

The most popular legend of all...

By Chuck Green
Sports Editor

Few legends are created overnight. Some take decades, and a handful aren't recognized until they're gone.

But what is possibly one of Nebraska's greatest legends took more than two-thirds of a century to surface, and it's far from gone.

It hasn't even slowed down. If anything, Nebraska's greatest legend is more widely recognized on a national level today than ever before.

The legend is Cornhusker football.

Few states, if any, can boast such an all-encompassing force as Nebraska can with its college football program. Almost nowhere else has such fervor and such nearly-unquestioning support for a single sports team taken hold of a state's population, be it a collegiate or professional team.

Some reasons for this are obvious. Nebraska has no professional sports organizations, aside from the Kansas City Royals' farm baseball team in Omaha. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is the only major Division I institution in the state, and the coverage of Nebraska's football program by the state's media would put a smile on the face of even the most dour coach.

It's no secret that most little boys in Nebraska grow up dreaming of the day they strap on a Husker helmet for the first time.

But like so many popular aspects of today's world, it wasn't always like this.

On Nov. 27, 1890, Nebraska had only been a

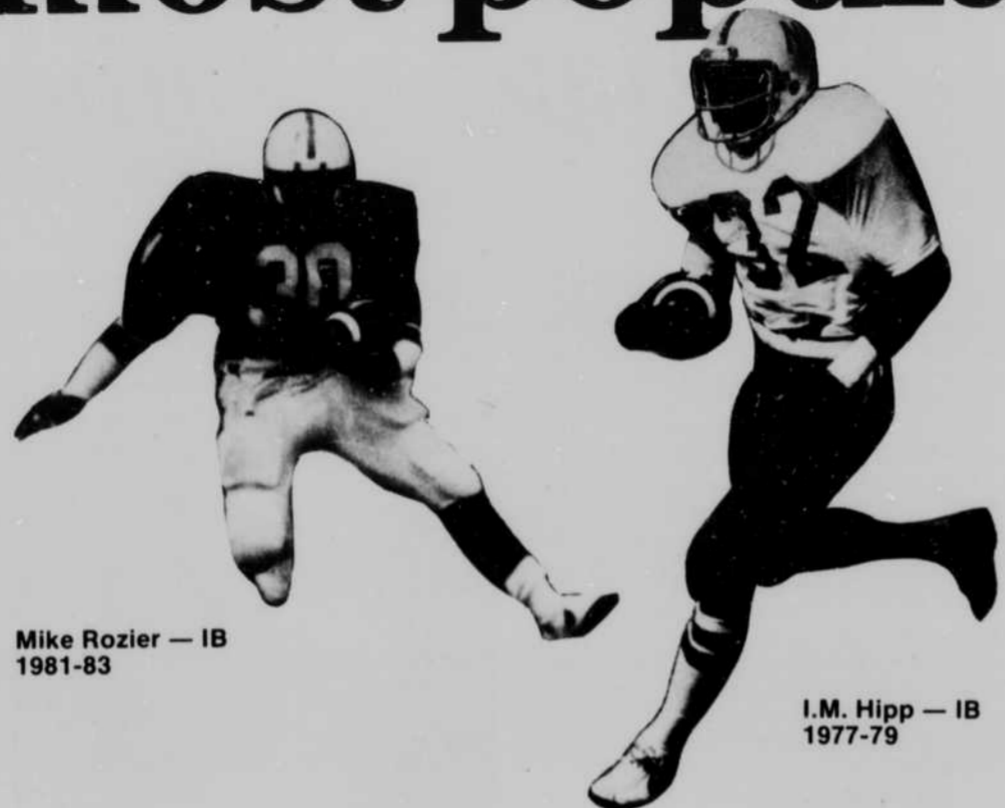
part of the United States for about two decades. A year earlier, a group of civil engineering students laid out the first football field on a strip of land just northwest of the campus. A challenge from the University of South Dakota to a game of football had to be declined because of an early winter, but another game invitation would come the next fall.

On that icy Thanksgiving Day 97 years ago, Nebraska's Old Gold Knights, as they were then known, defeated the Omaha YMCA 10-0. A.N. Troyer scored the university's first touchdown, which was then worth four points, and began a state-wide mania that to this day shows no signs of decline.

