

# Sports



Doug Carroll/Daily Nebraskan

Nebraska quarterback Steve Taylor relaxes before a workout at Memorial Stadium.

## NU to chase elusive national crown

By Chuck Green  
Senior Editor

Since the start of the decade, no college football program has been closer to more national championships than Nebraska's.

The Cornhuskers have compiled a 72-14 record and have been ranked among the nation's postseason top five for four of the five years.

But at the same time, the national champ-



ionship has eluded no other team more often during the 1980s than Nebraska.

In 1981, Nebraska faced undefeated Clemson in a title showdown in the Orange Bowl and lost 22-15. A year later, the Huskers finished 12-1, losing only to Penn State, last year's national champion.

In 1983, Nebraska had three of the nation's leading Heisman Trophy candidates — Irving Fryar, Turner Gill and Mike Rozier — but again finished 12-1, losing to Miami 31-30 in the Orange Bowl.

And the Huskers have been in contention for the crown the last three years, but come up short each time.

Nebraska coach Tom Osborne hopes the Huskers will capture the elusive title.

"We're looking for an overall improvement from last year," Osborne said. "Offensively, I think we'll be much more experienced, and we weren't that bad last year. On defense, we have some holes to fill, but I don't see much of a drop off from last season."

Osborne's optimism is based upon the return of 11 starters — six on offense, five on defense — and 40 lettermen from last year's

team that finished third in the Big Eight with a 10-2 overall record.

Osborne said the brightest spot on offense will be the starters returning at the skill positions.

At quarterback, Steve Taylor will again start the fall as Nebraska's top prospect. Taylor, who completed 52 of 124 passes for 808 yards and six touchdowns last season, will compete with Clete Blakeman for starting honors. Blakeman, a senior from Norfolk, completed 19 of 37 passes for 242 yards and four touchdowns in 1986.

Osborne said that Mickey Joseph, a freshman from Marrero, La., will share time with either Blakeman or third-team quarterback Gerry Gdowski at the start of fall practice. Joseph was a Parade Magazine High School All-America selection and was considered by several prep football experts as the top high school quarterback in the nation last year.

Keith Jones and Tyrese Knox return to their top spots at I-back for 1987. Jones, an all-Big Eight selection last season, rushed for 830 yards and 14 touchdowns last season, while Knox, a converted fullback, carried for 439 yards and two touchdowns in 1986.

Sophomores Terry Rodgers and Ken Clark will also challenge for key roles in the Husker backfield, said assistant coach Frank Solich.

Jeff Wheeler, last year's third-team I-back, has left the team to possibly pursue a baseball career at another school, Solich said.

The biggest question mark at the skill positions, Osborne said, is at fullback. Micah Heibel, who split playing time with Ken Kaelin last season, will start the fall at the No. 1 spot, despite an injury to his ankle at the start of summer.

If Heibel doesn't recover from his injury, sophomore Sam Schmidt will be next in line, Osborne said. Schmidt, a 6-foot, 225-pound redshirt, started for the 1985 Nebraska freshman team. Doug Dalton will start fall practice as the third-team fullback.

At wingback, Dana Brinson, Von Sheppard and Hendley Hawkins return from last year's

team. Brinson, who was given the starting nod when Sheppard was injured midway through the season, caught 14 passes for 208 yards and one touchdown and rushed for 296 yards and two touchdowns on 37 carries in 1986.

Sheppard, who played only five games last year due to a knee injury, should return "fairly soon in the season," Osborne said. Before his injury, Sheppard caught three passes for 61 yards and a touchdown and rushed for 30 yards on seven carries.

Hawkins, a converted quarterback, finished the spring at the No. 1 spot, ahead of Brinson and Jamie Worden.

Rod Smith, the 1986 NCAA punt return champion, will be back. Smith, a 6-0, 185-pound junior, caught 12 passes for 190 yards and a touchdown last season.

Sophomore Morgan Gregory will start the fall at second-team split end, Osborne said. Gregory, the son of former Nebraska fullback Ben Gregory, was a starter for the 4-1 freshman team last year.

Chip Bahe, a 5-9, 160-pound sophomore, will round out the top-three split ends.

Nebraska's receiving corps will be complemented by the return of Tom Banderas and Todd Millikan, the top Husker tight ends of 1986. Banderas and Millikan combined for 300 yards receiving and six touchdowns last season.

Keith Neubert, a 6-5, 240-pound senior and former member of the Husker basketball team, finished the spring as the No. 3 tight end and will start there in the fall, Osborne said.

Despite Nebraska's depth among the receivers, Osborne said not to expect more passing than usual.

"We'll just do whatever it takes to win," he said. "If we have a lot of close games, we'll tend to throw more, but otherwise, it won't be much different."

"Last year," Osborne said, "we had about 230 passes called. That's around 20 a game, but we only got off 14 or 15 a game. That's because the quarterback always has an option to run, so sometimes the low numbers of passes is misleading."

Osborne said the biggest concern on offense is depth on the offensive line.

"We have on returning starter (right guard John McCormick) and two or three others with minimal playing experience," Osborne said. "Beyond that, we're going with new people."

One of those new people could be Jake Young, Osborne said.

Young, a 6-4, 250-pound sophomore, will start the fall at second-team center behind John Nichols, a 6-2, 265-pounds. Young broke his leg during spring practice only a week after moving from guard to center, but should be "near 100 percent" by the time practice starts, Osborne said.

Chris O'Gara, another sophomore, is likely to begin at third-team center, Osborne said.

Besides McCormick, sophomores John Roschal and R.G. Arneson will challenge for starting honors at right guard. On the left side, Andy Keeler and John Nelson will be the top candidates to replace Stan Parker, who graduated last spring.

At right tackle, Keven Lightner, a 6-2, 285-pound senior, and Corey Bill Hudson, 6-3, 270, will start the fall at the top spots, while Jim Ernest will also challenge.

The top three left tackles are Bob Sledge, Bill Bobbora and Derrick Green.

Osborne said the punting and place kicking duties are "wide open" for the fall. Returning starter John Kroeker will battle linebacker Dante Wiley for the punting chores, while Chris Drennan, Gregg Barrios and Dave Cheloha will share time kicking.

Defensively, Osborne said, Nebraska will have at least two legitimate All-America candidates in end Broderick Thomas and tackle Neil Smith. Thomas, a junior, had 58 tackles, 41 unassisted, and four quarterback sacks last season. Smith had 49 tackles and five sacks last season.

Osborne said tackles Lee Jones and Tim Rother and ends Jeff Jamrog, John Marco and Jeff Mills will provide the Husker front line with depth.

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