

Huskers win, withstand passing onslaught

By Chuck Green
Senior Editor

On paper, Nebraska's season-opening football game against Utah State Saturday was supposed to be a mismatch of colossal proportions.

A rout. A 60-point farce. A college football joke.

But someone forgot to tell Utah State's players and coaches. At least until late in the third quarter.

Utah State quarterback Ron Lopez completed 23 of 41 passes for 373 yards and three touchdowns—a new regular-season passing record against Nebraska—and even a 19-minute, third-quarter lightning delay couldn't keep Lopez from riddling the Cornhusker secondary.

But fortunately for Nebraska, it wasn't enough.

The Huskers put on an offensive show of their own, generating 787 yards of total offense en route to beating Utah State 59-28 before 76,115 rain-drenched fans at Memorial Stadium.

Nebraska coach Tom Osborne was impressed with the Aggies.

"Utah State is not a great team, but they're an awfully good team," he said. "I think you'll see them beating a lot of people this year."

Osborne wasn't impressed, however, with the mistakes made by Nebraska's defense. Most of the passing yardage came against the top Husker defenders.

"We held up well against the run, but we didn't play the pass well," Osborne said. "Lopez is a great passer. But we were a little limited in some of the things we had in. We'll get better."

"In our base defenses, we were strictly zone. We didn't have the capability—because of the younger kids and not having worked on it—to play man-to-man underneath, and that guy was good enough to pick apart a zone."

Nebraska defensive coordinator Charlie McBride couldn't help but agree.

"We've just got to do better on pass defense," McBride said. "Anytime someone gets over 10 yards passing against us, I get concerned."

"But if they throw on every down, you don't get as concerned as if they throw 20 times and get 300 yards."

Nebraska played without its two starting defensive tackles. Kevin Ramackers was held out because of a back injury, and John Parrella sat out for disciplinary reasons. Brian Brown and Jamie Liewer started in their places.

But, McBride said, the absence of Ramackers and Parrella didn't have a big impact on Nebraska's pass rush.

"I don't think we'd have gotten to (Lopez) anyway," McBride said. "Their offense is a three-step drop and fire the ball. We got better pressure in the second half, but they still were pretty effective against us."

"What bothered me was our breaks on the ball."

Husker defenders intercepted Lopez twice, both in the second half.

Offensively, Osborne's concern centered on the running backs. Starting I-back Scott Baldwin was knocked out of the game with a severe ankle sprain after scoring Nebraska's first touchdown of the day on a 29-yard run, and fullback Lance Lewis left early with knee and ankle sprains.

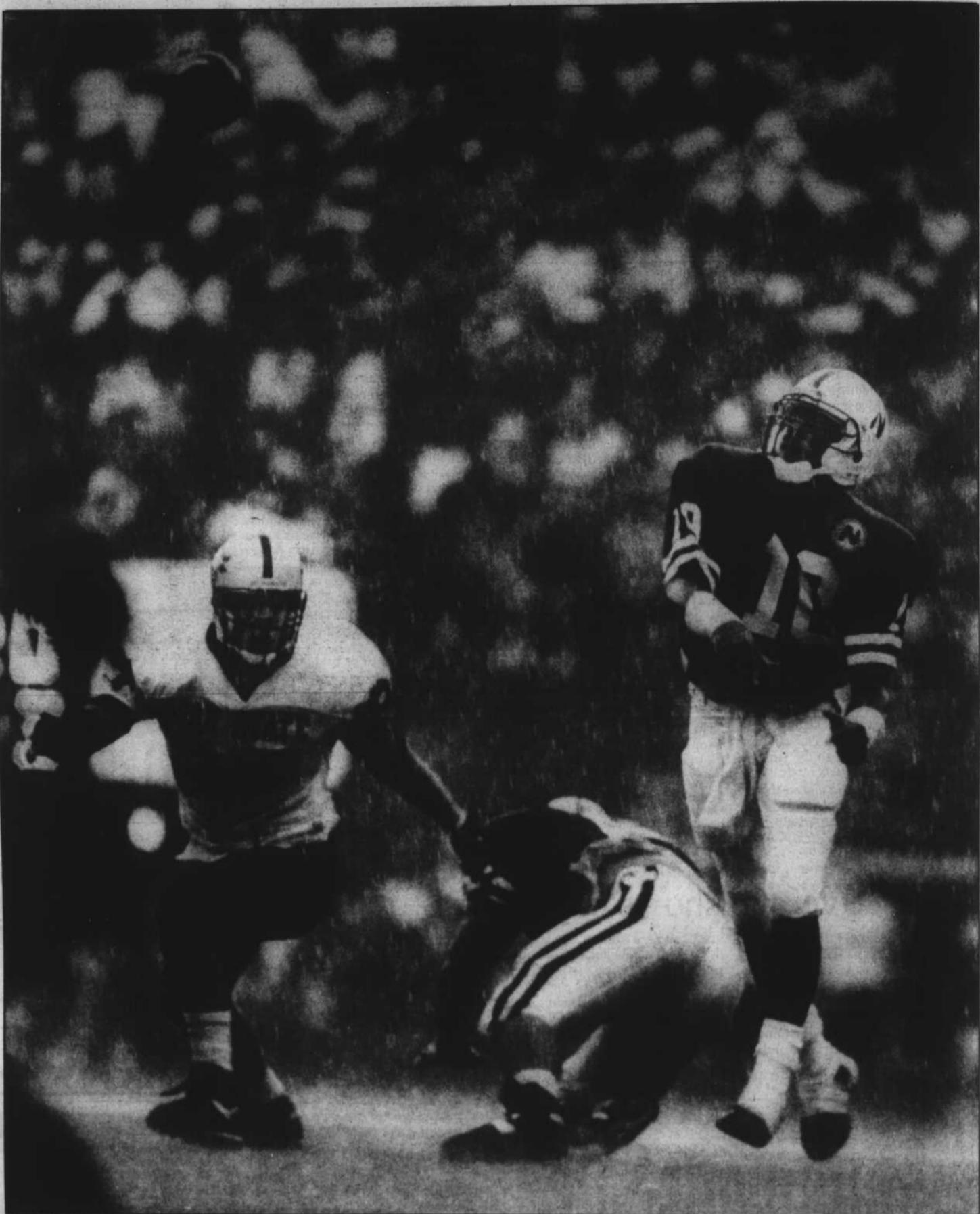
"We have a lot of good running backs, but we started running out of them pretty early," Osborne said.

