"Good, not great," I answered.

"OK great, so what's up?" Miles said.

And that? That is what covering this Nebraska basketball season was like. It made no sense. It entertained, it confused, it confounded, challenged, concerned and compelled.

And before we close this final chapter on the 2018-19 season and move on from the Miles era, I want to try to give you a taste of what it was like to cover this team. To describe the season's highs and lows and eventual failure by rolling out some quotes and statistics doesn't feel like enough.

In many ways, I stepped into a reporter's dream. This tortured basketball program was about to make a little history. The coach was a quote machine, the team talented, the fan base hungry. And I'd be there for it.

I figured my job would be somewhat easy. Just follow this team on its easy sail toward an NCAA tournament berth.

The first obstacle, though, was to pave some sort of my own way.

I replaced Lee Barfknecht on this beat. He retired last summer, a fact I was reminded of often by editors, coaches, my wife and disgruntled Nebraska fans. Often it felt like Russell Crowe quit the filming of "Gladiator" halfway through, and I was tasked with finishing the film.

"First year on the beat, great stuff," Kent Pavelka told me on the air before the Nebraska-Wisconsin Big Ten game. "But man, we sure do miss Lee."

This is what comes with following a 12-time Nebraska sportswriter of the year.

But more important, I quickly learned that the story of what I was stepping into was much more complicated than just recording the team's exploits for readers. Miles was a lightning rod for fans, which made the reporters who covered Miles piñatas. And beneath the preseason optimism, a doubt and worry festered. Especially after NU missed the NCAA tournament the year prior.

"That was devastating," someone in the program told me before the season. "Because we knew how much harder it would be this year."

For months, the pressure and worry lay dormant.

The Creighton game is what lit the season on fire. That was the day things changed — for the season and myself.

About a week before the Creighton game, a college friend of mine died. The first death in my friend group of 20-somethings. The funeral service was the morning of Dec. 6.

After sharing stories from nights on O Street and crying over photos of Matt on mountains, my friends turned left on Old Cheney to his parents' house to watch the game. I changed out of a black suit in the funeral home bathroom and turned right to cover it.

PBA packed in. As starting lineups began, I thought of Matt. The energy in that arena was one of a kind. He would have loved it.

And I cried as the ball tipped, because I realized Nebraska basketball was finally a place for happiness for so many. A place of solace instead of disappointment. Matt would have loved it. I know his parents did.

With the win over Creighton, NU exorcised a demon and cast out a bat signal to the Big Ten it wasn't messing around. The fan base, hesitant through the first month, pushed all its chips forward.

I started checking prices of flights to NCAA tournament sites.

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Two Casey's gas station coffees, a Chick-fil-A sandwich and half an audio book later, I pulled into Bloomington, Indiana, on Jan. 13. The next night, from the rafters, I watched Nebraska put on a show for a frustrated Indiana crowd.

The usually subdued Glynn Watson and Isaac Copeland were cocky in postgame interviews and laughed off questions like all-stars. At 13-4, they felt like the season was theirs.

After Miles' press conference, I snuck out next to the locker room to wait. He had a bus to catch, but he'd make time.

"Wardrobe question," the sports information director told Miles as he walked up.

"Oh," he said with a laugh. "No, I'll never tell you."

Pink shirt and pink tie. Obviously clashing. With Miles, there was always a reason.

"Never," he said.

"What if I ask you in a press conference to embarrass you?" I asked.

He shrugged.

“I’ll never tell,” he said as he walked off to high-fives while the team loaded onto the bus.

I ate a burger and filed a story after the game while two paintings of Bobby Knight watched over my shoulder.

On the 10-hour drive back, it started to dawn on me how this season would affect lives.

Assistant coach Michael Lewis’ two daughters showed up to practices more in the days after that IU game, waiting just off the court at PBA for him. When practice finished, Lewis would turn, the girls would run and smother him. Assistant Jim Molinari — the charming while seemingly aloof defensive-minded coach — had a T-shirt made with his image on the front by equipment manager Pat Norris. It was Molinari, as a cartoon character, screaming “Stance!” Student managers wore them a lot after that game. One person in the program was collecting newspaper articles and tweets written after some unexpected losses early in the season that said Nebraska was doomed. The plan was to send them back to authors after an NCAA tournament bid.

And the Huskers — put together with transfers from D.C. and walk-ons from Elkhorn — started to mesh. They were ranked. They were rolling.

Everything was falling into place.

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I pulled into a parking spot at Hy-Vee four hours after the Ohio State game and my phone pinged.

“We’ll have a statement later on Isaac,” the text read.

Embedded in the text was the tweet announcing Isaac Copeland’s torn ACL. I typed out a short story on the notes app and emailed the newsroom. A response from Miles popped at the top of my screen.

“Unreal,” it read. “After the f---ing play.”

Everything unraveled quickly. Too quickly for some to comprehend. Copeland’s injury at Ohio State sent the season spinning. Wisconsin, Illinois and Maryland followed, a string of games played by a seemingly unprepared, uninspired Husker team. At Illinois, Nebraska was forced to stay overnight due to fog. Amid that losing streak, the writing began to form on the wall.

The pressure rose to the top. Seniors stressed and became curt in media sessions. The injuries piled up. Coaches were harried. A blizzard blew through. Social media fired Miles. The bags under the coach’s eyes grew. His wit took a hiatus.

One fan who stops by my spot on press row before every home game took a deep breath the last time I saw him before the home loss to Purdue.

“I just ...” he trailed off. “I wish it would’ve worked out. But it’s time.”

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The season began with two possible conclusions. And even though Nebraska still played two games in the NIT, those games felt hollow. It was not if, but when.

The end finally came knocking at 1 p.m. Tuesday, when Bill Moos called Miles.

When word came down that Miles had entered the west side of Memorial Stadium, we followed the rule. We waited. He'd make time.

He emerged around 2:30.

"So Tim how ..."

"No, no," he said, gently. "I'm not taking questions. I'll just give a brief statement."

Miles talked of pride and joked about having some Coors Light. He finished 116-114 at NU, and that fan at PBA was right. It was time. There was no way around it.

I loaded up the car and drove back to Omaha for what seemed like the millionth time of the season. I cut the radio and drove in silence. I wondered what I'd most remember about this first year on the beat. I've covered three coach firings in seven years. The last memory of Bo Pelini is that fiery press conference. For Mike Riley, it's talking with him and his wife, Dee, about James Taylor and Carole King. Dee danced and sang to "I Feel the Earth Move" on the turf before Riley's last regular press conference.

For Miles, I wasn't sure if it would be the screams of the fans after the loss to Maryland or the sense of understanding he conveyed moments after his firing.

And then it dawned on me. It would be the smell.

When Miles finished speaking Tuesday, he backed away from the cameras, waved and I could smell ... cologne. It was the only time all season I remember him wearing cologne.

I stood in a light cloud of it and tweeted out the news of his firing.

It smelled new. It smelled fresh. It smelled of change.