In 1892, Nebraska teamed with Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri to form the Interstate League. A year later, the Bug Eaters, as Nebraska's team had then become known, began to pay their coaches and charged a 25-cent admission to games. In 1894, Nebraska won its first league championship.

become a famed coach at Michigan, led Nebraska to a 7-4 season. Two years later, Walter "Bummy" Booth guided the Big Eaters to a 7-1-1 season, including a scoreless tie to the Kansas City Medics. Nebraska didn't allow points scored against it in its first eight games until a season-ending loss to Minnesota.

That same year, a telegrapher at the Lincoln Star Newspaper named Cy Sherman pointed out that such an "up and coming" team deserved a better name than the "Bug Eaters." Sherman renamed the team as the Cornhuskers, and no one has argued the title since.



Mike Rozier — IB
1981-83

I.M. Hipp — IB
1977-79

In 1909, the Huskers set the all-time school scoring record, blanking lowly Haskell College 119-0, and set a mannerism for Nebraska football teams of the future.

Despite a few upset wins over Notre Dame's famed "Four Horsemen" teams of the 1920's and a showcasing of one of America's finest coaches of the future in D.X. Bible, Nebraska remained "just another team" in the minds of many national sports writers. The east coast was where it was at, they argued, with the exception of Stanford on the west coast. In 1941, when the two teams met in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day, the Huskers had something to prove.

Unfortunately for Nebraska, so did Stanford. The No. 2-ranked Huskers were defeated 21-13 before the largest crowd ever to see a Nebraska football game.

So began a difficult year for the Nebraska football program. They started with a loss and finished with the outbreak of World War II, which ended the Huskers' success for the next 20 years.

In 1962, following the departure of Bill Jennings, Nebraska was in need of a coach. Chancellor Cliff Hardin looked west to Wyoming where he found a coach named Bob Devaney. Devaney was hired and immediately began to rebuild a major football program at Nebraska.

In Devaney's first game at Nebraska, the Huskers rolled to a 53-0 win over South Dakota. Eyebrows were raised across the nation the next week when the Huskers upset a highly-ranked Michigan team 25-13 in Lansing. Seven wins and two losses later, Nebraska was in its first post-season bowl game since 1954, defeating Miami 36-34 in the short-lived Gotham Bowl in New York.

In Devaney's second season at Nebraska, the Huskers rolled up a 10-1 season which included a win over Auburn in the Orange Bowl. In 1965, Devaney led his team to a 10-0 regular season before losing to Alabama 39-28 in what turned out to be a national championship Orange Bowl game.

Suddenly, Nebraska was no longer the butt of college football jokes — the Huskers were for real.

They were never more real, though, than at the beginning of the 1970's. In 1970, Nebraska rebounded from a 21-21 tie to Southern California in the season's second game to win 10 straight, including a 17-12 dogfight with Louisiana State in the Orange Bowl on New Year's Day. But there were still disbelievers, as made evident by the No. 3-ranking given to Nebraska by the United Press International post-season poll. In that

poll, Texas was crowned national champion and Ohio State was voted runner-up.

The 1971 Huskers, picked by most pre-season college football polls to ascend to the college football throne, went 12-0 during the regular season. The year was highlighted by a 35-31 win over Oklahoma in the Thanksgiving Day classic that is considered by many to be the greatest college football game ever played.

Following a 38-6 Orange Bowl victory over Alabama, Nebraska finished first, followed by Oklahoma, Colorado and Alabama. Not since has any national championship team defeated the second-, third-, and fourth-ranked teams in the nation.

In 1982, the 1971 Nebraska team was selected by a national panel of sports writers as the greatest college football team of all time.

Besides finishing No. 1 in the ratings, members of Nebraska's 1971 team held numerous other honors. Defensive lineman Larry Jacobson was awarded the Outland Trophy, given to the nation's best college interior lineman, and middle guard Rich Glover won the John L. Young Trophy for outstanding linemen. Both players were finalists for the Lombardi Award, given to the nation's best college lineman or linebacker. In addition, Nebraska's 1971 team held and extended the nation's longest winning streak at 23 games and the longest unbeaten streak of 33 games.

The 1972 season-opener against UCLA ended both. Picked again by several pre-season polls to win the national championship, Nebraska trailed 10-0 at the end of the third quarter. The Huskers tied the game, 17-17, with less than six minutes left but then failed to move the ball on key possessions after that. UCLA took over for one final drive from its own 12-yard line and moved the ball into field goal position. Efran Herrera kicked the game-winning field goal in the final seconds to give Nebraska its first loss since the fourth game of the 1969 season.

