

## Huskers

Continued from Page 1

### A still Sunday

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon. Maybe too quiet.

Osborne canceled his Sunday afternoon office chat with reporters. It seemed odd, but Osborne's displeasure with the media is no secret.

Mid-afternoon, anonymous calls began trickling into newsrooms in Lincoln and Omaha. "The star player has been kicked off the team," the callers proclaimed, "because he beat his girlfriend up last night."

News reporters were curious. Sports writers were nervous. And the national media had no idea what story was waiting for them in Nebraska.

While the city slept early Sunday, police believe Phillips scaled the outside of a Meadow Wood Apartments building to reach the third-floor home of reserve quarterback Scott Frost, where Phillips found his former girlfriend.

Lincoln Police Chief Tom Casady said Phillips came into the apartment through an unlocked sliding door on the balcony. As Frost called police, Casady said, Phillips allegedly began beating Kate McEwen, a sophomore guard on the Nebraska basketball team.

Police said McEwen was dragged across carpet, down a flight of stairs and outside the apartment complex at 4440 N. Seventh St. Witnesses would later describe McEwen caught in a violent tug-of-war between Frost and Phillips.

"When we went out there, we saw Scott Frost and Lawrence Phillips each pulling on Kate," said a UNL junior, who lives in the building.

That witness and her roommate helped Frost drag McEwen into a neighbor's apartment behind a locked security door. Blood from McEwen's head and body soaked a white T-shirt she was wearing.

The fight only lasted a few minutes, witnesses said. But they described the anger in Phillips' eyes as frightening.

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

Witnesses said Phillips ran from the apartment a few minutes before police arrived at 4:48 a.m. Police said Phillips was their only suspect and called NU Athletic Department officials to the crime scene.

"We notified them and told them to look for him," said Lincoln Police Lt. Kent Woodhead. "They were very cooperative."

Phillips, who runs the 40-yard-dash in 4.48 seconds and is the fifth-fastest player on the team, eluded police for 15 hours. About 8:15 p.m., Phillips turned himself into police with attorney Hal Anderson at his side.

Phillips was booked into the Lancaster County jail on suspicion of third-degree assault and trespassing. He was released from jail about 9 p.m. after paying \$100 — 10 percent of his \$1,000 bond.

As details of Phillips' arrest were made known, coaches gathered to decide his fate. About 40 minutes after Phillips posted bond, Osborne issued a five-sentence statement that would set the tone for undoubtedly one of the most challenging weeks in his 23 years as head coach.

"We have told all our players that abusive behavior such as this will not be tolerated," Osborne said. "We will do everything we can to help him get his life back together, but he is dismissed from the football team, effective immediately."

Reporters already had started to ask questions. Osborne apparently knew the story was out, so he released his statement, dated Monday, Sept. 11, one day early.

### Media pounces

The Heisman Trophy candidate is off the team. What could Phillips have done to warrant such drastic action? How can a reserve receiver continue to practice as he awaits a trial on attempted second-degree murder?

The answers to these questions were in short supply Sunday night. But they were being asked everywhere Monday — from the police station, to a booster luncheon, to the football field.

As if the Phillips situation wasn't enough, Benning's arrest was revealed and Nebraska's top two I-backs were both accused of assaulting their former girlfriends.

A coach could hardly ask for a worse public relations disaster.

Osborne was deluged with questions on a Big Eight conference call Monday morning, but his colleagues supported his decision to remove Phillips. At the Extra Point Club lunch,

*'There comes a time when this all kind of weighs on me'*



Lawrence Phillips' aunt from Little Rock, Ark., walks beside him after his court arraignment this week. Phillips was born in Little Rock, but he grew up in West Covina, Calif., a Los Angeles suburb.

the coach faced university donors who all had questions about the football fiasco.

"I imagine there have been 1,000 rumors spread around this room today, and probably one or two people actually know what happened," Osborne said at the University Club. "And I hope I am one of them. I may not be, but I hope that I am."

Reporters from every part of the country scrambled to Lincoln to document the tarnished Nebraska image. The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Boston Globe, ESPN, CNN, ABC, CBS ...

Nagging reporters asked nagging questions. By noon, Osborne's sound bites were on radio call-in shows and television news breaks. The media was unwavering and often unsympathetic.

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

Reporters researched court files and perused newspaper clippings to dig up players' criminal histories. Old cases that locals had forgotten became new fodder for national stories.

