

Sports

Nebraska football walk-ons fight uphill battle

Former West Point athletes take a shot at the 'big time'

By Suzanne Teten
Staff Reporter

It's not easy making dreams come true. It takes hard work, determination and guts. And even then . . . well, sometimes the difference is ever so slight, an inch or two maybe.

Ask Jeff Sellentin.

Or, better yet, ask Keith Kreikemeier. They know a thing or two about dreams.

Both had excellent high school football careers at West Point. Sellentin lettered three years for West Point High School. Kreikemeier lettered two years at Central Catholic. Both served as team captains during their senior years. And both had the same dream.

They wanted to play Big Red football. The dream started in grade school. And it lasted.

But dreams are hard-won. Sometimes they work out. Sometimes they don't. That seems to be the case with Sellentin and Kreikemeier.

Sellentin, a junior center and the son of Mr. and Mrs. Ed Sellentin, is now on the second team, according to the spring depth charts. His dream seems to be coming true.

Kreikemeier's dream has faded. He checked in his uniform in late April. Kreikemeier had decided before spring practice that if he didn't make the traveling squad, he would quit the team. Spring ball was going very well for him. Kreikemeier earned a 1.9 average on a 2.0 scale after three scrimmages. But he wasn't moving up on the depth charts. A 6-foot-1 235-pound offensive guard just isn't big enough, he was told, when the competition weighs 260 to 265 pounds.

Kreikemeier could have stayed on the team. The coaches wanted him to stay. But the struggle "just didn't really seem worth it to me anymore," he said. "When your goal's taken away from you already, it's kind of tough to keep going . . . to keep trying . . ." Kreikemeier said.

Coach Milton Tenopir urged him to "stick with it" so he could qualify for the benefits — lettering, a senior watch, going to the bowl game. Kreikemeier decided against that.

But it wasn't easy. It took more courage to quit before his last season, he said, than it took to stay on the team for four years.

"I think there's always a time when you have to face reality . . . decide what's best for you in the long run and not in the short run."

Kreikemeier said he felt he had accomplished a great deal by making the team and working his way up. That's why he doesn't feel any sense of failure now.

"All along . . . there was always just that little voice in the back of my mind saying 'you've still got a chance' . . . And then that voice wasn't there anymore."

There are few regrets, Kreikemeier said. Seeing the inside of a top-rated football program is a "pretty neat" experience, he said.

"If I . . . had to do it all over again, I'd do it," Kreikemeier said.

His teammates haven't said much about his decision. Mostly, he said, they want to know what it's like not to have to go to practice every afternoon.

His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kreikemeier, were fairly stoic. His father told him he had to please himself, no one else. His mother, Kreikemeier said, was a bit upset, until . . . well, he had a surprise for her.

Graduating seniors are allowed to keep their helmets. Kreikemeier asked the equipment manager if he could have his helmet since he had gone so far through the program.

"I sent that home, so that bright-eyed mom up a little bit. She called to say that was pretty neat."

Kreikemeier said if he were two inches taller and 20 pounds heavier, he would still be playing football.

But that's the way it is, he said. Height, weight and strength are important aspects of Nebraska football.

So are competition, pressure, frustration and regimentation. But the athletes learn to live with them.

The competition is hard to deal with sometimes, Sellentin said, especially during spring practice when players are vying against close friends for positions. The 6'3" blond said that situation causes friction sometimes, but it's not hard to get over it.

"People get in fights . . . out there (on the field)," Sellentin said. "It doesn't last very long, but you just kind of blow up once in a while. You've gotta expect that, I guess."

He has had "a few words and a little pushin' around" himself. But Sellentin said the next play "is like nothing happened."

"If you'd get rid of the competition," he said, "you'd get rid of the good team."

Kreikemeier agreed with Sellentin. Kreikemeier said competition is probably the best part of Nebraska's football program. It brings out the best in players, he said.

Cletus Fischer, Cornhusker offensive line coach, said competition must be "strict and tough." He said the coaches want athletes who know what they want and who work to achieve it.

Part of the desire can be measured in the program's strict regimentation. From the day freshmen walk on the field for two-a-day practices in August, they enter a four-year cycle of never-ending repetition.