But sophomore Derek Brown led all rushers with 175 yards on 23 carries.

Starting quarterback Mickey Joseph completed only 1 of 6 passes in the first quarter, a 22-yard touchdown to wingback Vincent Hawkins. His other passes in the quarter were either underthrown or sailed over the receivers.

Joseph finished the game 4 for 10 for 68 yards. He also rushed for 36 yards and a touchdown.

After the game, Joseph was visibly upset with his performance.



Michelle Paulman/Daily Nebraskan

Nebraska quarterback Keith McCant gets off a pass Saturday against Utah State during the third-quarter downpour. caused a 19-minute delay. The Huskers beat Utah State 59-28 before 76,115 rain-drenched fans downpour.

"I wasn't having a good day throwing the ball," Joseph said solemnly. "So we had to go with someone else who could get the job done. Keith was that man."

Early in the second quarter, Keith McCant was sent in to replace Joseph. He connected on 6 of 10 passes for 101 yards and one interception and hit tight end Johnny Mitchell on a 27-yard touchdown strike in the second quarter. McCant also rushed for 87 yards on nine carries.

McCant said he wasn't surprised he was brought in so early in the game.

"I always envisioned that if I got a chance to come in, it was up to me to play well and keep the team going," McCant said. "I think I did all that."

On his touchdown pass to Mitchell, McCant rolled right, looking for

his primary receiver. Because Utah State's defense was flowing with McCant, the senior quarterback had to look for his secondary target.

When he saw Mitchell, McCant threw the ball across the field for the score.

"Keith did a nice job, considering he's never played when a game was still in doubt," Osborne said.

Because of Utah State's passing attack, the game remained in doubt until the third quarter, when the Huskers scored the first of four touchdowns that put the game away.

Lopez connected on a 51-yard touchdown pass to split end Rod Moore with 38 seconds left in the game to narrow the gap.

Osborne said that although he was

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Lightning causes delay

From Staff Reports

The 19-minute lightning delay during Nebraska's season opener against Utah State Saturday was the first one any press box veterans could remember at Nebraska.

With 2 minutes 10 seconds remaining in the third quarter, the game was postponed because of severe lightning. Both teams were sent to their locker rooms, and many of the fans in Memorial Stadium hurried down to the field to play in the puddles caused by heavy rains. The temperature dropped 17 degrees when the thunderstorm moved

through Lincoln.

Nebraska coach Tom Osborne said he thought the delay helped Utah State regroup.

"I'm not a big one for going in. I never would have thought of that," Osborne said. "But safety-wise, you have to think of the fans first."

Osborne said he had no idea that rain would be a part of the game.

"I usually call the flight service to get the forecast," he said. "They said there was a 20 percent chance of rain after 8 p.m."

Osborne said, "I guess I should have gotten an updated report."