

Husker Fan--'Some Kind of Super-Loyal Nut'

Editor's note: The following sports depth article was received by the Daily Nebraskan from the University's School of Journalism. It was written by senior Hal Brown, past sports editor for the Nebraskan. The collected information in the article was gathered from interviews with the nine Cornhusker coaches who are still alive, reports in over newspapers covering a 50-year period. He talked to sports editors and former sports editors, fans and former players. It was his idea to find out why the Nebraska fan is as he is.

By Hal Brown

To the outsider — the non-Nebraskan — the Cornhusker football fan may appear to be some kind of a super-loyal nut.

Under normal circumstances, the Cornhusker football fan probably couldn't care less about what an outsider thinks. But this week after almost two decades of football drought, Nebraska is in the process of picking a new athletic director.

What does the new regime face?

Is the Cornhusker fan a frightening, coach-devouring, different breed of cat?

Strange

Is there something strange about Nebraska's football tradition beyond the normal urge to win?

The answers to some of these questions can be found in three places:

1. The bare statistics of Cornhusker support by Cornhusker fans through droughts, depressions, and almost endless losing seasons.

2. The peculiar parallel of Cornhusker football tradition with Nebraska's history.

3. The observations of the nine living members of one of the most exclusive clubs in the world. Each member, roasted on Nebraska's own gridiron fires, is an ex-Cornhusker football coach.

Statistics

The statistics help prove that the Cornhusker fan is in some way different from the average grandstand quarterback. In most of the Big Eight schools, it takes a winning team to fill the stadium.

Conference members with larger stadiums than Nebraska's, have trouble attracting crowds of more than 10-15,000 unless their team is on a winning streak. But that's not true at old N.U.

Everyone of the Cornhusker home attendance records have been set in post World War II years, a 16-year period during which there have been only three winning seasons.

The single game attendance record was set in 1950 when 39,770 saw the Huskers blank Penn State 19-0. That year happened to be a winning one with a 6-2-1 record. But the home attendance record for a whole

season was set in 1960. That year 199,973 paid their way in to six games as the Huskers finished with a 4-6 win-loss record in their sixth straight losing season.

The record for a five-game home schedule was set in 1951 during an even more dismal season. While the Huskers won two and lost eight, 179,444 paid to see home games.

Team Support

You needn't even go beyond the 1961 season to find support for a losing team. On Nov. 18, 26,000 fans shivered in snowy stands to watch Colorado clobber Nebraska in a game in which the Huskers made not a single first down. A week later on Thanksgiving weekend, when most of the student body was away from the campus, more than 25,000 fans saw Oklahoma snatch victory from the Cornhuskers.

There are statistics galore to prove that the Cornhusker fan backed his team during the dry, broke days of the thirties. Week after week, when dollars were as scarce as rain, the Cornhuskers played to a nearly full stadium. But statistics don't make a tradition. Why did the Cornhusker fan still put out his dollars when they were so scarce during the thirties? Why did he go on supporting losing post-war teams when a win was the exception?

Perhaps the answers can be found in Nebraska's state and football history. The name, Cornhuskers, is a solid part of that historical tradition, but Nebraska teams had already established a winning reputation by the time they were given an official name in 1900.

In late November of 1890 the University had fielded its first football team which defeated the Omaha YMCA by 10-0. Nebraska went on to finish a perfect 2-0 season that first year by beating Doane College 18-0. Under such titles as the antelopes, the rattlesnake boys, and the bugcatchers, University teams ran up winning seasons until 1899.

Cornhuskers

The next year Cy Sherman, later to become sports editor of the Lincoln Evening Journal, gave them a name that stuck—The Cornhuskers.

How the Cornhuskers fared in that first year of the 20th Century is reported by Frederick Ware, now executive editor of the Omaha World-Herald, and Gregg McBride, a veteran of three decades of Cornhusker coverage, in their book, "Fifty Years of Football." They quote Cy Sherman as saying:

"That name Cornhuskers fits 'em. Seven wins, two ties, and only one loss in their first season. I think I did a good job when I hung it on 'em."

Now Nebraska's super-loyal fan had something to cheer about by name. Even the irrepressible William Jennings Bryan repressed himself for football. At the

Minnesota game of 1900, the crowd roared for a pregame speech from Bryan. Ware and McBride describe the following results:

Order of Day

"Nothing but football is in order this day," sang the Boy Orator, and his eyes glistened.

"What about the game? What's your idea?" the crowd demanded, and Bryan was Bryan again—"You Nebraska can conquer," he bellowed, and added, even more resoundingly:

"Let each person punctuate that as he will!"

Conversation

Bryan wasn't talking — very much. But sports observers of the day noted

the Four Horsemen, spoke at a banquet in Omaha in 1947. He was quoted by the World-Herald as saying, "They talk about powerful teams at Minnesota and Southern California and other such schools, but don't you believe it. The most powerful teams of all were those Nebraska teams which we met in Lincoln."

