



National Champions

In control Calm Osborne takes bowl success in stride

By Jeff Zeleny
Editor

MIAMI — The scoreboard reads 1:01 to go in the 4th. Nebraska 24, Miami 17. The orange of a once-menacing bowl is alive with red.

Black national championship shirts and white hats are handed out to cover the red jerseys and white helmets. Nearly everyone on the sideline is holding them, wearing them. Equipment managers, trainers, third-stringers, starters.

The governor's shirt says Nebraska is No. 1. The university president's says it, too.

Time ticks away.
Fifty-nine seconds.
Fifty-eight.
Fifty-seven.
Fifty-six.

Who can wait?
Players crowd the field, in search of one man. The man who brought them to this field of dreams deep within the inner city of Miami. The man. The coach. The legend.

Two players quickly find him. In perfect synchronization, they raise an orange cooler filled with ice water. They follow him to midfield, but before he makes it, he is given the ritual baptism of a national championship.

His everyday tranquil expression momentarily turns to a wincing grin. But before you blink, his expression turns back.

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Tom Osborne won yet another football game on Jan. 1, giving him a total of 219. On the outside, the win seemed almost as routine for him as any other game. But this one was different. Much different.

Those close to Osborne are the only ones who know what the national championship really means to him.

"It makes it more worthwhile," says Nancy Osborne, the coach's wife. "It's just nice to have the world's recognition. It's nice to have the respect."

"It's a wonderful moment." Osborne has been within reach of the title four times during his 22 years as Nebraska football coach. In 1984, a deflected pass in the east end zone of the Orange Bowl gave the national championship to the Miami Hurricanes. In 1994, a field goal, also in the east end zone, went wide left and sent the championship trophy to Florida State.

Osborne has consistently lost a bowl game for the last seven years. It didn't seem to matter where Nebraska played. Orange Bowl. Citrus Bowl. Fiesta Bowl. The Cornhuskers' luck always fell short after the regular season.

But the 1994-1995 team was different. There was much adversity to overcome. One quarterback, then two, then three. And Osborne was quick to silence naysayers about his team's depth.

"We have other people," Osborne sternly told reporters after Tommie Frazier's blood clot was discovered.

Osborne's outspoken confidence this year comes from building a solid program, says Lee Corso, an ESPN football analyst who often criticizes Osborne's decisions and philosophy.

"He realized he doesn't have to be silent," Corso said. "He can

show the other side of his personality, show the man he really is — a good man."

Earlier in the season, Osborne lobbied bowl officials for two non-Florida teams to be paired in the Orange Bowl.

Two days after Osborne's team defeated Miami, he still says he would have liked to play a team other than Miami.

"The players wanted to play Miami in Miami," Osborne says. "I didn't particularly want to do it, to tell you the truth."

But the story wasn't about which team the Huskers played, but which quarterback would play against the Hurricanes.

Three days before the game at the Orange Bowl media day, Osborne said Frazier would start at quarterback over Brook Berringer. This announcement develops into a 60-minute episode for Osborne.

At least 100 reporters and photographers swarm Osborne during his press conference. He patiently answers most questions, but appears annoyed at the continual questions about Frazier's condition.

"The guy that's been treating him is the guy that operated on my heart," Osborne says. "So when he's got your heart stopped, laying out on a table, you tend to put a lot of confidence in what he says."

The pack of reporters following Osborne don't leave. Reporters from national media organizations probe him, each trying to get their own personal account of Osborne's life.

The coach seems more patient with print journalists.

"Weren't you over there when I said that? I know you were. I saw you," Osborne barks at a television reporter. "You just want to get an exclusive. That's not fair."

The broadcaster turns around and leaves the interview circle. Another reporter soon fills the empty space.

While listening to reporters' questions, he frequently stops to sign a small plastic football or an autograph card.

He is the man of the moment. Patience prevails, but as the afternoon continues, he confesses the media's questions have become more difficult than deciding if Frazier or Berringer would start.

"The main burden has been answering a lot of questions about it," Osborne says. "I haven't lost any sleep over it."

By the end of the hour, Osborne has answered hundreds of questions and changed clothes once for a live television appearance.

But Osborne is used to the public spotlight.

He is one of Nebraska's favorite sons.

And many of the boys he has played a father to over the years came to Miami to watch him earn his first title.

"This is the premier program in the nation that has tried to be copied," says Trev Alberts, the 1993 Butkus Award winner.

"Obviously this is the biggest game they will play in their life."

And what a game it was. Osborne will be credited for the game's outcome, just as he has been criticized for the last 21 seasons. But in his own modest words, the victory wasn't his doing.

"I'm still the same guy who lost seven straight bowls," Osborne says



Scott Bruhn/DN

Tom Osborne remained optimistic throughout the 1994 Nebraska football season as he dealt with losing two quarterbacks and a free safety to injuries. By the season's end, both quarterbacks were healthy, and Osborne had his first national championship.

the day that the final polls are released. "I'm no smarter today than I was last year or the year before."

Smarter or not, Osborne finally has won the big one, and should earn respect, says Bob Devaney, his predecessor who has won two national titles.

"Well, I think Coach Osborne has been the finest coach in the country for a long while," Devaney says. "I hope everybody just appreciates what a great man he is and a great coach."

"I think he's got respect. Now they can never say he don't win the big ones — he's won it."

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About 45 minutes after the game, the Orange Bowl Stadium lights are turned off. During those 45 minutes, Osborne has quite a ride.

He is asked over and over to sum up what the victory means to him. Twenty-two years in 45 minutes — that's no small task.

Most of the reaction is typical Osborne.

A few smiles.
A few autographs.
A lot of humility.

The celebration on the field and near the locker room is chaotic. But Osborne doesn't take part in most of the craziness. He is dressed in a conservative blue blazer — not a championship T-shirt.

He hugs Frazier, shakes hands with many bureaucrats and accepts congratulations from players.

And then his own special moment begins.

Standing below a handmade "Nebraska Beats Canes" sign, Osborne holds his grandson, Will.



Gerik Parmele/DN

One day after defeating Miami in the Orange Bowl, Nebraska coach Tom Osborne and his undefeated team came home to greet more than 13,000 fans at the Bob Devaney Sports Center. The next day, Nebraska was rated No. 1 in both football polls.

He is surrounded by his wife and children. This moment, where Osborne looks the most relaxed, lasts for only minutes.

Seventy minutes after the championship bath, the Osborne family walks down a corridor outside Gate 12C at the Orange Bowl Stadium. Osborne takes time to chat with his children before they are greeted by another throng of screaming Husker fans.

After signing autographs and

waving, Osborne leaves his family and climbs the four steps onto team bus No. 5095. He sits directly behind the driver and begins to unwrap a sandwich. He looks straight ahead without saying a word.

He doesn't have to. The sign posted in the front window of the bus tells the complete story:

"National Champions — Nebraska 24, Miami 17."