



Devaney... says farewell to Memorial Stadium.

'Our goal is the Big Eight crown'

by Jim Johnston

It's not as big as it was last year. Nebraska and Oklahoma aren't untested or undefeated and rated first and second in the nation going into this year's Thanksgiving Day game. And even though it's Bob Devaney's final coaching appearance at Memorial Stadium, the Cornhusker head coach isn't about to call it the biggest game of his career.

But, then, perhaps it's unfair to compare it to last year. How does one compare anything to what was truly the "Game of the Century"? How does one compare anything to a game which involved the emotions of the entire nation and was witnessed by an estimated 80 million people on coast to coast television?

The 1972 Nebraska-Oklahoma game is a bit more modest. Oklahoma has lost. Nebraska has one loss and a tie. The Sooners' record-shattering wishbone offense of 1971 is no longer looked upon with awe. The Cornhuskers' "Black Shirt" defense, regarded as the most bruising defense in history in 1971, has shown weaknesses at times this year.

The magnitude which surrounded last year's Thanksgiving Day game (which Nebraska won, 35-31) has definitely been minimized. But there's an explanation for the less impressive statistics and lower national rankings Nebraska (No. 5) and Oklahoma (No. 4) bring into Thursday's nationally televised game at Memorial Stadium in Lincoln.

Best conference

The Cornhuskers and Sooners are competing in the best football conference in the nation—the Big Eight. It's a conference which finished with teams rated 1-2-3 in the final national polls last year. It's a conference which will be represented in five post-season bowl games this year.

It's a conference where no team can afford a bad week. It's a conference where even the fifth place team can stray away for one week and defeat a national power. Just ask Notre Dame.

Nebraska and Oklahoma have been victims of a brotherly brawl. After Oklahoma had climbed to the No. 2 spot in the national ratings, Colorado handed the Sooners a 20-14 setback. Nebraska, after a 20-17 season opening loss to UCLA, had fought its way back to No. 2 before Iowa State dashed hopes of a national championship with a 23-23 tie. So the Nebraska-Oklahoma game of 1972 will not decide the national champion. It was, perhaps, too much to ask for both teams to go through the non-conference schedule and first six Big Eight games undefeated or untied two years straight.

Although an improbable combination of upsets could change the picture, the winner of the

Nebraska-Oklahoma game will probably have to settle for just the Big Eight championship.

But what's so small time about that?

Championship goals

"Our goal is to win the Big Eight championship," Devaney said at the beginning of the season. "Of course, we hope we're contending for the national championship, too. But we realize the odds against winning the national championship three years in a row. The competition for No. 1 in the Big Eight is just too great."

So although the interest will be more regional than national this year, nobody in the Big Eight is counting the Nebraska-Oklahoma game short. And the Cornhusker players and coaches aren't buying that philosophy that Oklahoma's wishbone offense isn't as devastating as it was a year ago.

"It's difficult to lose a great option quarterback like Jack Mildren and not miss him in your offense," Devaney said, "but this Oklahoma running game is truly as good as it was last year. It's more difficult to defend because they do more things and have a better inside running game."

Oklahoma, no doubt, has missed Mildren this year. Senior quarterback Dave Robertson is regarded as a good passer, but he cannot operate the wishbone as effectively as did Mildren. With Robertson as quarterback, the Sooners have passed more than a year ago.

Oklahoma coach Chuck Fairbanks doesn't hesitate to substitute freshman Kerry Jackson at quarterback. He is a more effective runner, lacking only in experience.

The outside game

Nebraska has concentrated on taking away the outside game from wishbone teams. That means taking away the third option of the wishbone where the quarterback pitches to the trailing halfback.

Nebraska successfully managed to take away the outside game last year... allowing Heisman trophy candidate Greg Pruitt only 53 yards.

Some teams have been successful in stopping Pruitt and the outside game. But the Oklahoma speedster has put together three straight 100-yard-plus performances coming into Thursday's game. Pruitt rushed for 135 yards in the first half against Kansas last week before injuring an ankle and missing the entire second half. Fairbanks still expressed concern about the condition of Pruitt's ankle Tuesday afternoon.

Joe Wylie, who nudged Nebraska's Johnny Rodgers for sophomore of the year in the Big Eight two years

ago, is the other halfback threat from Oklahoma. Wylie, however, has not carried the football as much this season. His backup—freshman Joe Washington—has seen more action.

"With Washington in the lineup, it's like having two Pruitts in the backfield," Kiffin said. "Washington is a terrific broken field runner and gives Oklahoma another great breakaway threat. He's also one of the best blocking backs around."

Senior Leon Crosswhite, the big reason for Oklahoma's improved inside running game, is at fullback.

Passing defense

Nebraska's defense no longer looks upon wishbone teams with awe. The Black Shirts see it as a challenge. They were satisfied with their performance against the rush last year. It was just the job against Oklahoma's passing game that concerned Devaney.

The Sooners passed for two touchdowns and 188 yards.

The wishbone forces a defensive secondary to play man-for-man. Husker all-American cornerback Joe Blahak has switched to safety against wishbone teams this year and the experiment has been successful. Nebraska now feels it is better prepared to defend against the pass.

Juniors Randy Borg and Zaven Yaralian, who has started only against wishbone teams, will get the starting assignments at cornerback.

One part of Oklahoma's game which has definitely improved since last year is defense. The Sooners had to outscore teams last year. The defense was giving up about 21 points per game. But this year it's different. Oklahoma's defense has allowed only four touchdowns the entire season.

The Sooner defense has been especially tough against the long gainer. And it's that type of play which has been Nebraska's specialty this year.

The Huskers used "ground-it-out" thinking last year. But this year, that David Humm to Johnny Rodgers passing combination can strike from anywhere.

While fans across the nation may still be buzzing about last year's classic, there's no reason to think this year's Nebraska-Oklahoma game is second rate. There are three Heisman trophy candidates performing—Pruitt, Rodgers and Husker middle guard Rich Glover. There's the Big Eight championship at stake. There's Bob Devaney's last home game. And, even though the "experts" may scoff at such a suggestion, the two teams which take the field at Memorial Stadium Thursday may still be the best two football teams in the country.