



Huskers in Washington

Huskers tour D.C. on once-in-lifetime trip

By Jeff Zeleny
Editor

WASHINGTON — In the 71 days since Nebraska won its national-championship football game, the awards, ceremonies and banquets have become commonplace.

Coach Tom Osborne responds to nearly every cheering audience the same way: "I'm the same guy who lost the last seven bowl games."

The team captains also have their response mastered: "We couldn't have done it without Nebraska fans."

Monday, the Nebraska Cornhuskers attended another ceremony. The smiles were the same. The congratulations were the same. The autographed footballs were the same.

The Husker fan, however, was different.

President Bill Clinton congratulated the Nebraska football team on its national championship during a White House ceremony. The president spent about 30 minutes with the Huskers.

Team co-captain Terry Connealy of Hyannis said Clinton was friendly and easy to talk with.

"He seemed like a very personable guy," said Connealy, who escorted Clinton to the ceremony on the White House South Lawn. "He spent quite a bit of time with us."

Monday was the first trip to Washington for fellow co-captain Rob Zatechka. The senior All-American snapped photographs of monuments around the Mall in Washington.

Though Nebraska's season is over, players are still thinking football, Zatechka said as he walked into the Russell Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill.

"A lot of guys on the team were leery of coming out here because of NFL scouts and mid-terms," he said. "You get out here and you forget about that."

"It was a neat experience."

Most players and coaches preferred not to say if they were fans of Clinton. But, they said, the office of the president earns their respect.

"He has a difficult job on his shoulders," Coach Tom Osborne said.

Monday's trip came with more perks than meeting the president.

After leaving the White House, players toted cameras and carried their suit jackets as they embarked on a whirlwind tour of Washington, D.C.

The first stop was lunch at Occidental Grill. This restaurant, about two blocks from the White House, has photographs on the walls of dignitaries and celebrities who have been served at the restaurant since 1906.

A team photograph and a portrait of Osborne

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NU team co-captain

will be considered as new additions to the walls, which include U.S. presidents, foreign ambassadors and movie stars, said Irene D'Auria, director of catering for the restaurant.

The Husker party that ate salad, spaghetti and cold cuts is one of the biggest ever served by the restaurant, she said.

"This room is the heaviest it has ever been," D'Auria said.

Buses labeled "National Champions" whisked the team around the District of Columbia. A motorcade of nine police officers accompanied the team as it toured the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, Vietnam Wall and Smithsonian Institute.

Players grabbed their cameras for a brief stop at the reflecting pool on the Mall and for a quick jog up the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial.

Players surrounded Osborne as he knelt on the ground, trying to fit the entire image of Abraham Lincoln in his camera.

A few coaches and administrators slowly walked along the Vietnam Wall. Some stopped to take photographs, others searched for a name.

Osborne, who played for the Washington Redskins in 1960 and 1961, said he had never seen the Vietnam Wall. He and his wife, Nancy, took photographs as they walked through the park.

Most players, coaches and their wives stared out the bus windows as the 75-minute tour concluded with a drive down Independence Avenue and the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

An hourlong tour of Capitol Hill wrapped up the Huskers' day in Washington.

So after nine hours, another ceremony was finished. There are sure to be others with the same smiles, congratulations and autographs, but an Arkansas Razorback made Monday's ceremony memorable.

"I thought it was great. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Connealy said. "Meeting the president was definitely a highlight."



Photos by Jeff Haller/DN

Above: The Husker football team and dignitaries await President Clinton's arrival before a ceremony Monday on the White House South Lawn. Right: Two Nebraska football players stop at the Mall during their whirlwind tour of Washington.