The final home game in 1922 illustrates the growth of the Cornhusker super-fan. As the team faced Notre Dame, every seat was filled. There was a large pile of coal at the east end of the field, which is now the south practice field. Spectators covered the coal pile. Trees around the field were full of

memorial to the state's war dead and to the Cornhuskers. From their own pockets, fans pledged \$300,000 toward the half-million dollar stadium.

Evolution

For the evolution of Nebraska's super-fan in the twenties, ask the men who coached the teams.

Fred Dawson, who coached the great teams in the early 1920's, says, "We always had wonderful support from the student body and from O Street in Lincoln. For stimulation of a team there's nothing like mobs from the student body cheering them on at practice sessions. The merchants of Lincoln were invaluable. They gave the boys jobs. It

Then came the terrible thirties.

Observers believe that the real clue to the Cornhusker fan's super support can be found in these years. Hard times on the farm had started in Nebraska in the mid-twenties and by the thirties when drought joined depression, the state was in for one of its toughest periods in history. Hot winds blew away the state's topsoil. The cold chant of the auctioneer sold farms and furniture at a fraction of their value at tax sales.

And yet, Nebraskans supported the Cornhuskers. Perhaps the World-Herald's Ware put his finger on it when he said that the team was about all the people of the state had during those tough times.

"People would come to the stadium on Saturday to forget their troubles, and then forget them for the remainder of the week as they discussed the preceding or upcoming game."

1937 Incident

John Bentley, who covered the Cornhuskers for many years for the Lincoln Journal and is now sports information director for the University, remembers an incident that happened during the 1937 season.

"We had just upset Minnesota and this fan was walking from the stadium when he said, 'Now, if it would just rain.'"

The Cornhusker team, observers believe, had become something more than simply the state's football players. It had become something which the state could be proud during a time when there was very little else. When it didn't rain, when the banks failed, Nebraskans could still point to their winning Cornhuskers. The coaches for that period helped make that point.

Dana X. Bible, who coached from 1929 through 1936 without a losing season, says, "Wherever you went in the state, east, west, north, or south, you might be visiting with a farmer and he would say, 'How are we going to do Saturday?' You knew he meant the University of Nebraska football team."

Pride

That type of spirit wasn't found in many places at that time. The people took so much pride, and I can't make it forceful enough that everywhere you went, it was THEIR team.

Biff Jones took over for Bible in 1937 and was the last really successful NU coach, who took his team to the Rose Bowl on Jan. 1, 1941.

He says, "There was a real loyalty to the state and to the football team. People thought nothing of driving across the state to see the Cornhuskers. Going to the football game in Lincoln was the focal point in the lives of most of the people of the state."

By 1942, Col. Biff Jones had been called to the Army, and apparently, the Husker winning tradition went with him.

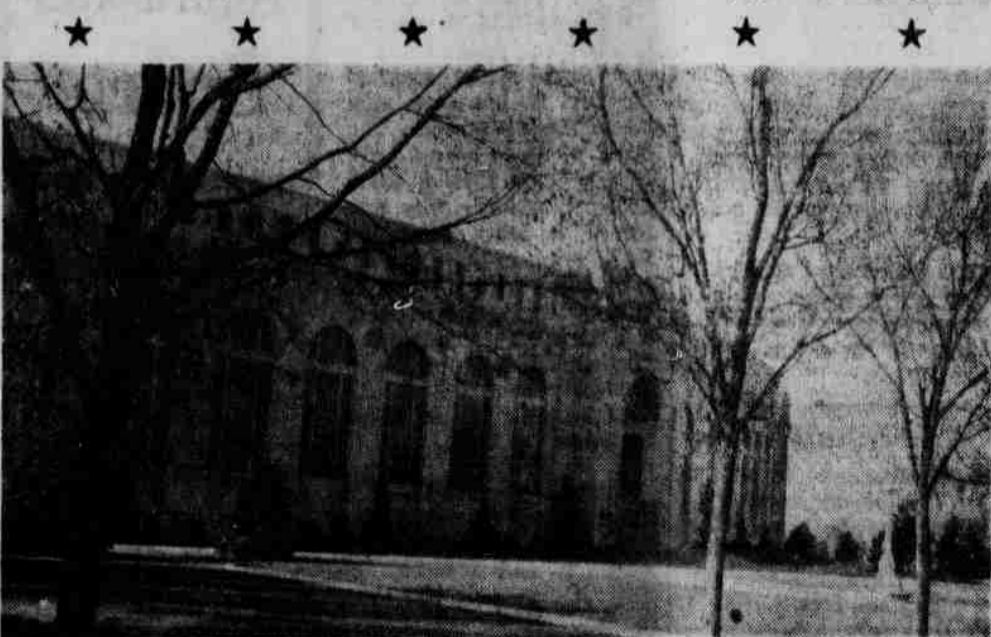
Situation

One brief statement explains the situation that occurred at the University of Nebraska two decades ago:

One day you're a winner and then almost overnight everything changes.

