

Baylor game answers Husker defensive doubts

By Dennis Onnen

If there was a serious question mark for the Cornhuskers as they entered this season, it had to be the defense. Traditionally noted for that phase of the game, the Huskers again led the Big 8 last year giving up only 262.3 yards and 13.1 points a game.

But they lost defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin to Arkansas during the off-season and had to adjust to the more aggressive scheme of Kiffin's replacement, Lance Van Zandt.

Also lost were such top-notch players as All-Americans Mike Fultz at tackle and Dave Butterfield at cornerback; linebacker Clete Pillen, Big 8 defensive player of the year; All-Big 8 end Ray Phillips and Ron Pruitt, three-year starter at tackle.

However, the defense's performance in last week's 31-10 win over Baylor may have dispelled any remaining doubts. Baylor had only 77 rushing yards and 182 total yards, the fewest by a Husker opponent in 10 games.

Co-captain and linebacker Jeff Carpenter agreed that the defense has been getting better with each game as the players adjust to each other and the methods of Van Zandt and new defensive line coach Charlie McBride.

Carpenter also lauded the new coaches' practice of substituting players more freely than has been done in the past. For example, Bill Barnett, Barney Cotton, Rod Horn and Randy Poeschl all have started at tackle at one time or another this year. Also, 22 different players recorded tackles in last week's game.

"I think it's helping our team that players are playing a lot more—it makes the team a lot closer," Carpenter said. "Also, you're always fresh. It makes up for not having the real outstanding players."

He said the linebackers have fewer responsibilities under Van Zandt's system. This year, they are basically responsible for the tackle-to-tackle area without worrying about the outside areas on sweep plays. Thus, they must be more aggressive by stepping up to the line of scrimmage to meet the play instead of shuffling along the line to see how the play develops.

There also is much more blitzing under the new system, Carpenter said. He said he blitzed five to eight times himself last week, and the blitz proved to be a key weapon when Baylor was threatening in the third quarter.

Continued on p. 7

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