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Huskers focus on 'quite confidence'

I am numb. A sort of paralysis, I think. And it isn't because of frost-bite. There's a swelling in my veins and it isn't blood a-pumping. No, there's some sort of stuffing in my arteries going into Saturday's Cornhusker match-up with Colorado.



Todd Cooper

I've been asked repeatedly who's going to win the Boulder rumble this week. Instead of firing a typically juicy prediction, I simply garble and mumble, "I don't know," with glazed eyes.

Such a coma-calmness is conditioned. Last year's Colorado game and this year's Washington game were enough to tranquilize anyone.

Even the players seem subdued entering Saturday's game.

Johnny Mitchell, the most flamboyant tight end in Husker history, held a sort of composed cockiness after Nebraska's 63-6 victory over Missouri on Saturday.

"We're just calm and focused," Mitchell said. "We're trying not to be over-intense this year."

Not revenge, not bitterness, not hatred toward the Buffaloes, just "calm and focused."

I-back Derek Brown held a similar disposition after Saturday's blowout. Brown didn't have a comment when asked if Colorado is comparable to Washington.

No comment, no brash words, no predictions.

A far, pleasant cry from last year, when, in the words of Mitchell, Nebraska was "overintensified" going into the Colorado match-up.

Mitchell guaranteed that Nebraska's attitude won't match the altitude this year in Boulder, Colo., then fall off like a boulder should the Huskers lose like last year.

Nebraska already proved that earlier in the year, when the Huskers responded to Washington's 27-point, come-from-behind rampage with a win against Arizona State.

No, last year was different. As outside linebacker Trev Alberts said, "It seemed like last year we just blew everybody out. And you saw the result."

Yet, are Husker fans supposed to be reassured Saturday because Nebraska clawed by Kansas State and Arizona State? A close game with Washington certainly will help Saturday. But by how much?

"That helps a lot," Brown said. "We're going to let it all hang out in the fourth quarter this time."

Receivers coach Ron Brown alluded to that very problem after last year's loss. He noted that Nebraska was too tentative and maybe too happy after going up by 12 points late in the third quarter of last year's 27-12 loss in Lincoln. Nebraska was penalized for celebrating after their last, 46-yard touchdown by Mitchell.

More importantly, Brown said they lacked that "quiet confidence."

Not this year. Mitchell, the man who was so exuberant last year, said he'll be "calm and focused."

Forget about the "just another game" attitude Husker Coach Tom Osborne mentions this week. This game, this attitude, is different. Players have admitted this game is big, but this time their approach isn't.

Defensive coordinator Charlie McBride said the mood of his defense was hard to read before Saturday's game with Missouri.

"They were really quiet... really focused — like they were all business."

And that's the way the whole team seems this week. After Osborne's press conference Tuesday, several players from Brown to quarterback Keithen McCant to split end Tyrone Hughes said last year hasn't been brought up this week in practice.

Nary a word. In fact, the only words they mention are Mitchell's unusually modest ones: "calm and focused."

Of course, what "calm and focused" gets them Saturday is "tense and cloudy" right now.

But the attitude is admirable for a game that has so many implications: national respect, probably the Big Eight title and respect at home which, amazingly, is the hardest to earn.

As Colorado quarterback Darian Hagan said last week, "Nebraska fans are just getting spoiled. You can't win everything, every time."

When Nebraska fans realize that (as the players have), maybe those fans can then be "calm and focused." Or, better yet, numb.

Cooper is a sophomore news-editorial major and the Daily Nebraskan senior sports reporter.

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Jayhawks

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she was impressed with Nebraska's hitting ability.

"We were having trouble with all their hitters tonight," she said. "It seemed like the block wasn't there. I don't even know if they had to go around us. It seemed like there were a lot of holes in the block."

Nebraska improved its record to 17-3, 9-0 in the conference, while Kansas fell to 21-5 and 4-4.

The Huskers will travel to Texas this weekend, taking on Houston Friday and No. 8 Texas Saturday.

Predictions

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Oliver said he, like Stull, was disappointed with the way he and his teammates played against Colorado and Nebraska.

"Today wasn't Missouri football," he said after the loss to Nebraska. "When you get beat that bad, it hurts. We know we're a good team. That's why this loss hurts so much."

Missouri defensive end Stacy Elliott had a more direct approach to predicting the outcome of the Nebraska-Colorado game.

"Colorado, all the way," he said. "Playing out there, in front of their fans, and with that defense... Colorado should definitely win the game."

"I'm not taking anything away from Nebraska," he added. "I just think Colorado is the better team at this point."

Tiger fullback Michael Washington, who was Missouri's leading rusher against Nebraska with 11 carries for 48 yards, said he thought both teams' defenses were equivalent.

"They both are fast, and they both hit hard," he said. "Nebraska showed a lot of team speed out there (last Saturday), and Colorado showed just as much last week."

Any predictions? "No way," Washington said, laughing. "I'll tell you next Sunday."

Stull also declined to offer a prediction on the game.

"I'm not worried about those guys," he said. "I'm worried about our own score."

Vance

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quarterbacks, but the similarities end there, Vance said.

"We're very different players on the field," Vance said. "I consider him as being more of a runner but I think I can pass a little better than he can."

Vance's abilities have not been limited to the football field. The sophomore from Marrero, La., was named to Colorado's "Academic Starters" for having the best grade

point average of all of the Buffalo quarterbacks.

Vance spent time as Colorado's first-string quarterback during spring practices when Hagan was rehabilitating from knee surgery. Vance said getting that playing time was valuable as he prepares to take over the Buffalo offense after Hagan completes his eligibility after this season.

"I had a lot of pressure on me last spring when Hagan was hurt, so I had to improve a lot and gain some needed experience," Vance said. "Hopefully, now I'll be ready to take over for Hagan after this year."

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