Practices last about two hours, Sellentin said, but then the players have to lift weights. That takes about 1½ hours, he said. Each player has a computerized weight-lifting routine. The player does the workout and two supervisors sign the card before he returns it.

If players don't lift weights, Sellentin said, they must do 50 "up-downs" — hitting the floor flat, jumping back up and doing it again. Players don't skip lifting very often, he said.

Team members must take all their classes in the morning or be finished by 1:30 p.m., Sellentin said, because the players have hour-long meetings before each practice. The meetings, practice and lifting mean that players aren't finished until about 6 p.m. That's 4 1/2 hours the players spend each day on a one-credit class.

"You do get relieved when you hear that final whistle," Sellentin said. "You just know another day's over."

"It just gets tough sometimes," he said. "You just get sick of it 'cause it's all year round . . . You just kind of need a break from it once in a while."

No matter how much players might need a break from football, they rarely skip practice.

If players miss practice without a good excuse, they are penalized. Kreikemeier said he missed once so he could go to Kansas with his brother to buy a bull for the family's herd. The coaches told him that wasn't a reasonable excuse. He had to ride an electronic bicycle.

For Sellentin, the threat of three laps around the field for an unexcused absence is reason enough not to miss. "It's not all serious," Sellentin said. "It's a lot of fun. You screw around a lot. It's serious when it has to be, but it's a pretty loose atmosphere."

Sellentin has two years of eligibility left. He wants to start in his senior year, if not before.

And that's the dream, of course. Starting. The cheers of 76,000 fans. Public acknowledgement for all those hours of work.

Kreikemeier said non-starters may not get the same press attention as the starting players, but that isn't the case inside the program. He said the coaches "never run you down." They make every player feel "just as much (part of) the program as the starters are."

It's hard sometimes, Sellentin said, not getting that public recognition because all the players work hard.

"People don't really see what you do," he said. "They think it's just all them (the starters). But, you know you'll have your day, I guess."

If you want to play, Sellentin said, you have to work. Such determination has served the two men well in areas other than football. Both point to their grades with pride. Kreikemeier set a goal of graduating with a 3.0 grade average on a 4.0 scale. He's right on mark. Sellentin, an architecture major, earned a 3.58 during the fall semester, squeezing homework in between the heavy practice schedule.

"If you got the willpower to stick with football, you know you've just got to realize that 'if I can do it for that, I can do it with my studies also,'" said Kreikemeier, an animal science major.

Sellentin said football taught him to have confidence in himself and his abilities.

"If you set your mind to it," he said, "you can do anything."

Getting good grades hasn't been easy.

And playing football can have some distinct disadvantage sometimes, Kreikemeier said.

"Sometimes certain professors will go out of their way to talk to you," he said. "You also can get the professors who hate athletes and make your work extra tough."

Sellentin said going to school while playing football is the most difficult part about being on the team.

"You're putting more time into football than you are in . . . schoolwork," he said.

At first, Sellentin said, he "didn't really do so hot." He went to the athletes' study table during his freshman year for help with calculus, but he hasn't been there for help for a long time.

Sellentin said he is doing a lot better in his classes now, probably because he likes what he's doing. When he was a freshman, he majored in engineering. That didn't work out, so Sellentin switched his major to architecture and he said he really likes it.

Kreikemeier said he wishes he had studied harder in high school. His first two years at the university were tough, he said, because his study habits weren't the best.

Sellentin works until 1:30 a.m. Thursday nights and one night each weekend clearing tables at The Fizz.

Kreikemeier feeds livestock on the university's East Campus for about 20 hours each week. Sometimes he vaccinates cattle at the university's feedyard at Mead.

