

# Huskers named Big Eight favorites

By Scott Ahlstrand

Daily Nebraskan Staff Writer

It won't be confused with "the greatest team in college football history," but the 1984 Nebraska Cornhuskers already have won the confidence of Big Eight coaches, and at least two magazines have picked them for the national championship.

Absent from the 1984 line up will be the "million dollar" backfield of Turner Gill, Irving Fryar, Mike Rozier and Mark Schellen. But Big Eight coaches again picked Nebraska as the favorite of this year's Big Eight.

The Cornhusker offense returns only three starters from last year's power-packed squad. But many of the 22 returning lettermen saw extensive action in high scoring victories.

Coach Tom Osborne, speaking in a press conference at the annual photo day, said the players were "anxious" to practice and in good condition.

"I was looking at some of the physical reports from the first night and I was impressed," Osborne said.

Osborne said an experienced quarterback is always a tough position to replace. Particularly when the quarterback was Turner Gill, who is now with the Montreal Concordes.

Craig Sundberg, a Lincoln Southeast graduate, and Travis Turner, a walk-on junior from Scottsbluff, are the leading candidates for Gill's job.

A native of Lincoln, Sundberg was effective as the No. 3 signal caller last year behind Gill and senior Nate Mason. Sundberg completed nine of 12 passes, throwing for 159 yards and two touchdowns. Turner lacks the experience of Sundberg, having appeared in only two games. But came on strong during spring practice.

Senior Jeff Smith returns at I-back after gaining 1,001 all-purpose yards in 1983. The Big Eight punt return champion, Smith earned 439 yards in 78 carries as a back-up to Rozier, and has been picked as an All-American candidate by *Playboy* and *Street and Smith*.

Backing up Smith will be junior Paul Miles and sophomore Doug DuBose.

Junior Tom Rathman won the starting nod at fullback ahead of senior Scott Porter. Rathman backed up Schellen last season, but started against Oklahoma in Nebraska's 28-21 victory. Rathman gained a career-high 48 yards on five carries against the Sooners. The receiving duties will be handled by returning lettermen Shane Swanson and Scott Kimball.

Brian Hiemer earned the starting tight end job after a solid spring performance, beating out junior Todd Frain. Frain saw extensive action last year as Nebraska's No. 2 tight end.

"We'll run the same plays we ran last year, but we will have some sort of quality control on them," Osborne said.

Last year's big play was a 41 pitch to Mike Rozier, which averaged 6 to 7 yards a carry. The pitch still will be in for this season, but it will get another look if it isn't as effective, Osborne said.

"We'll get that film out and try to figure out why that isn't working anymore," Osborne said. "We'll do that with the whole offense and try to determine if it's personnel or another problem. We may have to make adjustments."

Nebraska's three returning offensive starters are linemen in left tackle, Mark Behning, left guard, Harry Grimmering, and center, Mark Traynowicz. Behning and Traynowicz and being hyped as All-American candidates. Also starting on the line are senior right guard, Greg Orton, and senior right tackle, Tom Morrow.

Defensively the Huskers return eight starters and 30 lettermen.

The defensive backfield returns all four starters from last year's crew and should be one of the more experienced backfields in the nation.

Safety Bret Clark returns for his third year as a starter. A preseason All-American in several publications, the 6-3, 200-pound Clark combines strength (bench press of 325 pounds); speed (4.59 for 40 yards) and experience.

The starting monster will be senior Mike McCashland. McCashland led Husker defensive backs in tackles last year with 57. His backup is junior Todd Fisher.

The starting cornerbacks will be seniors Dave Burke and Neil Harris. Burke recorded three pass interceptions last year, while Harris is remembered as the hero of Nebraska's win over Oklahoma. The 6-foot, 190 pounder batted away two straight Danny Bradley passes in the final minute. Burke and Harris' backups will be Dennis Wadkins and Ricky Greene.

The linebacking crew suffered a loss when senior Mike Knox went down with a knee injury in spring practice. Knox had surgery and is not expected to return for the '84 season. With Knox out, the No. 1 linebackers are senior Mark Daum and sophomore Marc Munford. Daum was second on the team in tackles last year with 97.

