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KSC team in red 'shadow'

Editor's Note — This is the first of a five-part series on the importance placed on college football and the range of finances which support it.

Analysis by Jeff Browne

September 24, 1983 — Kearney, Nebraska — Kearney State College is traditionally a power in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Division I football teams. However, because of the Big Red shadow that rises high above Lincoln and stretches over this central Nebraska town, Antelope football many times has to take a back seat to the Huskers.

Kearney head coach Claire Boroff said he is tired of people in Kearney making games in Lincoln their top priority.

It was evident on this night, though, that a lot of people at the Kearney-Minnesota-Morris game were not getting overly excited about the Antelopes. Most of the crowd didn't bother to show up until after 7:10 p.m. for the 7:30 p.m. kickoff. When they did, they were more eager to discuss Nebraska's 42-10 victory against UCLA and show off varying degrees of sunburn they had received sitting in Memorial Stadium in Lincoln.

The parents' section seemed to be the exception. Most of that section was filled early, and almost all were dressed in some sort of Loper blue for Kearney.

"I'm here to watch my grandson," Phyllis Greveing of Central City said. "I had to leave the Nebraska game early to get here. This is really different after being in Memorial Stadium."

Foster Field is a small stadium, well-suited for Kearney State College's needs. It has a cinder running track around the outside of the football field, and reminds one of a high school field with its 8,000 bleacher seats lining the east and west sides of the field.

"These games aren't any different from high school," one former Kearney State player said, "except the coaches take all the fun out of playing."

"Loperman," the school's self-elected mascot and head cheerleader, was quick to defend the program, though.

"They (the students) do get fired up," he said. "It's just that the Nebraska-UCLA game takes away a lot of before-the-game activities. There'll be some good parties after the game."

Loperman is a junior from Waverly. He said he enrolled at KSC because of the school's size. Its enrollment is about 7,500.

The school, and the football team, seems like a mini-UNL because most of the students are from the area, and there seems to be a sense that Kearney

State is not just for Kearney, but for all of central Nebraska.

Greveing's grandson, Brett Kuhn of Aurora, and the rest of the team didn't fare too well that night against the Cougars of Morris, Minn.

The Antelopes, despite outweighing the Cougars by about 10 pounds per man, lost a tight 13-7 game. Minnesota-Morris spent the whole game trying to hold back Kearney, and the team's members showed the type of emotional effort it was for them.

The Cougars traveled with only 43 players and none of them was on an athletic scholarship. None had been red-shirted, either, and many times the field was flooded with 18-year-olds who wouldn't attend their first college class for two days.

The Morris coaching staff consisted of two men who were too busy to worry about individual problems on the bench. The Morris cheering section consisted of about 25 parents and friends of the team.

Thus, the team had to make up for the lack of personnel both on the coaching staff and in the stands. The older players spent most of their free time encouraging and teaching the younger players.

With two minutes left in the game, and Morris leading by six points, Kearney was driving for what seemed would be the winning touchdown. Then, the Morris cheering section took over. Not the cheering section in the stands, but the players. They began to chant "Cougars" to help exhort their defense to hold off the suddenly stampeding Antelopes.

Whether that was the reason or not, Kearney State fumbled on the Morris 1-yard line and the Cougars held on for the win.

After the game, the Morris players took on another role, assistant equipment managers. They had to carry everything back to their bus from the field.

The teams then went to the locker rooms to spend the rest of their respective emotions. Kearney fans stayed around to greet their team outside the locker rooms. Both players and fans seemed unconcerned that the Antelopes had lost a game they should have won. The emphasis of the conversation dwelled on what a great effort both teams had made and what an exciting and fun game it was.

The Minnesota-Morris team, after showering, boarded their bus, went to get buckets of fast-food chicken and started east down Interstate 80 to begin their 10-hour drive home.

Such is the life of a small-college football team.

Homecoming . . .

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The checklist is the same every week, and the greatest virtue, the measure of the Husker fan, is perfect attendance. The season does not go by when the papers don't trot out their annual features on some of the more long-standing Husker fans, who regale us with anecdotes about life in the days of the leather helmet and half-empty stadium. "We haven't missed a home game since 1951," they say proudly. You almost wonder if they want gold watches for their years of fidelity and dedicated service.

These days, the football game itself is only important if the Huskers are in danger of losing. Even after that 69-19 massacre on Saturday, conversations after the game were filled much more with relief than joy. Talk to fans after the game and, sure, they admit the game proved to be a mismatch, but there's always that sour, "I thought we were going to blow it when they scored that touchdown before the half," admonition.

But superior personnel and sheer numbers prevailed, and the Huskers won again. Mission accomplished.

The issue here is not whether the energy and emotion people spend on football is misapplied, it's whether it is the right kind of energy and emotion. There's no reason why fans should leave a football game emotionally drained, grumbling about the slender margin of victory.

So maybe the Huskers ought to go out there and stink up Memorial Stadium for a couple of years, just to put some life back into the fans, so that we can go back to enjoying victories instead of fearing losses.