

Cornhusker nose tackle proves football 'experts' wrong

By Cory Golden
Staff Reporter

Mike Murray lives for challenges. The Nebraska senior, who chased snakes while growing up as a youth in Chicago, now spends his days running down quarterbacks and I-backs as the starting middle guard for the Cornhuskers.

Murray has spent his football career being criticized for his lack of size by so-called football 'experts' who say the 5-foot-10, 240-pound Murray is too small to be a lineman.

His solution is simple.

"I don't listen to them," he said. "What do they know?"

Murray has proved them wrong every step of the way.

At Chicago Mount Carmel High School, where he played as an offensive lineman, he was an All-Catholic league selection.

Sophomore wingback Nate Turner was one of Murray's high school teammates.

Turner said he remembers Murray's contribution to the squad as a big one.

"I remember one play... it was a reverse. As a matter of fact, we ran the same counter sweep we run here (at Nebraska)," Turner said.

"Mike was the offensive guard and he was pulling. He knocked down three guys on one play."

Turner shook his head. "It was unbelievable," he said. "I went for about 70 yards that play."

Despite his high school heroics, size was still a problem for Murray, Nebraska defensive coordinator Charlie McBride said.

"Even small schools overlooked him and didn't recruit him because of his size," McBride said. "He took a big chance coming down here. But he defied everybody, walked on and earned a scholarship."

Murray has a simple solution when asked why he walked on.

"Why not?" Murray said. "It's got the best walk-on program in the country."

"Any college team's a challenge to prove yourself. It made me work a lot harder."

Murray's hard work earned him the starting nose tackle spot in 1986 on Coach Scott Downing's 4-1 junior varsity team.

Murray finished the season second in tackles with 46.

As a sophomore, Murray moved up to the varsity where he saw playing time in every regular season game and the Fiesta Bowl against Florida State.

Murray tallied 34 total tackles, 21 of which were unassisted stops, both highs for a non-starter. He also added five tackles behind the opponent's line of scrimmage, including two sacks.

His junior year, Murray battled with Lawrence Pete for the starting middle guard position. He started the first three games until Pete took over, and later started the Kansas State game when Pete was injured.

Pete came back and earned All-Big Eight honors and was later picked up in the fifth round of the National Football League draft, leaving Murray to take over in the spring.

Murray said he likes the challenge of being a starter.

"I'm pretty confident," he said. "I've been playing for two years pretty steadily, so it's nothing new."

"Sometimes there's a lot of pressure when you're No. 1, but I feel pretty comfortable with it. You know you have to perform because nothing is set in stone but you feel better about yourself. It's a good feeling."

"It's always nice to be on top." Turner said Murray hasn't changed off the field since high school.

"He's the same ol' Mike Murray," Turner said. "He's nice -- he's a nice guy, just don't get on his bad side."

"Mike's the type of guy you don't want to mess with on his bad days. That's why he's a nose guard, he's like that: he's like a little fire cracker waiting to go off."

Murray said he doesn't think he has a real bad side.

"I'm all right," he said. "I mean, I'm not a jerk or nothing. If I have a bad day, I just don't like to be bothered."

Still, Turner said he remains unconvinced.

"I never got on his bad side -- he's too strong for me," he said. "I'd have to take a bat to him or something to calm him down."

McBride said that while Murray is "relatively quiet as a football player, a nasty streak still may be there."

"To play that position you have to have that," McBride said. "You don't have to show it outwardly. I've had quiet kids and you wouldn't think that's how they'd be on the field."

"Sometimes if you play hard or aggressive, people interpret that as a mean streak."

"In any case, it's nothing but an asset to him on the field."

McBride said Murray's attitude is another one of his strengths.

"He gives constant overall effort," McBride said. "His motor's running all the time."

"In my own mind, Mike is a guy who has something to prove," he said. "Mike plays a lot with his heart."

McBride said Murray's strengths more than make up for his weaknesses in a college football world where most nose tackles "look like giant fire hydrants."

"As football terminology goes, Mike is undersized," McBride said,

"but he makes up for it with his speed and aggressiveness."

"I don't like using the word small with Mike, because he plays 'big'. Oftentimes when you go back and watch films, he's taking big people and throwing them around like rag dolls."

Murray said he likes his position -- sort of.

"The position ain't fun," he said. "Well, it's fun, but you get double-teamed a lot and it gets clogged up in there."

Murray said he puts up with life in the trenches because "I like playing for a major college football team. Especially here at Nebraska, because we're good," he said.

"It's a challenge every week and it's my last year so I'm going to make the most out of every week."

Murray also knows how to get the most out of a story.

The Huskers' press guide lists Murray's hobby as "catching snakes."

"I don't know where they got that," the speech major said. "I guess I must have told them."

McBride said Murray told Nebraska's Sports Information Office a few more snake hunting tales when they were writing a profile of him recently.

"He told sports information that he went to India to hunt cobras," McBride said.

But Murray's coach knows differently.

"I think Mike's pulling somebody's leg," McBride said. "He's been in summer school, not in India."

"He's from the South Side of Chicago. He lived not far from where I grew up," he said.

McBride said he used to go chase garter snakes in the weeds by a set of railroad tracks, as Murray did.

"Mike had some brothers and I think that's what they did, too."

Turner heard his stories as well.

"I remember him saying something about it to me," Turner said, "and I was like... 'Snake hunting? What are you talking about?' That's a weird hobby."

"It's no big deal," Murray said. "I used to catch snakes when I was younger. They're pretty cool."

Murray paused. "Boa constrictors..." he said, "ever seen one of those?"

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