

Westbrook: benchwarmer to Big 8 star

By Steve Taylor

From benchwarmer to Big 8 star.

That is the saga of wingback Don Westbrook, who last year at this time watched from the sidelines as Oklahoma crushed Nebraska 27-0.

"Oklahoma wasn't that fantastic last year," Westbrook commented in a recent interview. "I felt I could have run on them, but I just could never get in the game."

The Oklahoma contest wasn't the only game where the Cheyenne senior was relegated to the role of uniformed spectator.

Throughout his sophomore and junior years, Westbrook saw only sparse action, despite setting rushing records on the 1970 freshman team.

He speculated that possible explanations for his second team status were his lack of enthusiasm during practices or his dormant relationship with the coaching staff.

"The coaches and I haven't always seen eye to eye," Westbrook said. "But I've always known I could play."

This season has seen a complete turnaround in his fortunes. An inactive cocoon has changed into an elusive butterfly.

During the 1974 season, Westbrook has blossomed into one of the Big 8's premier receivers. Last year the only passes he caught were during warm-ups.

This year his name is on the tip of every Husker fan's tongue whenever he gets the ball and takes off on one of his unpredictable journeys.

Last season the only time his name was mentioned was when some fan yelled for him to sit down so they could see the action.

How did Westbrook get off the bench and onto the Astroturf?

"After the Cotton Bowl I went to the coaches and told them I could help them," he said. "I told them I wasn't after Ritch Bahe's job, I just wanted to play."

Westbrook said he feels that conference convinced the coaches he was dedicated to the football team and was not just a Saturday afternoon player.

Since then, he has had regular communication with the coaching staff and has gained a better understanding of their philosophy.

"The coaches have more confidence in me now," Westbrook remarked. "Last year they weren't even looking at me; now they are counting on me."

There is no doubt that Westbrook has supplied the Huskers with the home run threat that wasn't present during the 1973 campaign.

Though he occasionally outsmarts himself and maneuvers right into a pack of enemy defenders, his wide assortment of moves never fails to leave Husker fans gasping.

He is a great admirer of O.J. Simpson but says his moves are original, not patterned after any stars he watches on TV.

"It just comes naturally," he explained. "When people are chasing you, it is hard to think fast enough to plan a move."

He went on to say he was satisfied with playing wingback. Before the season began he was given a shot at I-back, where he would have gotten the ball more.

"I like to run, but at wingback your body lasts longer," he said. "An I-back gets hit so many times."

Westbrook said his toughest personal test this year was against Missouri where "they were out to get me." He said he thought the best team the Huskers have faced all year was Oklahoma State.

It has been a pleasing year for him because he never expected to rise so far so quickly, he said.

"This year I really wanted to prove to the coaches I could play," he remarked. "But the biggest thing was to prove it to myself."

Westbrook has certainly proved his ability to himself, as well as to the state of Nebraska. Today he hopes to prove it to the Oklahoma Sooners.



Don Westbrook in 1970 and now.

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