During the 21-year period from 1920 through the 1940 season, the Cornhuskers had experienced only one losing season. That lone black mark on an otherwise spotless record came in 1938

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GHOSTS, ECHOS OF PAST

Standing empty in the clear winter sun after another season of gridiron competition, the University's Memorial stadium rings with the past echoed cheers of both winning and losing seasons and the ghosts of thousands of "super-loyal" fans who have filled the stadium during home

games to watch their Cornhuskers. The football team has a past history that no fan can be ashamed of, but even more important, the fans have a tradition of loyalty and support that no team has ever been ashamed of.

that everyone else in the state was. "The game had become a topic of year-around conversation in country stores and barber-shops, and in city clubs, as well as on the campus," one sports historian noted.

And as the Cornhusker teams began to build an almost unprecedented tradition for winning, the state took the football players to its heart. Nebraska compiled nine straight winning seasons before it settled for a tie record in 1909. It then racked up eight more winning years before losing in 1918.

Ellsworth Moser, a member of Jumbo Stehm's great teams during this period recalls, "When you were a member of the football team at the University you were a hero. When the boys would return to their home towns in Nebraska they would be greeted by a parade and a big celebration. The town would be turned over to them. It was the ultimate ambition of every kid in the state to grow up and play football for the Cornhuskers."

Looking back to the 1920's, national football historians repeatedly cite Nebraska as one of the top teams in the nation. During the days of Knute Rockne and his famed Notre Dame Four Horsemen, the Cornhuskers became a stumbling block.

Powerful Teams

Harry Stuhldreher, one of

youngsters, and one observer noted wryly, "The trees were also full of people who were no longer kids."

Further evidence can be found in the account of the Thanksgiving Day Parade preceding the Notre Dame game in 1925. Passengers who had ridden special trains from Superior paraded the streets of Lincoln as a tribute to Ed Weir, the great All-American tackle. Ed's younger brother, Bill, led the parade with a sign reading, "Watch THIS Weir in 1931." Bill Weir, like much of the rest of the state's youth, was planning a football career with the Cornhuskers.

In those early twenties the Cornhusker fan built a

was unheard of then to provide room, board, and tuition for athletes."

Ernest Bearg, who followed Dawson as head coach, points out, "There was a tremendous interest and the football coach was as big a man as the governor. All the young people wanted to go to the University to play football."

"We played the best of them all," he recalls, "and the team meant so much to Nebraska. Nebraska was in the same position in those days that Oklahoma was in recent years. The Cornhuskers would have been rated in the top 10 many of those years if they had had ratings then."

Career Cues:

"This age of specialization opens special opportunities for the well-rounded man!"

Robert Saudek, President Robert Saudek Associates, Inc.

"The more specialists society creates to cope with its complexities, the easier it can be for a non-specialist to achieve success."

If that seems paradoxical, look at it this way: the more men who go out for specific positions on the ball club, the more chance you have to wind up as manager!

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can see the entire picture...the man who can draw on a broad background of knowledge, evaluate the problem, then assign the details to specialists.

The world of entertainment may seem somewhat special, but it's a case in point. These days, it demands more of its people than ever before. Today's musical comedy score is often as sophisticated as grand opera. Drama draws heavily on psychology and history. Television productions are concerned with nuclear science and political science. If you've ever watched 'Omnibus' you may have seen how our productions have run the gamut of a wide range of man's interests.

So I suggest to you that even though you may concentrate on one special field of interest, keep your viewpoint broad. Keep your college curriculum as diversified as possible. Attend lectures and concerts, the theatres and museums. Above all, read and read, and listen and listen! But pay scant heed to the oracle who says there's no route to the top but that of specialization. I don't believe it!"

NU Board of Regents Fires Coach Jennings

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when he made a speech interpreted as critical of Nebraska fans, sports writers and sportscasters, and downgrading of the state in general.

This season was regarded as the "must" year for Jennings and there was some rumor that with a successful grid year he would move up to the vacated athletic director's job.

1961 Team

His 1961 team, however, after a big pre-season build up, won only three games, while losing six and tying one.

The Huskers lost their last two games of the year 7-0 to Colorado and 21-14 to Oklahoma in two of the most disappointing losses in Jennings' NU coaching career.

The Huskers failed to make a first and ten in the muddy loss to the Buffs and blew a 14-0 halftime edge in the Oklahoma game.

Jennings failed to produce a winner in his five years as head coach but his teams provided some upsets which shocked the nation.

Grid Eleven

Jennings' grid elevens smacked Penn State and Pittsburgh in 1958, Minne-

sota and Oklahoma in 1959 and Texas, Army and Oklahoma last year.

The first Oklahoma win, a 25-21 victory in Lincoln, was especially sweet for Jennings as it broke the Sooners' 74-game undefeated conference record and was achieved against an old college, Bud Wilkinson.

Jennings had been an assistant coach under Wilkinson at Oklahoma for six years before coming to Nebraska. He had also played football for Oklahoma in 1938-39-40. As a wingback and end, he set several Sooner pass-catching records which he still holds.

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