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Veteran safety starters to lead NU secondary this season

By Todd Cooper
Staff Reporter



Cooper



Byrd

Nebraska's secondary will rely on a couple of "war veterans" at safety this season.

Returning starters Reggie Cooper at strong safety and Tyrone Byrd at free safety "have been to war a lot" over the past season, and will use their experience to help lead the team this year, Nebraska secondary coach George Darlington said.

Cooper, the all-time leading tackler among Nebraska defensive backs, may be considered the general of the secondary this season, according to Darlington.

"Reggie was a leader as a junior so it's just part of his responsibility," he said. "The younger players look to him for that leadership on the field. If he says something, they tend to do it."

Cooper said leadership is just one of his duties.

"It's not added any pressure, it's just part of being a senior in the position I'm in," he said.

Despite being slowed with cartilage damage to his left knee in the season opener against Northern Illinois, Cooper went on to collect second-team All-America honors and was named a finalist for the Thorpe Award, which recognizes the nation's top

defensive back.

With the knee now fixed, Cooper says he's anxious to begin his senior season.

"The first game (Sept 1, against Baylor) will be very important," he said. "It'll be a big game... a chance to make a statement. We'll be able to prove whether we're as good or as bad as they say."

With four starters back in the secondary, Cooper still expects opposing quarterbacks to repeatedly check out the coverage.

"I don't know how much they'll respect us," he said. "We have all returning starters, but I'm sure we'll get tested."

Sharing that test at strong safety will be junior Curtis Cotton, who set the highest performance index record by a Cornhusker athlete during testing Aug. 16. He also was voted Weightlifter of the Year by his teammates.

His off-season work will help, Darlington said.

"Curtis will very much be involved in our dime defense," he said. "With that, he's guaranteed 190-some snaps."

"When Reggie was a sophomore we rotated him at strong safety with Mark Blazek and Tim Jackson. So that's a possibility for Curtis this year."

Rotation also is a possibility at free safety, Darlington said. Byrd, last season's Big Eight Freshman of the Year, will be competing with redshirt sophomore Steve Carmer and junior Will Thomas.

Byrd's return was questionable after last year's Fiesta Bowl. Byrd, from Chandler, Ariz., stayed home after the game, and there was some doubt as to whether he would return.

"I thought about staying home... I just got homesick," he said. "I really didn't want to leave Arizona."

Though nervous about Byrd's return, Darlington said he was more concerned with the 5-foot-11, 165-pounder's state of mind.

"I felt he was making a big mistake academically and athletically," he said. "But he had to determine for himself what he wanted to do."

"In football, a guy has to want to play. It's too demanding of a sport, and even more so if you don't want to play."

Byrd changed his mind after deciding that he "didn't want to leave the team or get behind in academics."

"I felt I had a responsibility here," he said.

"I was very pleased," Darlington said of Byrd's decision to return. "Obviously, he's a good athlete. He had been to war 12 times last year, so we'll need his experience."

Byrd, Carmer and Thomas "are all doing a lot of things well," Darlington said. "Will's a tremendous hitter and Carmer really kept his head in the game during his redshirt year, so we'll have to make some decisions."

"It's a good problem to have."

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