

# The battle for the Heisman ...

by Kim Ball

"It was on my mind at the start of the season. I put it up as a definite goal. It is something that I always think about and work for."

Johnny Rodgers spoke these words. The "it" he was referring to was the Heisman Trophy.

The Heisman Trophy is awarded annually by the Downtown Athletic Club of New York City to the outstanding college football player in the United States.

Since, 1935, the year the Downtown Athletic Club began presenting the small bronze statue of a football player called the Heisman Trophy, only two Big Eight Conference players have won the award. Billy Vessels of Oklahoma in 1952 and Steve Owens of Oklahoma in 1969 were the only Big Eight honorees.

This year a third Big Eight player will probably win the award, because the annual two-man race for the Heisman Trophy has shaped up to be between Nebraska flanker Johnny Rodgers and Oklahoma halfback Greg Pruitt. A year ago Auburn's Pat Sullivan and Cornell's Ed Marinaro reaped the lion's share of the Heisman votes.

Probably never before have the two leading Heisman Trophy candidates been better friends than Johnny Rodgers and Greg Pruitt are.

Before the season started names like Joe Ferguson of Arkansas, Gary Huff of Florida, Sonny Sixkiller of Washington and Nebraska's own Rich Glover kept popping up when the Heisman was mentioned along with Rodgers and Pruitt.

Now Rodgers and Pruitt rank head and shoulders above the rest of the Heisman field which includes Glover, Huff, Don Strock of Virginia Tech, Charlie Davis of Colorado and Anthony Davis of Southern California.

Rodgers had kind words for Nebraska teammate Glover.

"He's definitely the best lineman in the country," Rodgers said, "but they (the Heisman voters) don't



Greg Pruitt

select lineman. He should be a unanimous choice for the Outland."

The Outland Trophy is awarded annually to the outstanding college lineman in the country.

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Rodgers and Pruitt met last December in Miami, Fla., where they were being honored as members of Kodak's All-America team. They seemed to hit it off from the start.

"Ten minutes after I met him we were up in my room talking," Rodgers said. "We were just different from the rest of the guys."

"We couldn't really relate to anyone else," Rodgers added, "we could just relate to each other."

"When I first met Johnny we agreed to be friends," Pruitt said, "except for the 60 minutes we played against each other, then we'd hate each other."

They continued to run around together on four other All-American excursions, including a trip to Chicago for the Playboy All-American team. While in Chicago, Rodgers talked Pruitt into coming to Lincoln before he went back to Norman, Okla.

During Pruitt's stay in Lincoln, Rodgers took him to a few parties and lined him up with a couple of dates.

When Rodgers went to California to visit his father this summer, Pruitt went with him.

But their friendship didn't end when the football season started. They have telephoned each other several times since the football season has started.

Early in the season their telephone conversations centered on football. But as the season went on they began talking about things they were going to do after the football season was over. They plan to take another trip to California this summer.

Last week Rodgers called Pruitt twice. Their main topic of conversation was the bowl games. Both are planning on going to the Hula Bowl in Honolulu, Hawaii. They also felt that Alabama went to the Cotton Bowl to avoid playing either Nebraska or Oklahoma.

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"It's quite obvious that they're running from us," Rodgers said. "I'm really disappointed that they are."

Pruitt said, "The deal we wanted to make was that the winner (of Okla.-Nebr. game) would go to the Orange Bowl provided Alabama was there. And the loser would go to the Gator Bowl. But it turned out that Alabama went to the Cotton Bowl."

"With Tennessee and LSU playing each other in a bowl game, it looks like everybody is running from the Big Eight," Pruitt added.

Both players indicated they will probably say nothing to each other prior to their Thanksgiving day encounter, not even so much as good luck.

Rodgers chuckled when he heard Pruitt's remark about hating him during the game. But Rodgers agreed.

"It doesn't matter if your old man is on the other team," Rodgers said, "you don't have any friends on the other team."

"It's dog eat dog," Rodgers added. "I put all things aside when it comes to winning and not winning. I'm a very poor loser, very poor."

Thursday's Turkey Day clash, although it probably won't determine the national champion, still holds about as much significance as last fall's 35-31 thriller.

"I've been looking forward to this game," Pruitt said. "It seems like it always boils down to the conference title on Thanksgiving day."

Rodgers said, "It's going to be a tough game, but I think we're going to pull it out. We know what has to be done. We're just going to have to go out and do it."

"Just looking at the trend of past games, the best Nebraska can do is tie," Pruitt said.

Two years ago, Nebraska defeated Oklahoma, 28-21, for the Big Eight title. Last year Nebraska won 35-31.

People watching the game from either their stadium seat or their living room sofa will have their eyes focused on Johnny Rodgers or Greg Pruitt, depending on which team is on offense.



Johnny Rodgers

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