

Fischer: Corn husker punting game needs a boot

By Jim Hunt

Ask any football coach and he will say the kicking game is important to his football team. This is no exception at Nebraska.

Husker kicking coach Cletus Fischer said he is pleased for the most part with the Huskers' kicking game this season.

"We would like to see some improvement in our punting," Fischer said. "Otherwise our kicking game has been good this

year. There is always room for improvement, though."

The punting this season has been handled by Tim Smith, a sophomore from Chula Vista, Calif. Besides punting, Smith is the Huskers' top split end.

Smith currently ranks fifth in the Big 8 with a 37.7 yard average after nine punts.

"The punting game must get better," Fischer said. "Smith must start kicking the ball better and he must start getting the ball up in the air. We have to start getting

better hang time so we can get down there and cover it.

"We don't want to sit there and wonder if the ball is going to dribble 37 yards."

Fischer said Smith needs to work on punting more during the week to improve his consistency. It is hard for Smith to get the extra time to warm-up and practice his punting since he spends most of his time with the first team offense, Fischer said.

"Our punt coverage has been fairly good," Fischer said. "We haven't had real good hang time to see what they can do. Last year Randy (Lessman) got real good hang time and had minus return yardage."

On the other hand, Fischer said place-kicker Billy Todd has been doing an excellent job for the Huskers this season.

"Billy has a chance to be as fine a kicker as there is around," Fischer said. "He has excellent range and I don't think we would hesitate to try a 50 or 55-yard field goal."

Todd, a junior from Chandler, Ariz., transferred to Nebraska from Arizona Mesa Junior College in January.

At Mesa, Todd kicked eight field goals and 28 extra points. This season he has connected on two of three field goal attempts. He has hit field goals of 20 and 29 yards and missed an attempted field goal of 48 yards.

Todd said one of the reasons he came to Nebraska was that he had a chance to start. Both Husker punter Randy Lessman and kicker Al Eveland graduated last year.

"They (Nebraska) lost both of their kickers and they really didn't have a backup," Todd said. "I thought I had a chance to play every day."

Another reason Todd came to Nebraska is the winning tradition. Mesa Junior College has a reputation as a winner in the junior college ranks and that is important to Todd, he said.

Todd said two of the biggest differences between playing football in Arizona and playing football in Nebraska is the wind and the length of time a kicker has to kick the ball.

"There is no wind to speak of in Arizona," Todd said. "I've been pleased with my kicking for the most part, but I wouldn't really say I am doing quite my best."

"I still have to work on getting my kick-offs deeper when I'm kicking into the wind. Sometimes I try kicking too hard

and the ball has kind of a knuckle-ball effect.

"I also have to get the ball off a lot quicker. I have to get a field goal off in about 1.2 (seconds) and a punt off in about 2 or 2.1 (seconds) because the defenses are a lot better in major college."

Even though Todd averaged 40.2 yards a punt at Mesa he has yet to punt for the Huskers this season. Todd blames it on a poor spring.

"I didn't punt that well in spring drills," Todd said. "I had to adjust to the wind and you can only work on it so much."

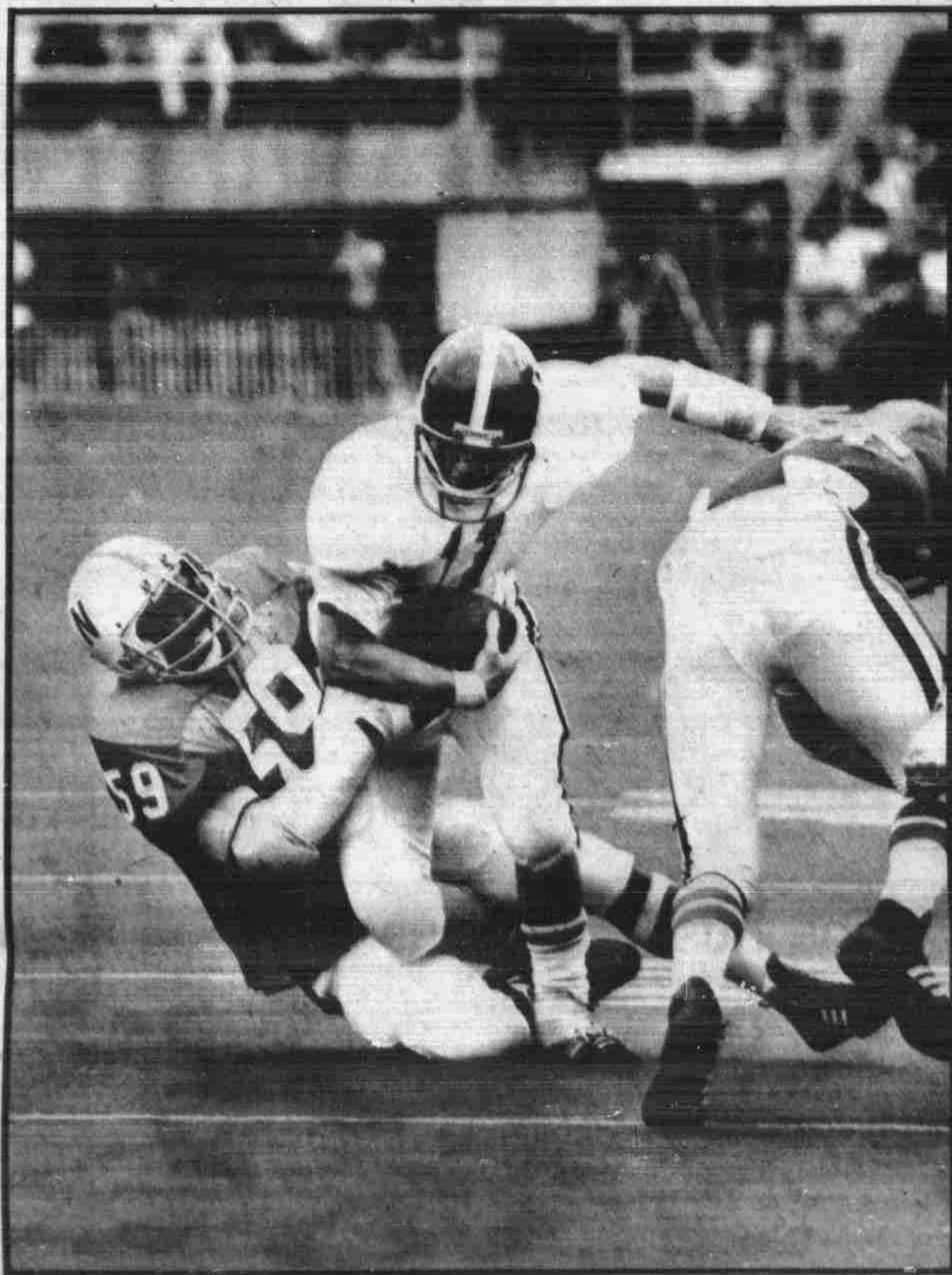
"I'm starting to get my timing back now, but Tim has been doing a pretty good job."

Todd said for a kicker to be successful he must work on his kicking every day. It is comparable to a relief pitcher having to throw a baseball every day, he said.

"I usually come out 45 minutes to an hour before practice starts and begin loosening up," Todd said. "I start off by kicking short then kick harder as practice goes along."

"We (the kickers) usually only work for about 15 minutes during specialty periods with the quarterbacks and another 10 minutes during team kicking drills."

Todd, a left-footed kicker, said the kickers receive some criticism from the other players because they do not have to do a lot of the running and contact the others players do.



James Wightman (59) was in on five tackles against Alabama.

FIRST DOWN

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