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Linebacker duo called best by coach

By Chris Hopfensperger
 Senior Reporter

Mike Petko has a new license plate and is looking to run someone over. Petko, who wore number 37 last year, will wear number 99 this fall and feels much better about it.

"When you think of 37, you don't think of, you know, strength," said the junior from Anaheim, Calif. "Ninety-nine makes you think of . . . like the front of a runaway car."

While Petko still is speaking in terms of things out of control, that no longer reflects his style of play, according to linebacker coach Kevin Steele.

"During his freshman year he played with a lot of terror and no control," Steele said. "Now we've gained some control, but we had to tone him down before we could build him back up."

Petko, who started as a true sophomore on the strong side a year ago, plays next to All-Big Eight weak-side linebacker Pat Tyrance. Steele, who has coached three linebackers now in

the NFL, once called them the best linebacker duo he has ever coached.

"I don't really know what that is worth, but I personally have never had the privilege of coaching two guys who are as quality as they are," he said.

After quietly leading the team in tackles last season with 74, Tyrance is getting more attention this season.

"I probably preferred it like it was before," said the 6-foot-2, 240-pounder from Omaha. "Now people know who you are."

Tyrance also must mix studies with spending time with his wife, Renita, and son, Pat III, born last winter.

"It's not easy," he said. "We are here to get a degree, but people don't realize how hard that can be."

Petko, who missed two games in 1989 with a knee injury, said the knee isn't perfect, but shouldn't hamper his play.

"It's strong, but a little loose," he said. "It wobbles a bit but it is going to be like that for the rest of my life. My knee isn't a factor at all."

What could be a factor is the inexperience behind Petko and Tyrance. But even that can be deceiving, Steele said.

"You can look at it like that, in terms of having a lack of game experience," he said, "but some players can pick up game-type experience in practice."

"If they are intelligent players, which we are dealing with, they know they have to work hard in practice to disqualify that."

Behind the 6-2, 230-pound Petko are 6-3, 240-pound junior Brian Mohnsen and 6-2, 220-pound freshman Troy Branch.

Behind Tyrance are Mike Anderson, a 6-1, 230-pound freshman, and Paul Wightman, a 6-1, 220-pound sophomore.

Petko said the linebacking corps is ready.

"Two weeks after the Fiesta Bowl, I started preparing for Sept. 1," he said. "We're going to be tough, real tough . . . of course a little of the nastiness helps."

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Speed the name of the game for linebackers

By Chris Hopfensperger
 Senior Reporter

There will be speed at the outside linebacker position this season. At least projected starters Travis Hill and Mike Croel will have it.

Croel, who will play the right side, has an electronic 40-yard dash time of 4.63 seconds. On the left side, Hill's time of 4.76 completes a package that places them among Nebraska's fastest ever at the position.

What they will do with that speed remains to be seen, said Tony Samuel, outside linebackers coach.

"They're about the fastest we've ever had," he said. "Now we're going to see if we can transfer that when we put the pads on."

Croel gave some indication of what to expect by earning Second-Team All-Big Eight honors as a junior at a position that was deep with talent

across the league. He ranked fourth on the team in tackles with 49, including nine for losses.

"I was a softie when I got here," he said. "Right up until my sophomore year. (Former Husker) Broderick (Thomas) got me going, got me on my mean streak."

He said his goal is to double his factor output of a year ago to 14. A factor is awarded every time a player is involved in stopping a play.

Hill's task will be to replace All-Big Eight selection Jeff Mills, who was drafted in the third round by the NFL's San Diego Chargers.

"I got to play a lot last year and I think I got a lot of confidence out of it," the 6-2, 225-pound Hill said. "I worked real hard over the summer and I know what I have to do."

"I have to always be thinking, always keeping a nose for the ball."

As a redshirt freshman, Hill grabbed

25 tackles last year.

Hill says he and Croel would cut out the banter that was the trademark when Thomas, who now is with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, occupied the outside.

"As far as that goes, Broderick was Broderick," he said. "We're pretty nice guys on and off the field."

"We'll hit you but we're not here to talk. That isn't respectable if you ask me."

Another redshirt sophomore, 6-2, 225-pound David White, switched to the left side to back up Hill, along with 6-0, 230-pound senior Dan Svehla.

Backing up Croel on the right side are 6-1, 215-pound senior Rick Wendland and 6-4, 220-pound redshirt freshman Trev Alberts.

"We're sitting OK with depth," Samuel said. "If we can stay healthy we should be able to do pretty well."

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