

Home crowds, opponents taking note of NU defense

By Paul Domeier
Senior Reporter

"Defense" for the Nebraska men's basketball team last year was a chant as empty as the plank seats rimming the Sports Center arena.

This year, the plank seats are filling up and the Cornhuskers are shutting teams down.

Through eight games, Nebraska has allowed 71.3 points per game, down from last year's 86.1 ppg. In their five-game winning streak, the Huskers have given up 65.4 ppg, with fewer than 70 points each game. Nebraska held the opponent to fewer than 70 points only four times all of last year.

No one appreciates that more than senior guard Clifford Scales.

"I've always liked to play defense," Scales said. "As a team, collectively, we can win on defense."

Scales said he and Keith Moody have set the tempo for the Huskers with their perimeter pressure.

"I think the rest of the team is more or less taking the example of how the guards are playing," Scales said.

Opposite Scales is junior forward Carl Hayes, who didn't get the nickname "Sco" (short for "Score") because of his defense.

"I was young and inexperienced," he confessed. "I gambled a whole lot."

Hayes, the team's leading scorer with 16.4 ppg, said he isn't ready to switch to a nickname like "De," but he has improved enough that he was given the first crack at guarding Michigan State All-American Steve Smith earlier this season.

Last year, Hayes said, the team didn't play like a team.

"It was if you got beat, you got beat. 'My man didn't score,'" Hayes said.

This season, Scales said, the Huskers play five-on-five or suffer the consequences.

"You can have four guys playing aggressively, one not, and break down," he said. "Nobody wants to see that."

Nebraska opponents have shot 40 percent from the field, down from 48 percent, 36 percent from three-point territory, down from 40 percent, and have turned the ball over 19.8 times a game, up from 14.8.

Scales said the Huskers have even discussed the exhausting effect of tight defense on free-throw shooting. Nebraska opponents have shot 51 percent from the line.

In 1989-90, Hayes said, the team would think offense during bad parts

of games. That resulted in losses by scores like 98-93 and 111-95. Now, Hayes said, the team thinks offense and defense.

"We've got to do both," he said. "Set them down first, but definitely score and take the crowd out of the game."

Scales said he isn't surprised at Nebraska's defensive turnaround. The Huskers are a huge team, with seven regulars 6 foot, 7 inches, or taller, and have some good individual defenders, he said.

Now they are playing together. "We can score a hundred and hold them to 60, 70 points," Scales said.

He used the 97-63 rout of Creighton as an example. The guards helped inside on post players Bob Harstad and Chad Gallagher. Creighton's wing shooters weren't hitting. And whenever point guard Duan Cole drove, the Husker inside players would jump out and make Cole pull up.

Scales broke it down to a simple equation.

"If they're not hitting the outside shot and we're helping out inside — there's outside and there's inside," he said. "If you don't have that, you don't have anything."

Grant

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Grant isn't being challenged by Joe Montana or even Joseph. Haase is a walkon who has completed 2 of 7 passes for eight yards this fall with one interception, and has run 15 times for 101 yards. McCant has completed two of three passes for 32 yards with one interception, running six times for 23 yards.

These aren't impeccable credentials.

If Haase can lead the Huskers to a win over the Ramblin' Wreck, Osborne has found his quarterback for next year. Forget Grant, Joseph, Matt Jones or Todd Gragano; that would be the second coming of Gerry Gdowski.

But even Gdowski got to start with Northern Illinois and was a fifth-year senior and a legitimate second-string back-up.

Does Osborne want Haase making his first career start in a bowl game, leading the 18th-ranked team against the ferocious defense of the undefeated second-ranked team?

Whatever happened to Nebraska's unwritten rule that always deferred to experience, for years keeping lousy linebackers and linemen in the game while raw recruits sat?

If Joseph had gotten hurt and Nebraska didn't have Grant, every

day would be a desperate search for an adequate replacement. Now Osborne is thinking about starting this search, even though Joseph has a replacement.

Shunning Grant would make Osborne look like he was filing away the game, building for the future. If he's doing that, he should start freshman Jones. Otherwise, Grant is the man.

Nebraska's season will be a wash no matter what the outcome of the Citrus Bowl. Anything less than a national championship is seen as a failure, so the Huskers in effect played a single-elimination season. After losing to Colorado, the year was over and the bowl game doesn't matter.

Georgia Tech will be playing for a possible national championship. The Yellow Jackets have nothing to lose, since this is their best season in years no matter what happens in the Citrus Bowl, and they have everything to gain. I think that will be enough of a psychological advantage that Tech will win.

But the Huskers have an excellent chance, and Nebraska should go with the best available players. Grant is the best available quarterback. Osborne should stop using his spring-practice motivational tactics and start supporting Grant.

Domeier is a senior news-editorial major and Daily Nebraskan sports senior reporter.

Coaches

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year before by Texas. Nebraska lost to Long Beach State in the finals, while Texas won the 1988 title by beating Hawaii.


Banachowski said his team has something to prove this year.

"We're definitely hungry to win it," Banachowski said. "But as we've seen the last two years, anything can happen."

Nebraska's Terry Pettit refused to say there was a favorite. He only said that LSU may be the underdog.


"I don't think there is one (a favorite)," Pettit said. "LSU is the team that would figure not to be the favorite, but of the other three, I'd say they're pretty equal."

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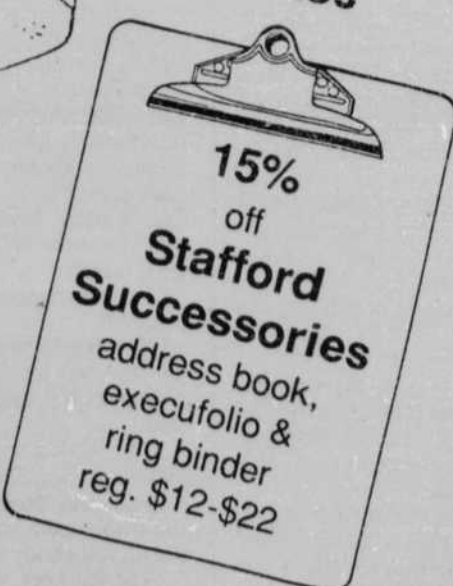
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6. Guns-n-Roses	(5-3)
7. T & A	(6-2)
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