



Nebraska breaks Wishbone, 35-31

Not just another game . . .

by Jim Johnston

It wasn't just another game.

From the moment the Nebraska football players boarded the chartered jet at the Lincoln airport last Wednesday, they realized that this was something special. The Nebraska-Oklahoma showdown had stimulated such a build-up, that the reality of actually playing the game seemed only a dream.

But now, perhaps for the first time, the Cornhuskers realized that this classic battle between Nos. 1 and 2 was for real. . . just one day away.

A gathering of 400 Nebraska fans greeted the two team buses at the Lincoln airport. Head coach Bob Devaney spoke briefly to the group. The players, however, headed quickly from the buses into the aircraft.

THERE WAS LITTLE conversation when the jet departed from Lincoln. The players sat quietly. Some were reading magazines. The pass receivers and quarterbacks were taking the written test that assistant coach Tom Osborne always hands out. Other players just looked out the window.

After an hour's flight, the jet landed at Oklahoma City. A new world greeted the Cornhuskers, a world of television cameras, news photographers and reporters.

The players headed directly for the buses. Devaney spoke briefly with reporters.

One television photographer entered the bus. He was asked to leave.

AS THE BUSES left from the airport, a small gathering of Oklahoma fans met the Cornhuskers with signs reading: "Boomer Sooner," "Oklahoma's No. 1," and "Sooners will have popcorn for Thanksgiving."

Things didn't get any easier as the buses started on a 45-minute trip to Norman for a workout at Owen Field. Nearly every car bumper displayed a sticker reading: "OU No. 1" or "Mildren & Co. No. 1."

One elderly, well-dressed lady, riding in a fancy car, was going past the buses when she realized it was the Nebraska football team. She quickly extended her middle finger toward one bus. (It's doubted that she was signifying No. 1).

The Cornhuskers went through a light workout at Owen Field. It was a relaxing practice. The linemen set up an offensive backfield unit with linebacker Bob Terrio at quarterback and Jim Branch as a receiver.

MEMBERS OF THE Oklahoma University band and several other bystanders, watching the practice from the stadium, went wild everytime a Cornhusker dropped a pass. Devaney called the team to the center of the field after a 30-minute workout.

As the team left the field, Oklahoma coach Chuck Fairbanks joined Devaney in the center of the field for a brief discussion. Devaney was then greeted by at least 50 reporters as the Sooners started their final practice.

Devaney entertained several questions. One reporter asked if the Huskers had a special defense planned to stop Oklahoma's Wishbone.

"Sure," said Devaney. "We're going to try Pepper Rodgers' defense that he used in the Orange Bowl. He used 12 players."

After a 15-minute session with reporters, Devaney said it was time to go back to the motel in Oklahoma City.

"Let's go home," Devaney said to his team. "I could use a good night's rest."

THE CORNHUSKERS went to a show Wednesday night and were in their rooms by 10:30 p.m. But few coaches had a good night's rest.

Defensive line coach Monte Kiffin, who is always one to worry, was drinking coffee in the motel cafe at 3 a.m. Linebacker coach, John Melton, secondary coach Warren Powers and Jim Walden also spent late hours at the cafe.

The team ate breakfast early Thursday morning. Nebraska, for the first time this season, took its own food to Oklahoma.

"With a game of this magnitude you can never be too careful," explained Nebraska trainer Paul Schneider. "There's too much at stake to risk getting some 'bad' food."

The Cornhuskers loaded the buses for Norman. The trip took over an hour. It was quiet all the way. A few players talked about the oil wells near the highway, but conversation was usually limited.

WHEN THE HUSKERS arrived at Owen Field, a mob of Nebraska fans cheered as the players left the bus. The players went immediately to the dressing room. Just like the rest of the trip, the locker room was quiet.

Outside the stadium, however, the atmosphere proved that this was to be the game of the century. Radio announcers were interviewing fans. Youngsters were selling buttons and newspapers with front page headlines reading: "Who's No. 1?" "Big Reds Battle Today," and "Wishbone Meets Blackshirts."

The stadium exploded when the Sooners and the Huskers arrived on the field. Fans and bands went through their own battle before the game started.

