

Players' off-field trouble causes concern

By J. Christopher Hain
Editor

The shining image of the Nebraska football team is becoming tarnished faster than coach Tom Osborne can polish it.



The top two I-backs on the team, Lawrence Phillips and Damon Benning, have run aground with the law.

Both Phillips and Benning are accused of assaulting ex-girlfriends. And Phillips, a leading Heisman Trophy candidate, has been kicked off the team.

Those incidents — and several others involving players — have made the sanctity of the Cornhusker image a matter of concern.

Over the last few years, four other Nebraska players have been involved in less than glorious off-the-field incidents.

- Tyrone Williams, starting cornerback, is accused of firing a gun at a person in a car.

- Reggie Baul, starting split end, was found guilty of receiving a stolen wallet.

- Riley Washington, reserve split end, awaits trial on charges of attempted second-degree murder.

- Christian Peter, starting defensive tackle, was found guilty of third-degree sexual assault. He also has been fined for third-degree assault and other offenses.

With six prominent players in trouble, comparisons might be drawn between Nebraska and other football programs with muddied reputations.

But UNL Interim Chancellor Joan Leitzel said the Nebraska football program was not in danger of mirroring situations like those at the University of Oklahoma in 1989 and the University of Miami over the past few years.

"The athletic program has been a highly regulated and responsible program," Leitzel said.

The University of Oklahoma football program descended into lawlessness in 1989,



Jon Waller/DN

NU football coach Tom Osborne speaks after practice Monday to members of the media about I-back Lawrence Phillips' dismissal from the team.

shortly after the program was placed on three years of probation by the NCAA.

OU football players were accused of a gang-rape, a shooting and cocaine dealing, among other things.

This summer, Sports Illustrated published an article addressing the continuing problems with the University of Miami football program.

Miami football players have been charged with drunken driving, burglary, arson, assault and sexual battery.

However, most of the crimes attributed to Nebraska football players are less serious than those at Miami or Oklahoma. And Nebraska has yet to encounter serious NCAA violations.

Leitzel's concern is the behavioral problems of Phillips and Benning.

Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs James Griesen said the incidents involving both Phillips and Benning would be reviewed to determine if they violated the Student Code of Conduct.

If so, a number of sanctions could be taken against either player, including warnings, restitution or even expulsion.

Osborne said the football team would continue to support Phillips, despite his dismissal from the team.

But Osborne has been affected by all the media attention targeted at his players and their troubles.

"There comes a time," the coach said at a luncheon Monday, "when this all kind of weighs on me."

Huskers in Court

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<p>May 13, 1993 Christian Peter, defensive tackle Charged with third-degree sexual assault for putting his hands between the legs of a female student. He was later found guilty.</p>	<p>January 29, 1994 Tyrone Williams, defensive back Charged with unlawful discharge of a firearm and use of a firearm to commit a felony in connection with a shooting.</p>	<p>November 20, 1994 Reggie Baul, split end Charged with stealing a wallet at a Village Inn restaurant. Later found guilty of receiving stolen property.</p>
<p>August 2, 1995 Riley Washington, split end Faces charges of attempted second-degree murder in connection with a convenience store shooting.</p>	<p>September 10, 1995 Lawrence Phillips, I-back Arrested on suspicion of assaulting a former girlfriend.</p>	<p>September 9, 1995 Damon Benning, I-back Charged with assaulting a former girlfriend.</p>

Phillips

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sophomore record by rushing for 1,722 yards, the second highest rushing total in Nebraska history.

This season, Phillips ran for 359 yards and seven touchdowns on 34 attempts in two games, an average of 10.6 yards per carry. In his 24-game career, the preseason All-American has rushed for 2,589 yards, ranking sixth on the all-time Cornhusker rushing charts.

"We lost a great player in Lawrence Phillips," Osborne said Monday at the Extra Point luncheon, where he was speaking before a group of boosters. "Lawrence was probably playing as good as any I-back we have had in a long time."

In most cases, Osborne said the Unity Council — a group made up of two football players from each position — set the policy on suspensions and dismissals from the team.

Under Unity Council rules, a player is permanently dismissed after twice losing five points on the team's merit scale.

If a player is convicted of a felony, he loses the full five points. Conviction of a misdemeanor costs a player four points.

A player loses three points for missing practice, two points for missing a meeting and one point for missing a class or tutoring session. If a player loses all five points, he is suspended from the team.

The second time a player loses all five points, he is usually thrown off the team permanently. Phillips was suspended for one game in 1993 for fighting with a teammate. Since then, he has not been suspended.

Osborne, who made the decision to remove Phillips, said he reserved the right to overstep the power of the Unity Council.

"There is a certain amount of discretion left

up to me as coach," he said. "And there is pretty good communication among the team members as to why somebody isn't playing."

"I imagine there have been 1,000 rumors spread around this room today, and probably one or two people actually know what happened."

"And I hope I am one of them. I may not be, but I hope that I am."

Osborne said he was confident the Huskers would overcome this distraction. Nebraska players decided Monday afternoon that they would not talk to the media this week — about Phillips or anything else.

Phillips has been under a great deal of scrutiny from the NCAA and the media recently concerning his relationship with a professional sports agent. Osborne said the pressure may have indirectly contributed to Phillips' actions Sunday morning.

"I understand the press," Osborne said. "They have got a tough job to do. There comes a time when this all kind of weighs on me."

"You have to understand how difficult it is to be a young person. They (football players) are not normal college students. They get way more credit than they deserve when they score a touchdown," he said.

Though Phillips is not the victim in this incident, Osborne said he would be sympathetic toward his player, considering his background.

"I think he knows that I am with him in spirit," Osborne said. "Lawrence has come up the hard way. He's a survivor, and I am hoping he will survive this, too."

"Basically when you are without any parents at age 11, and you are on your own, you find a way to get by. Some of the survival techniques that he's had have led him to getting in some trouble."

"I haven't given up on him as a person."



Travis Heying/DN

The Meadow Wood Apartments at 4440 N. 7th St., where junior I-back Lawrence Phillips allegedly assaulted his ex-girlfriend, NU basketball player Kate McEwen.

Witness

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the apartment.

Police said Phillips entered Frost's apartment through an unlocked sliding door. As Frost called police from a cellular phone, Casady said, Phillips allegedly began beating McEwen.

"He was just completely out of control. He was totally irrational," the UNL junior said. "Scott kept saying, 'What about football?'"

Police said Frost filed a trespassing complaint against Phillips.

Police called NU Athletic Department officials to the crime scene. They helped police locate Phillips, who turned himself in at 8:15 p.m. Sunday.

An hour later, Nebraska coach Tom Osborne announced he had kicked Phillips off the team.

McEwen received a cut to her head and several scrapes and bruises. She was treated and released at Lincoln General Hospital.

McEwen went to her parents home in Topeka, Kan., after the alleged assault. Numerous attempts to contact her Monday were unsuccessful.

Lincoln attorney Hal Anderson said Phillips will plead not guilty to the charges. Phillips is scheduled to be arraigned today.

The two women said they knew McEwen but were not close friends. But they immediately went outside their apartment when they heard the young woman's screams.

The struggle in the building's foyer lasted fewer than five minutes. Frost and the two witnesses tried to get McEwen inside the security door.

"When he pulled back and pulled her into the wall, they (Phillips and McEwen) both hit the floor," the UNL junior said. "She started running toward me. We pulled her into the apartment."