Nebraska finished the 1972 season with a 9-2-1 record, including a 40-6 win over Notre Dame in the Orange Bowl. Despite what many Nebraskans viewed as a disappointing season, the Huskers swept the nation in individual honors. Wingback Johnny Rodgers won the Heisman Trophy, given to the nation's best collegiate player. Glover won the Outland and Lombardi Awards, and finished third in the Heisman voting. Willie Harper was voted as the Defensive Player of the Year by the Pigskin Club of Washington, D.C. All three players were consensus All-Americans. Never before or since has a single team swept all individual honors.

The one thing Nebraska fans will remember the most about the season, though, was the departure of Devaney from the coaching position. Devaney, who posted a 101-20-2 record at Nebraska, resigned to become Nebraska's athletic director and hand-picked an assistant coach named Tom Osborne to be his successor. Osborne had played football and basketball at Hastings College and went on to play professional football for the Washington Redskins and the San Francisco 49'ers. His Nebraska coaching debut did little to change his successful image.

Nebraska opened the 1973 season against UCLA, the team that had ended Devaney's winning streak a year earlier. But this time the game was in Lincoln and a national television audience saw a preview of things to come. Osborne won the game 40-13 and finished his first season with a 9-2-1 record. The season was capped with a 19-3 upset victory over Texas in the Cotton Bowl.

Osborne's 1974 team finished with a 9-3 record. The next year, Nebraska went 10-2 and after that, in 1976, the Huskers finished the season with a 9-3-1 mark behind the throwing arm of All-American quarterback Vince Ferragamo.

In 1977, Nebraska finished 9-3 again, with the season highlighted by an upset win over Alabama in Lincoln the week after the Huskers lost to Washington State in the season opener.

In each of those years, one of Nebraska's losses was to Oklahoma. The Sooners have remained a thorn in Osborne's side to the present, but in 1978, that changed — for a while.

The year started with a 20-3 loss to No. 1-ranked Alabama. After that, however, the Huskers reeled off eight straight wins to set up the annual Big Eight Conference showdown with Oklahoma. The Sooners were undefeated and rated No. 1, while Nebraska held an 8-1 record and were ranked No. 4.

Rick Berns, Nebraska's latest I-back, rushed for 113 yards and I-back I.M. Hipp, who split time with Berns, scored two touchdowns. With Nebraska leading 17-14, Oklahoma was driving for what appeared to be a game-winning score. With 3:27 left in the game, Heisman Trophy winner Billy Sims took the ball, turned the corner for the Sooners and was met by three Nebraska defenders. He was hit hard and fumbled the ball, which was recovered by the Huskers, on the 3-yard line. Nebraska ran out the clock and had defeated Oklahoma for the first time since 1971.

Nebraska's joy, however, was short-lived. One week later, with temperatures nearing

the zero-degree mark, Nebraska lost to Missouri, 35-18, and finished the regular season with a 9-2 record. Because of their win, the Huskers had wrapped up an Orange Bowl berth. After the loss to Missouri, Osborne learned that his team would again have to face Oklahoma, this time in Miami. The Sooners won the rematch 31-24.

In 1980, Nebraska won the recruiting battle for a highly-touted quarterback from Texas named Turner Gill. Gill had narrowed his choices of where he would play his college football to Nebraska and Oklahoma. In 1981, against Colorado, Gill got his first start of his college career. Behind Gill's leadership, Nebraska crushed the Buffs 59-0.

With Gill starting at quarterback, Nebraska posted a 29-2 record. Many fans will argue that that mark should really be 30-1.

