

McBride expects talented, inexperienced defensive line

By Tim Hartmann
Senior Reporter

The departure of six players from last year's squad — including three starters — left big holes in the Nebraska defensive line, but some big players are ready to fill them.

All-America middle guard Danny Noonan, who was chosen in first round of the National Football League draft by the Dallas Cowboys, will be replaced by 6-foot-1-inch, 270-pound junior Lawrence Pete. Pete, who had 25 tackles and two sacks last season as a backup, holds the Nebraska bench press record of 500 pounds.

At left tackle, three year starter Chris Spachman is being replaced by 6-4, 250-pound senior Neil Smith. Despite backing up Spachman last season, Smith finished with 49 tackles, 16 more than Spachman, including 10 against both Colorado and Oklahoma. Smith, who earned the "lifter-of-the-year" award at Nebraska last spring, has a 4.63 clocking in the 40-yard dash (a position record), a 35-inch vertical jump, and a 7-foot-1 1/2-inch arm span (the longest ever at Nebraska).

Defensive line coach Charlie McBride said this year's interior line will be talented, but inexperienced.

"When you lose a Noonan and a Spachman, a couple of three-year starters, you're hurt," McBride said. "Neil Smith and Lee Jones have played a lot and Lawrence Pete has played enough to know what day it is, but some of the other guys — (Paul) Brungardt's, the (Sean) Putnam's, the Tim Rother's — are null and void (in terms of experience)."

McBride said he expects good things out of Smith this season.

"Neil is the kind of player with a ton of ability," McBride said. "He could be a first-round choice depending on what kind of a season he has and if he avoids injuries."

"He's the best athlete, as far as pure athletic ability, I've ever had."

Lee Jones, a 6-1, 245-pound senior who will start at right tackle, is also an outstanding athlete, McBride said.

"Lee is the quickest lineman we have," he said. "He and Neil Smith have the best speed I've ever seen at their position, and that's in 25 years of coaching. Lee should have a good year."

McBride said he is happy with the starting interior line of Smith, Pete, and Jones, but that inexperienced

backups worry him. "The depth I'd rate as average," he said. "The inexperience is really the problem at left tackle and nose guard. There's plenty of talent, but a lot of these guys haven't seen much action."

Sophomore Mike Murray and Putnam, a junior, will backup Pete at nose guard.

"Putnam doesn't have the quickness or the speed of some of the others," McBride said, "but he is smart and he is strong."

Kent Wells, a 6-4, 295-pound sophomore from Lincoln East, also will challenge at middle guard.

Wells missed most of spring practice," McBride said. "He probably only practiced one or two days (because of a leg injury). He has a lot of ability, but it's hard to miss that kind of time and be caught up."

McBride said sophomore Ray Valadao, now a backup at left tackle, might be moved to middle guard, depending on how good the others perform there.

"The last two weeks of spring Valadao really came on and showed a lot of potential," McBride said.

Tim Rother, a 6-6, 265-pound senior who will backup Jones, began his career on offense. Willie Griffin switched from offense to defense last spring, and will be forced to adjust to the defensive tackle position this season.

"It's pretty tough to transfer from offense to defense," McBride said. "Tim Rother did it and now he's a good player, but it takes a lot of time."

Rother has developed well, and is a possible professional draft choice next season, McBride said.

Paul Brungardt will be behind Jones and Rother.

At the defensive end positions, junior Broderick Thomas and senior Jeff Jamrog are the projected starters. Starter Tony Holloway and three-year letterman Brad Tyrer both graduated.

Defensive end coach Tony Samuel said the loss of those two would hurt, but that there was a lot of talent at the position.

"Broderick is the only returning starter," Samuel said, "but Jeff Jamrog has been under the gun, Jon Marco can play, and Jeff Mills is an excellent athlete."

With Thomas, an all-Big Eight choice last season, and Smith, Nebraska will have two All-America candidates side-by-side. Samuel said Thomas is an All-America type of player.

Thomas had 58 tackles last season, including 11 for losses, and set a school record by recovering six fumbles.

Jon Marco, a 6-1, 220-pound junior, will backup Thomas, while sophomores Jeff Mills and Kenny Walker will backup Jamrog.



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