Munford came off the 5-0 Husker freshman team last year, and used his speed (4.72 in the 40) in spring practice to win a starting job. Sophomore Kevin Parsons will back up Daum, while sophomore Steve Forch will come in for Munford.

The defensive line is anchored by returning starters Bill Weber, Rob Stuckey and Scott Strasburger. The three will be joined by Ken Graber and Chris Spachman. Weber, Stuckey and Strasburger combine academics with athletics. All three were named academic all-Big Eight performers, and Stuckey and Strasburger were academic All-Americans.

Back ups to the starting line are Brad Smith, Danny Noonan, Ken Shead, Jim Skow and Gregg Reeves.

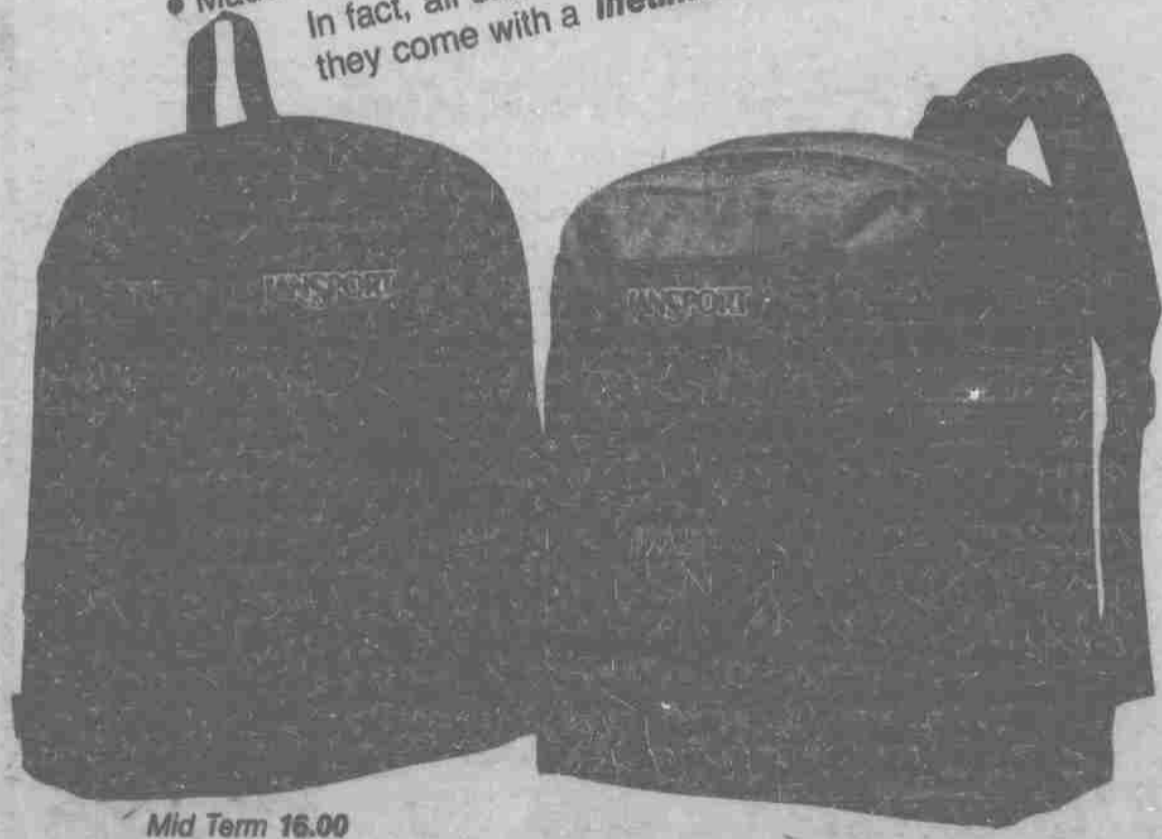
Punting and kicking duties will be handled by senior Scott Livingston. Livingston averaged 40.8 yards a punt last season and converted on 35 of 37 extra point attempts.

Osborne said he was worried about the four-game stretch that will take the Huskers to UCLA and Syracuse, then back home to play Oklahoma State and Missouri, both of whom have the best chance in years of knocking off Nebraska or Oklahoma for the conference title.

"A lot of people seem to think the Syracuse game will be a breather for us, but we had a deceptively easy game with them last year," Osborne said.

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