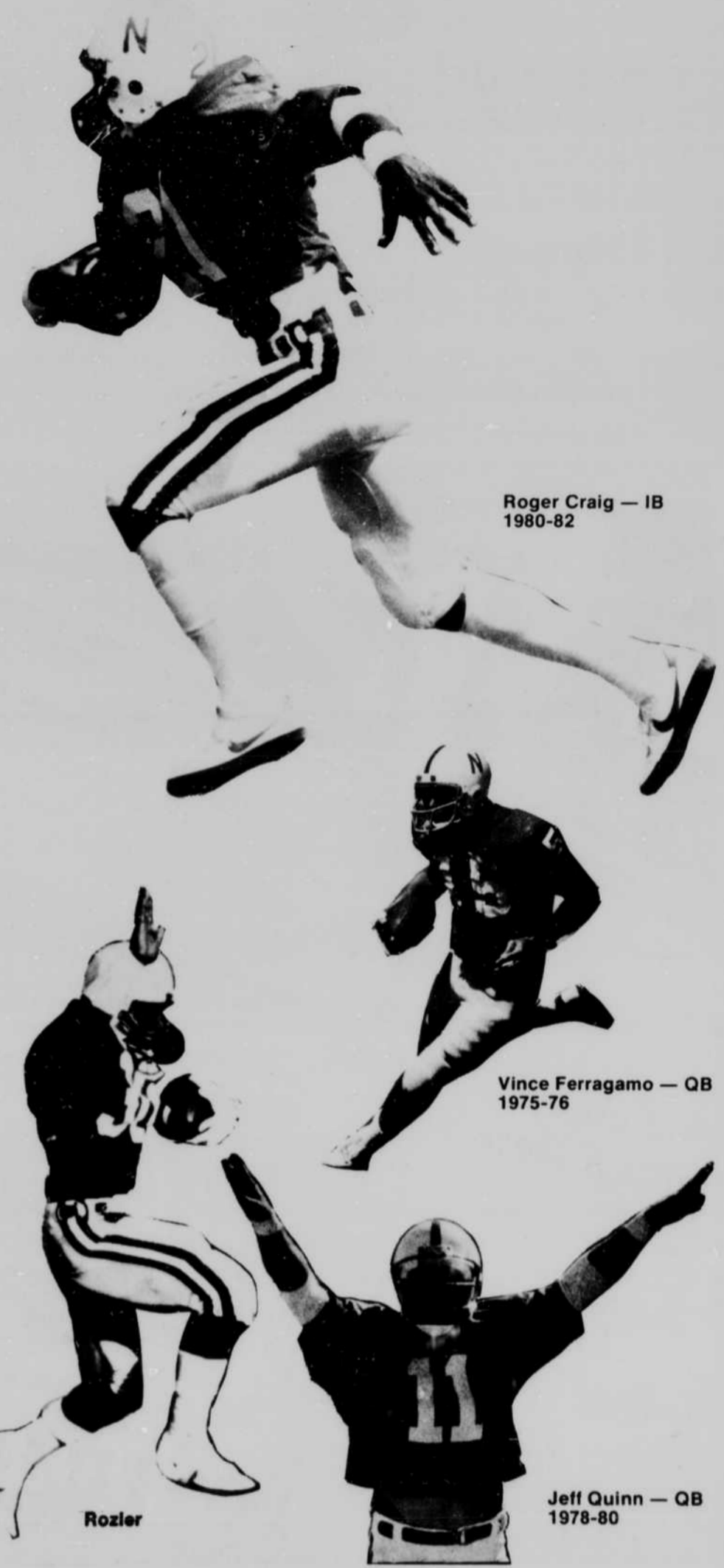
In a nationally-televised game against Penn State on Sept. 25, 1982, Gill led the Huskers to a touchdown with less than two minutes remaining to give Nebraska a 24-20 lead, its first of the game. But the Nittany Lions, led by quarterback Todd Blackledge, drove to midfield with the final seconds ticking off the clock. On third down, Blackledge fired a pass to tight end Mike McCloskey at the 2-yard line. Television replays showed that McCloskey's feet came down out of bounds, but the officials ruled that he had drug one foot inbounds. On the next play, Blackledge completed a game-winning touchdown pass to Kirk Bowman for the 27-24 win.

In 1983, Nebraska avenged its loss by beating Penn State 44-6 in the first Kickoff Classic enroute to a 12-0 regular season. The Huskers possessed three top Heisman Trophy candidates that season: I-back Mike Rozier, wingback Irving Fryar, and Gill. Guard Dean Steinkuhler was regarded as the nation's top candidate for the Outland and Lombardi Awards, which had been won by Husker center Dave Rimington the year before. Rozier won the Heisman, Steinkuhler won the Outland, and Fryar was the first player selected in the 1984 professional draft.

The team, regarded by some sports writers as the greatest college football team of all time, lost the Orange Bowl and the national championship to Miami, 31-30, when a two-point conversion pass from Gill to I-back Jeff Smith failed.

Nebraska football teams since 1983's have appeared in New Year's Day bowl games and have not finished outside of the post-season top 10. In fact, no Nebraska team has finished outside of the top 10 in at least one poll since 1969.

Some legends never die.



Roger Craig — IB
1980-82

Vince Ferragamo — QB
1975-76

Jeff Quinn — QB
1978-80

Rozier



Turner Gill — QB
1981-83

Johnny Rodgers — WB
1970-72