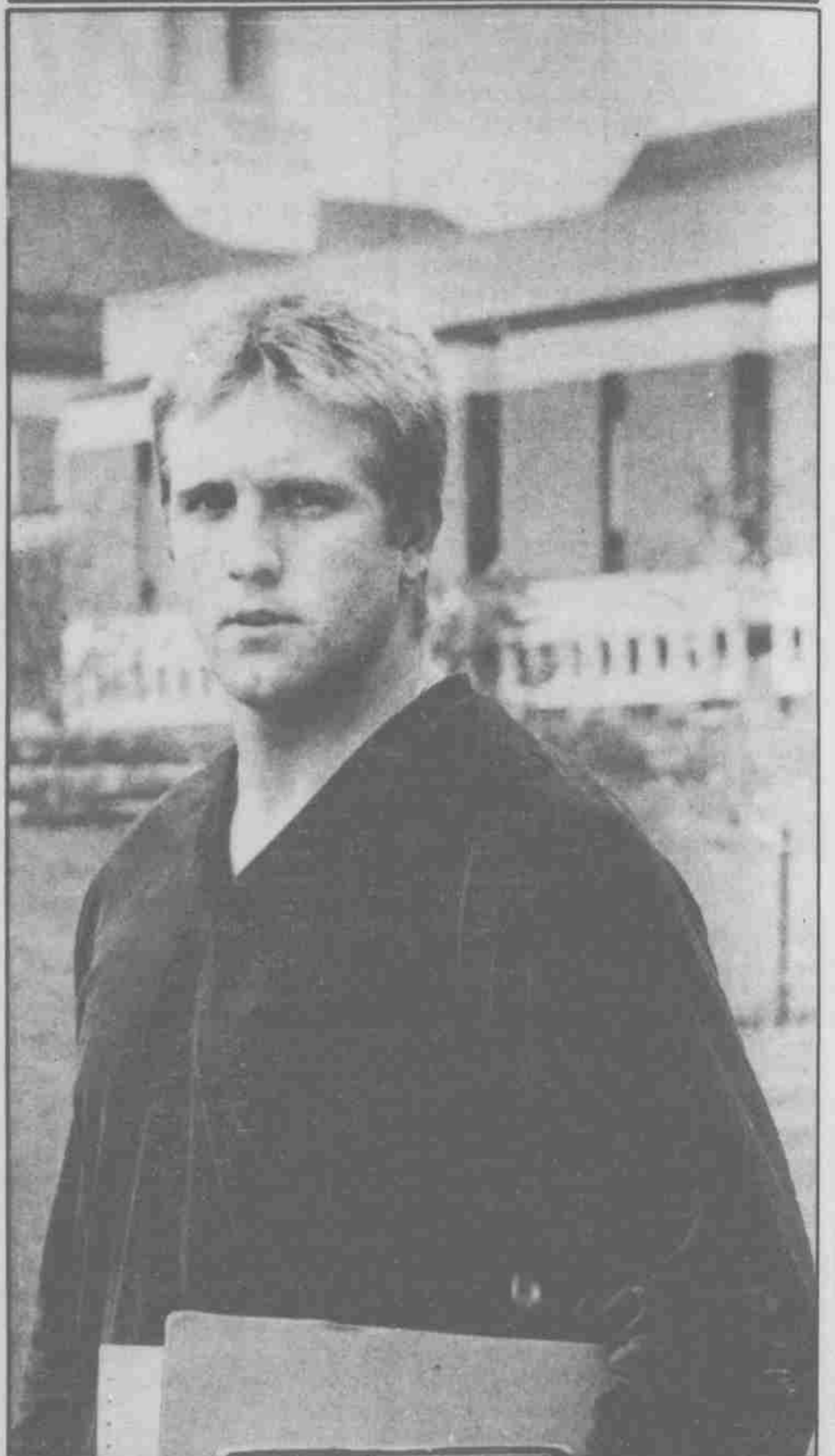
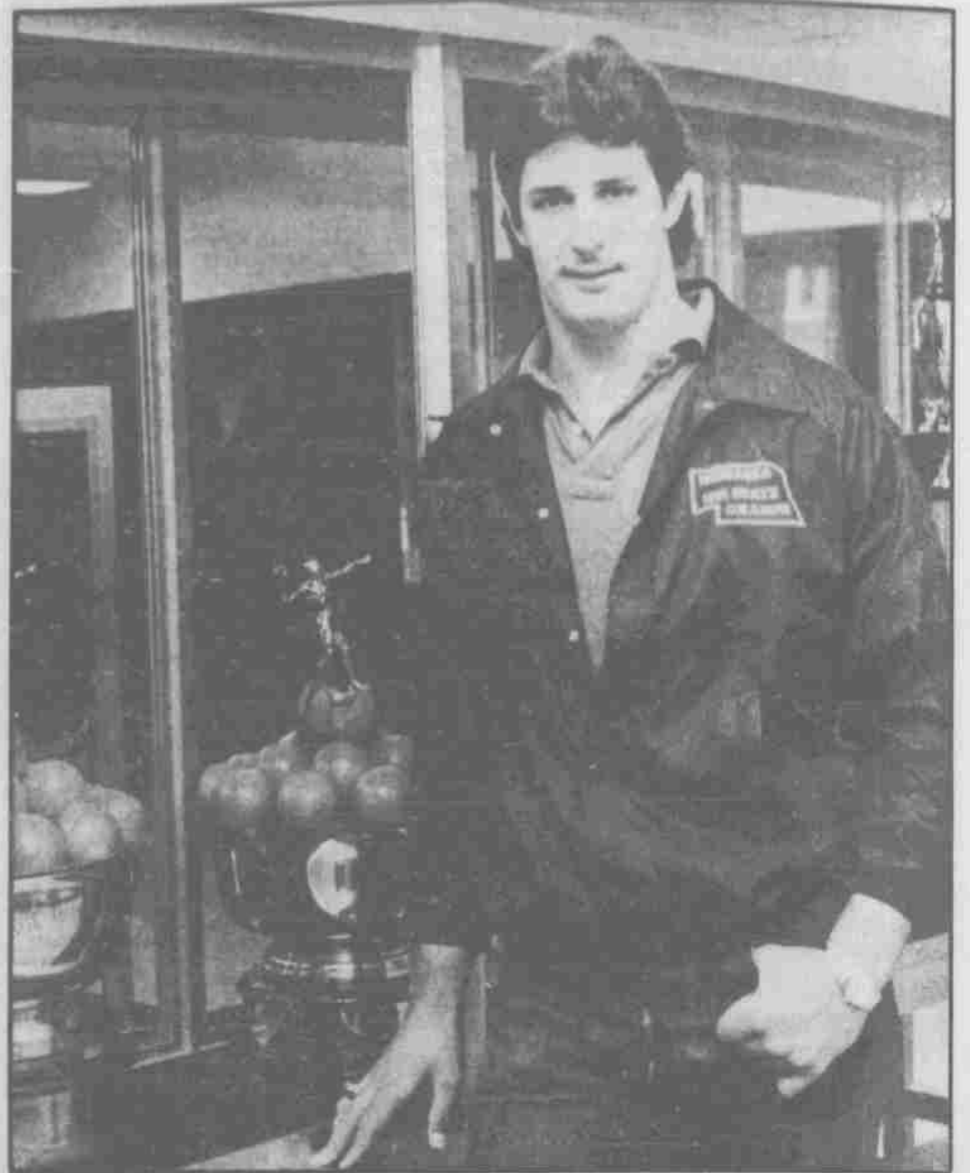
The pressures of football, school and jobs aren't all either. Kreikemeier and Sellentin said they have an extra burden that players from Omaha or Lincoln don't have. They both feel the pressure from hometown fans.

Kreikemeier said he thinks players from small towns are under a lot more pressure to do well than those from large cities. Each player has the pressure of relatives wishing him well, but players from small towns have entire communities behind them he said. People he doesn't even know ask his parents how he's doing in Lincoln.

At first, people are "really for you," Sellentin said, but "they expect everything to happen so fast."

"If they knew more about it, I think they'd understand," he said.

Many people do understand. Sellen-



Dan Dulaney/Daily Nebraskan

Jeff Sellentin (top) and Keith Kreikemeier . . . a tale of two walk-ons.

tin said some would "just do anything to help." But their understanding doesn't necessarily make things much easier. He sometimes gets discouraged because he's not where wants to be. Some people just play better than he does, he said. And he gets tired of the whole ordeal.

But the hard work pays off — on the turf and in other ways.

Kreikemeier said he has more confidence in himself now than before Big Red football. Some of that is just grow-

ing up, he said, but some results from football's added responsibilities.

"Playing football . . . develops you into a better person," he said.

Sellentin agrees. Football has taught him to take pride in himself. And if he doesn't make the starting lineup, he said, he'll still be glad that he played.

"Even if I don't make it, at least I tried," he said.

And maybe that's what matters most — dreaming the dreams and going after them. Even if they don't come true.