

NU walk-ons climb the ladder to success

Wingback Vedral's complete package invaluable to team

By David Wilson
Staff Reporter

Nebraska wingback Jon Vedral has worked hard this season to make a name for himself not only as a wingback, but on special teams as well.

"He has really been one of the most valuable wingbacks that we've had over the years. He's a great special teams player too," Nebraska receivers coach Ron Brown said. "He's just a complete football player."

Although Vedral has emerged as a leading Cornhusker receiver this season, catching 14 passes for 272 yards, two of Vedral's biggest plays didn't involve catching the ball.

Instead they involved falling on the ball. Vedral recovered fumbles in the end zone for touchdowns against Kansas and Kansas State.

"A lot of it has to do with just hustling on every play," Vedral said. "Good things happen when you just hustle around. I try to give 100 percent on every play."

Vedral, who leads the Huskers with five touchdown receptions this season, said he was satisfied with his performance, but he was always looking to improve.

"I'm a competitor," Vedral said. "I want to get better each day. I'm going to go out there each practice and try to get better as a player."

Vedral's hard work and determination helped him at Nebraska. Although he received scholarship offers to play football at Division-

II and Division-III schools, Vedral chose to follow in his brother's footsteps and try to walk on at Nebraska.

Vedral said his brother Mike, who was a tight end for the Huskers from 1990-92, played a big role in his coming to Nebraska.

"I look up to him a lot," Vedral said. "He had a lot of guts to come down here on his own from South Dakota and try to walk on. I admire him for that."

Vedral redshirted in 1992 after walking on as a freshman. Although he played in only three games as a reserve wingback in 1993, Vedral did not catch a pass. In 1994, Vedral served primarily as Nebraska's holder on extra-point attempts and field goal attempts.

"I feel that the special teams is just as important as the offense and the defense," Vedral said. "It's a third aspect of the game that a lot of the fans don't realize. It's something that you have to take a lot of pride in and really concentrate on."

As a backup wingback last season, he caught only one pass for a seven-yard gain. He did complete two passes during the season.

After a bad snap on an extra-point attempt in the third quarter against Oklahoma State, he completed a pass to kicker Darin Erstad for a two-point conversion. In the fourth quarter of the same game, Vedral completed a five-yard pass to Jeff Makovicka on a fake field goal attempt.

Brown said Vedral had become a valuable blocker and an excellent receiver.

"He's a prime-time wingback," Brown said. "We're a different offense," when Vedral or Clester Johnson aren't in there.

Brown said Vedral would be the front-runner for the starting wingback position next season.

Vrzal proves ability; waits his opportunity at starting position

By Mike Kluck
Staff Reporter

All Matt Vrzal has ever wanted was a shot to play football at Nebraska.

The former USA Today honorable mention All-American and all-state offensive guard from Grand Island passed up scholarship offers from Wyoming, Colorado State and Iowa State to walk on at Nebraska.

"I wanted to come here and prove I could play," Vrzal said. "To a point I already have, but I still have a long way to go."

"It's a challenge I felt personally, I needed to try. I needed to go to Nebraska and see if I could play and hold my own and just compete at this level of competition. It's kind of a personal thing for me."

For the last three seasons Vrzal has proved he can play for the Cornhuskers by playing in three games during the 1993 season and five games last season. So far this season Vrzal has seen action in 10 of the Huskers' 11 games.

During those three seasons Vrzal has moved into the No. 2 center spot behind All-Big Eight and All-American center Aaron Graham. But Vrzal knows his turn to start will be here soon.

"You can't think of it as filling his shoes," Vrzal said. "You just have to play to the best of your ability, and if that's good enough, so be it and if not, somebody will have to replace you when you're not doing your job."

Vrzal said he already had proved that he was ready to start — including against Arizona

State. In the first quarter Nebraska led 7-0, but Graham's helmet broke and Vrzal was sent in. The first play called was the direct snap to Ahman Green, the I-back, in the shotgun.

"He (Tommie Frazier) came into the huddle and looked down, and I think he expected to see Aaron and he looked and saw me," Vrzal said. "He kind of looked at me with this real confident look and called the play."

Vrzal said the play was one of the tougher plays the center had to run because he must worry about getting the snap right and making the block so the I-back can run through his hole.

"(Graham) was kind of upset his helmet broke because he likes that play," Vrzal said. "That play shows some of the talent he has because he does such a good job of snapping in the shotgun. He congratulated me when I came off."

Vrzal said he had enjoyed learning the offense from Graham.

"Playing behind Aaron, he's a great player and just a great leader," Vrzal said. "His presence on the field is amazing. I'm just trying to learn from him and feed off of him from what he does both on and off the field."

Vrzal said his commitment to earn a starting spot had helped build his character as a lineman.

"People who walk on on the line have a strong character and strong sense of being," Vrzal said. "They (the coaches) see a work ethic in you, they see it in a kid who can push himself and try to make himself better."

"As a lineman you have to be satisfied in the end product of the touchdown. You can't worry about the interviews and the TV camera. You just have to be satisfied in knowing that you were part of the line that got the touchdown."

Seniors

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that have gone undefeated through the regular season for three straight years. That's quite an accomplishment. A lot of these guys that were seniors have been a significant part of that."

Safety Tony Veland said the seniors' accomplishments were no surprise to them.

"We all got here as freshmen and set our goals," he said. "People might not think that's realistic as freshmen, but we put it all together and went out and did it. It was just hard work and dedication."

Osborne said he was very impressed with the team unity, which the seniors helped pull together.

"This year's team is one that I'll remember for many reasons," he said. "I've been very satisfied by the way they've been able to focus and pull together. They've been a team in the true sense of the word. They don't have any one specific area that's overwhelming, but they complement each other."

But most of the players agreed that they treated their last game like any other.

"I was feeling kind of sorry for myself because it was my last home game," quarterback Tommie Frazier said. "But I tried to put that out of my mind. The task at hand was Oklahoma. I couldn't really worry about this being my last game at Nebraska."

Center Aaron Graham agreed that he wanted to keep his emotions in check.

"It probably really hasn't hit me yet," he said. "I'm sure it will later. But we had to try to keep that stuff out of our mind and go out there and give our best effort."

It was a bittersweet ending for fullback Jeff Makovicka, who played only one series in the second half because of a possible bruised or fractured fibula.

"It was something I never tried not to think about all week," Makovicka said. "Now, it's kind of hit me. I didn't get to play very much, and it turned out to be an emotional game. Down the road, after the Fiesta Bowl, I'm sure all of us seniors will look back at it a lot more."

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