

Harper's pre-game plan— working on being happy

by Steve Strasser

Willie Harper is working on being happy. He would like to bubble over with joy.

In fact, the closer to Thanksgiving Day he gets, the happier Harper tries to be. That's how he prepares himself for a big game.

"I try to be as happy and content as I can," he said after a bruising workout earlier this week. "As long as I have my assignments down good I try to forget everything else."

So, while for the second year in a row Nebraskans and Oklahomans are working themselves up to such a state of frenzy that Thanksgiving dinners are unlikely to go down easily, Harper has been staying cool.

"If you worry about it too much you just get butterflies," he said. "You get nervous and sweaty; you can't sleep."

Harper's mother is visiting him this week to take in the game and, of course, to keep Willie happy and rested right up to kickoff. Harper also relaxes with a rack full of soul records in his off-campus apartment.

And he always is willing to spend his time off with the children. That too is relaxing to Harper, but it's relaxation of a much more serious nature. As with many black athletes, trying to give underprivileged youngsters a better chance than he had is almost a passion with Harper. He puts it in succinct terms:

"Any way to motivate a child—recreation, athletics, anything—I'm for it."

Harper is majoring in elementary education in Teachers College, and during the summer he worked as a city recreation department coordinator in his home town, Toledo, Ohio. He was in charge of one park's recreation program for small children.

Athletes can teach valuable lessons to children, according to Harper. "Sports get kids together and teach them to stay together," he said. "If a child learns to play well with other children, he learns to get along with other children."

Harper grew up in Toledo, playing football, baseball, basketball and throwing the discus for J. W. Scott High School. By his senior year he was 6'2", weighed 210 pounds and was all city and all state as a fullback and defensive end.

His high school coach, Bill ("Thunder") Thornton, was about to come to Nebraska as defensive ends coach, and Thornton made sure Harper came along. (Thornton has since left the Nebraska staff.)

Now 22 years old and a senior at Nebraska, Harper hasn't increased in height or weight, but his string of football honors has grown steadily.

After starring as a middle guard for the freshman

team, Harper was named Big Eight Sophomore of the Year as a defensive end.

In his junior year he was named to the All-America teams of the United Press International, the Associated Press and *Football News*. He was named to the All Big Eight teams by AP, UPI and the *Omaha World-Herald*. He was awarded the outstanding lineman award for the 1971 Orange Bowl.

Before he rushed his first quarterback this year, he was named to All-America teams by Kodak and *Playboy*.

Harper is a devastating, clawing pass rusher who becomes a blur of motion at the snap of the ball. And on wide running plays Harper can contain the fastest of halfbacks. Oklahoma's Greg Pruitt, for example.

In last year's "Game of the Century," Harper just didn't have much fun at all. His assignment was mainly to cover the explosive Pruitt outside. He did such a good job that Pruitt rarely got the ball outside, and Harper's friends inside—Rich Glover, for one—got all the action.

Harper didn't even work up a sweat. "It was frustrating," he said. "I can't remember ever being on the ground."

But this year Harper is looking forward to a lot more excitement. The cornerbacks have primary responsibility outside, leaving Harper free to pinch toward the middle, where most of the action is expected.

"They're going to run right at me," Harper said happily. "They feel they've got a top-notch team that can run over anybody, and they'll try to prove it."

In a year when most teams have been staying away from him, Harper is gleeful over the prospect of Oklahoma running at him. He likes intense competition and doesn't mind a bruise or two, and he's not worried about a slightly sprained ankle, which has been giving him some trouble this week.

In short, "I'll be angry if Oklahoma doesn't run at me," he said.

And if he gets a chance to sack a quarterback sometime during the afternoon, well, that would really make Harper's day. Throwing quarterbacks is "unexplainable" thrill, he said with a wide grin. "It's just unexplainable."

As his last college season fades into history, Harper is looking forward to a chance to play professional football. And he would rather stay on defense than be switched to offense.

"When I was a freshman I was working out as an offensive back one day and Rich Glover gave me a concussion," Harper said. "I decided right then and there that I'd rather punish than be punished."

