

Backs dodging injury bullet

By Chuck Green
Senior Editor

Last season was an unusual one for Nebraska running backs.

Just ask running backs coach Frank Solich. Before the season started, Heisman Trophy hopeful Doug DuBose ended his Cornhusker career prematurely with an injury to his right knee, which he had hurt a year earlier.

Throughout the season, injuries continued to riddle the Nebraska backfield. Fullback Ken Kaelin and I-back Keith Jones suffered injuries and I-back Jon Kelley continue to be slowed by injuries.

Tyreese Knox, who began the year at fullback, was converted to I-back — his original position — and further shrouded the running back situation with question.

Freshman Terry Rodgers, the son of former Nebraska wingback Johnny Rodgers, struggled as a member of the varsity.

To top it all off, the Huskers were without a 1,000-yard rusher for only the second time since 1978. Jones was the closest with 830 yards.

"Overall, we're much more experienced at I-back, and I think that will be a definite plus this season," Solich said. "It looks like a pretty solid position."

Jones, who earned all-Big Eight honors last season as a junior, will begin the fall as the No. 1 I-back. Jones' 4.33-second speed in the 40-yard dash — the fastest in Nebraska history — helped him average 5.2 yards a carry and score 14 touchdowns last year.

During preparations for the Iowa State game last November, Jones tore ligaments in his thumb and was forced to sit out against the Cyclones.

Solich said that Jones appears to be fully recovered from the injury to his thumb, but added that he has suffered pulled hamstrings recently.

Knox, who rushed for 439 yards and two touchdowns on 70 carries, will enter the fall sharing the No. 1 spot with Jones. Knox started the Iowa State game when Jones was injured. He had played in previous games and rushed for a

season-high 127 yards on eight carries against Missouri, including a 92-yard touchdown run.

Knox was hampered by hamstring pulls during the spring, but should be at 100 percent for the start of the fall, Solich said.

Kelley will also return this season, as will Ken Clark and Rodgers, Solich said. Jeff Wheeler, who was third-team at I-back for most of last season, has left Nebraska to pursue a baseball career at another school, Solich said.

Bryan Carpenter, a transfer from Coffeyville (Kan.) Junior College could also play a key role in Nebraska's rushing attack this season, Solich said. Carpenter signed with the Huskers in 1985 and began practice that fall before leaving campus unannounced. Carpenter played a year at Coffeyville before transferring back to Nebraska at the end of the first semester.

Solich said the big question mark in the backfield is the depth at fullback.

"That's a spot where we're not as good as we'd like to be, but we still have some fine athletes there," Solich said.

Micah Heibel finished the spring as the front-runner, but injured his ankle during a pick-up basketball game at the start of the summer. Solich said he thinks Heibel will still be able to start the fall at the top spot.

"Micah has been running the stadium steps and trying to do some cutting on the field," Solich said. "He's been doing OK. Hopefully, it (Heibel's ankle) will be able to take that kind of pounding during the season, but right now, it looks good."

If Heibel doesn't fully recover, Sam Schmidt and Doug Dalton will battle for the top fullback spot. Solich said that Knox isn't under consideration to be converted back to fullback yet, but may be later in the season.

"We'll just have to see how we stack up once the season starts," Solich said. "We're not looking at the possibility right now, but if it's the best thing for the team, Knox might try to make the transition."

Solich said that Carpenter also will be given a look at fullback, as well as I-back.

"He could be a fine fullback for us," he said. "He would certainly have more speed than any fullback we have right now."

Solich said that freshmen George Achola and Leodis Flowers of Omaha will also be given strong consideration in the varsity backfield. He said that there is a possibility that one or even both players may make the varsity roster. If not, Solich said, Achola and Flowers would play on the freshman team or redshirt.



Jones



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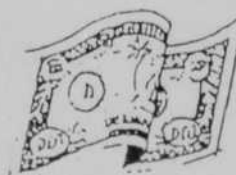
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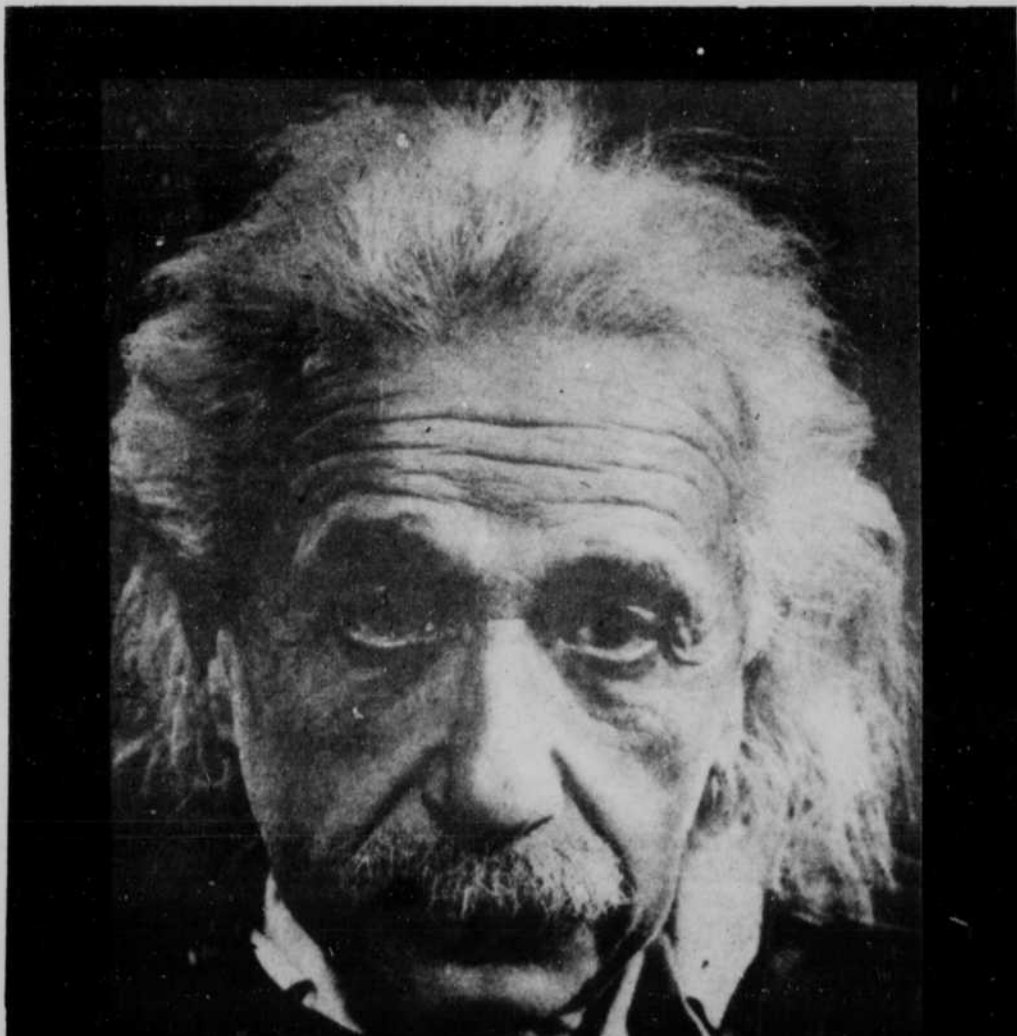
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