Christian Peter. Reggie Baul. Tyrone Williams.

This football research had to be gathered before day's end. It was required ammunition for Tuesday — Tom Osborne's first major face-off with journalists.

### Violence off field

On Tuesday, at a weekly press conference that is usually dominated by lively sports chatter and injury reports, a tense silence controlled the room. After reporters finished their lunch of cold cuts, pasta salad and brownies, they grilled Osborne.

National reporters overshadowed local football beat writers in the South Stadium conference room. Instead of detailing a team depth chart, Osborne was forced to go through the line-up of Huskers with criminal records.

The coach maintained that his players are scrutinized more than other students.

"We've been portrayed, I guess, as a Miami, but I don't personally see it quite that bad," Osborne said. "I think that the thing you have to understand is that when you have 150 players, there will be anywhere from three to five incidents every year."

Other national championship schools — Miami, Oklahoma, Colorado — have had troubles of their own. Gang rapes, weapons violations and narcotic charges have tarnished those institutions. But does it take a violent streak to win on the Gridiron?

"No," Osborne said firmly. "I'm a little offended by that question."

About two hours after Osborne's press conference ended, Phillips was arraigned in Lancaster County Court. He pleaded innocent to the misdemeanor assault, trespassing and destruction of property charges. A provision to have no contact with Frost or McEwen was added to his \$100 bond.

That court order could prevent an interesting challenge if Osborne would reinstate Phillips.

"Whether he goes back to the team isn't up to me," said Anderson, his attorney, "but in terms of his bond, if that's a limitation I'm sure there's something that could be arranged."

### A lasting image?

On Wednesday, University administrators continued working to gloss over the negative media attention by stressing UNL's academic strengths.

But the strong messages sent across the country through video clips of Phillips and Washington leaving courtrooms would be difficult to counter.

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

Mulnix, who advises the chancellor, said the weeklong spectacle could leave lasting impressions.

"The reason that it will hang on for awhile is because it appears that Tom has left the door open, at least a crack. This will lead to speculation every week," Mulnix said.

"I've never seen anything like it when you have CNN, ESPN and ABC all show up in the chancellor's office the same day."

National journalists picked the brains of local reporters all week. ABC's Dick Schaap came to campus to chronicle the conflict. But the veteran TV sports reporter said the national image problem would not last.

"While there have been incidents in the past, they have been relatively minor," Schaap said, "and have not stained the program or coach Osborne."

### An S.I. investigation

By Thursday, most reporters had left the Nebraska controversy for a different city and another story. Stragglers remained, but the circus-like atmosphere had calmed.

The week dragged on. The story became tiresome. A newspaper stand in the Nebraska Union that had sold out by mid-afternoon earlier in the week was still half full.

But students continued to line up to retrieve their tickets. Most could care less if they would see the Huskers with or without Phillips. Husker fans are waiting for what the state lives for — football Saturday.

The team continued to practice Thursday. They've been doing it all week long, but reporters have been too busy to notice.

Tommie Frazier's thigh has healed enough to keep him in the starting quarterback spot. So it seems things could be getting back to normal on campus and in Lincoln.

But Osborne most likely won't stop thinking about this week until next Wednesday — when the Sports Illustrated investigative piece on Nebraska is published.

The coach already had answered some tough questions and dodged even more. But Osborne took a deep breath as he began his 22-minute interview with Sports Illustrated. "They sent two of you?" he asked, before the hard-hitting questions began. Osborne fidgeted as the reporters questioned him in Memorial Stadium. He occasionally got a stern look on his face, but did not lose his cool.

Sports Illustrated has investigated Miami, Colorado and Oklahoma. It is a coach's worst fear. But Osborne handled it well, said reporter Shelley Smith.

"He was good," she said, "he didn't freak at all."

Smith, who graduated from UNL in 1981, said the story will feature "some fireworks."

As Osborne walked away from the two reporters, he took about 30 seconds to pose for a picture with a few fans gathered on the field.

Then, he started to jog.

Around and around the field's border, occasionally rounding a corner in the endzone. This is his quiet time. Two construction workers take a break and watch the man who has the most winning record in college football. They wave as he passes.

Regardless of what ESPN says or Sports Illustrated writes, 76,000 screaming fans will flock to Memorial Stadium tomorrow.

This is the Cornhuskers' state.