

Walk-on program vital tradition

By Cindy Gardner

Like Pilgrims flocking to their Mecca they come to Lincoln each fall. They are drawn by tradition, encouraged by the likes of I.M. Hipp and the Williams brothers. Without them, Coach Tom Osborne says Nebraska would be in bad shape.

They are the walk-ons. Coming from across the nation they arrive in Lincoln with hopes of playing Big Eight football. With coaching cutbacks and recruiting restrictions, the walk-ons are a vital part of the UNL football program. Osborne does not hesitate to say, "I think the walk on program has really saved our bacon."

The tradition of walk-on players becoming starters continues to draw Husker hopefuls into the program. Osborne estimates that in recent years, 40 percent of the players seeing some varsity action originally came as walk-ons.

The superior walk-on program was what brought Travis Turner, a quarterback hopeful with a goal of becoming an academic all-American, to Nebraska.

Coming from Scottsbluff, Turner had not even considered playing football at Nebraska until last summer. He found himself looking at schools like Colorado State where his brother had once played quarterback and Chadron State College where he felt he could be a starter. Turner admits the walk-on program at Nebraska was a major factor in his decision as was his desire to know if he could play major college ball.

"I was close to going to Chadron State. I would have gone so I could be a starting quarterback," Turner said. "I'm skeptical about my talent but if I would have gone to Chadron I would have always thought, 'maybe I could've made it.'"

Turner, a recruited walk-on, visited Nebraska last fall and again in March. After his second visit, his mind was pretty well made up. He would give it a go and come to UNL.

"The coaching staff and facilities are just unreal. Everything's so organized," Turner said.

Although Turner, a 6-3, 185-pounder, would like to play quarterback, he said he'd be willing to try some other positions. He would like to remain on offense adding that it might be nice to have a chance to catch the ball instead of throw it.

Osborne indicated that Turner might have an opportunity to be tested in some different positions.

"I think I told Travis that we're not real sure that he would be a quarterback. We'd like to look at him at quarterback but he has enough athletic ability that he might play somewhere else," Osborne said.

Turner realizes that as a walk-on he'll have to prove himself to the coaching staff. He laughed as he recalled the only chance he had to play in front of Osborne during high school.

"I didn't play at Lincoln," Turner said. "I was so uptight I wore my jersey backwards. After that game I thought I'd never hear from the University of Nebraska again but I kept getting plenty of phone calls."

Another western Nebraska walk-on, Pat Colerick of Alliance, never did get a chance to play a high school game in front of the Nebraska coaches but reports he sent plenty of films after the season was over. Unlike Turner, Colerick said he would have attended Nebraska whether or not he had the chance to play football.

After looking at and receiving offers to play football at schools like Utah, New Mexico and Arizona, Colerick decided he belonged at Nebraska, a larger school with a pre-med program.

Putting on size and gaining speed are two things the western Nebraska all-star feels he needs to work on. With a goal of starting on the freshman team this year and winning a varsity starting spot by his senior season, the 6-0, 165-pound back said, "I just hope I have enough desire to stay and to work hard."

Colerick and Turner are just two of many walk-ons and they and their counterparts have a tough road ahead.

"It's competitive," Osborne said. "We tell players when they come down here as walk-ons that the percentages, if you're a guy that we've encouraged, that has some talent, your odds are still maybe about one in three of making it. I mean making it to the point where you'll play a lot. We have some guys that stick around and play a little bit. Most everybody that stays will play to some degree."

Both Colerick and Turner said they are aware their chances are slim. Just having the chance is a thrill in itself, according to Turner.

Of the walk-ons who arrived in Lincoln last Tuesday, many will never wear a varsity uniform. Yet, among the Husker hopefuls may be a Heisman Trophy winner. The Nebraska coaching staff recognizes the value of their walk-on program. That is why they save from five to seven scholarships each year for walk-ons who do make it.

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