All the preparation. All the space in newspapers and on radio stations. All that talk. And here it was. Game time. Eighty million people were watching via national television.

The Cornhuskers scored quickly on a 72-yard punt return by Johnny Rodgers and held a 14-3 lead before the Sooners scored two quick touchdowns to take a 17-14 lead at the halftime. It was the first time the Huskers had trailed all season.

DEVANEY AND HIS team, however, went to the locker room confidently. The Cornhuskers felt they had beaten the Sooners in the first half.

"Are you just going to lay down and quit?" Devaney asked the Cornhuskers.

The Huskers didn't quit. I-back Jeff Kinney, who had been held to only 20 yards rushing in the first half, was determined as he entered the field for the second half.

The Huskers, who depended on the pass in the first half, decided to run over the Sooners. Kinney was elected to handle most of the running.

Nebraska quickly gained a 28-17 lead and things looked good for the Huskers again.

But, as in the first half, the Sooners came back on two quick scores for a 31-28 lead with 7:10 left in the game.

THE CORNHUSKERS understood their situation. They had to move on their next drive and put the ball across the goal line. Quarterback Jerry Tagge took a drink of water, talked with Devaney and assistant Carl Selmer and went on the field to direct the Husker attack.

"Everybody was talking in the huddle," remembered Johnny Rodgers. "We usually don't do that, but everybody knew we had to move."

And so they did. Tagge directed a 74-yard drive in 12 plays and 5:32 minutes concluded by Kinney's

two-yard scoring run. Rich Sanger's kick made it 35-31 in favor of the Cornhuskers.

All the Nebraska defense had to do was hold. And they did.

The Nebraska bench exploded. Devaney was given a ride off the field atop several padded shoulders.

Devaney, for the second straight time at Oklahoma, received a victory shower.

DEVANEY TALKED with reporters in the next room. Was this the greatest team Devaney has ever coached?

"I don't know," said Devaney. "I'll answer that Jan. 2 after the Orange Bowl."

Tagge was next in line for the reporters. Wearing Exon's wet, red hat, Tagge was asked to describe the Huskers winning touchdown drive.

"I can't remember every play," said Tagge. "All I know is that we knew we had to score and we did it."

One hour later, the Cornhuskers left the dressing room. It was cold and dark outside. Traffic was lined up for blocks. The team buses were delayed for 30 minutes more.

Finally, they were allowed to leave for Oklahoma City. The bus ride took another hour. The buses were again quiet. Only it was a different type of quiet. Everybody was resting.

BUT WHEN THE team boarded the jet back to Lincoln they started their celebrating. Center Doug Jamail, the showman on the Husker team, took charge of the public address system before the plane departed and informed the players of the safety precautions of the aircraft.

Just before the plane departed, Devaney (quiet and smiling) walked through the plane and talked briefly with most players. As a national publication had described him a year earlier, Devaney looked like the worst-dressed coach in the nation.

His post-game shower forced him to change into a pair of baggy, khaki practice pants. He wore a red coaching shirt with his red coat.

AS THE PLANE became airborne and the players full of turkey sandwiches, Jamail took charge of the entertainment.

"I have an announcement to make," said Jamail over the PA system. "It's now official that Sports Illustrated has named Nebraska No. 1 in the Midwest."

The pilot informed the team that there were some people waiting at the airport for their arrival. "Some people" turned out to be 30,000. As the Huskers' plane arrived, fans surrounded the aircraft and forced the team to unboard on the runway.

"LINCOLN, NEBRASKA, how do you do it?" asked one player. "This is too much."

It wasn't just another game.

Huskers meet Wyoming

The curtain goes up on the 1971-72 Nebraska basketball season tonight as Coach Joe Cipriano's Huskers tip off against the Wyoming Cowboys at 7:35 at the Coliseum.

The Huskers have nine returning lettermen from last year's 18-8 team, but must find replacements for the school's all-time leading scorer, Marv Stewart, and the all-time leading rebounder, Leroy Chalk. Those are the only losses from the 1970-71 squad, but they leave key holes.



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