

End of the 8

By Mike Kluck

On Nov. 22, 1963, as a bullet ripped through the skull of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, the Oklahoma football team's plane touched down at Lincoln Municipal Airport.

When the Sooners arrived at their hotel, they rushed to their rooms to try to learn about Kennedy's death. At the same time, members of the Oklahoma and Nebraska football staffs and the Big Eight Conference gathered to decide the fate of the 43rd contest between the two schools.

Later that night in Washington, D.C., Kennedy's casket was removed from Air Force One, while in Lincoln the debate on playing football continued. Many times throughout the night, the game was canceled.

Finally, in the early-morning hours on Nov. 23, Oklahoma football coach Bud Wilkinson decided to call Robert F. Kennedy, the slain president's brother.

Wilkinson was a member of the President's Fitness Council, which was headed by Bobby Kennedy. And when the younger Kennedy said to go ahead and play the game, the decision was simple.

Later that day, the only college football game in the country kicked off in front of 38,362 fans at Memorial Stadium. When Nebraska emerged three hours later as a 29-20 victor, the biggest winner became the Big Eight Conference.

"That game signaled a change in the Big Eight Conference," said Wayne Duke, a former Big Eight commissioner. "The conference literally changed from being known as Oklahoma and the seven dwarfs to one where five different teams won conference titles in the 1960s."

Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and Oklahoma all won or shared a championship from 1960 to 1969.

But it was Duke who in July 1963 made one of the bigger changes in the conference by making the Big Eight the official name of the conference. Up until that time, the conference had been called the Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association. Because most people called the MVIAA the Big Eight anyway, Duke said the change was simple.

Besides the 1963 Oklahoma-Nebraska game, Duke said the conference also was aided in 1954 when the Orange Bowl ceased its contract with the conference.

"The termination of the Orange Bowl brought a resurgence and a boom to the Big Eight," Duke said. "We were able to play a lot of different games in different places during that time.



Former Oklahoma running back and Heisman Trophy winner Billy Sims tries to elude Nebraska defensive back Earl Everett.

DN file photo

"... We also felt we had a powerful force emerging with the conference."

That powerful force continued to develop throughout the 1960s, Duke said, thanks to the coaches' promotion of the conference.

Bob Devaney, former Nebraska coach and athletic director, said the coaches at the time felt the Big Eight had become something special.

Former Colorado coach and athletic director Eddie Crowder said selling the Big Eight at that time had been simple.

"During that time there were no other professional sports among the Big Eight schools," Crowder said. "For example, the West Coast is very competitive with college and professional football, which was not true of the Big Eight schools.

"The focus of attention among the Big Eight schools is their college football programs. That focus of attention has contributed to a great extent to the strength of the conference. Most athletes would far prefer to

go to a school with great loyalty."

The selling, dedication and commitment began to pay off for the conference by the end of the 1960s. More teams began moving onto the national scene, starting with Missouri.

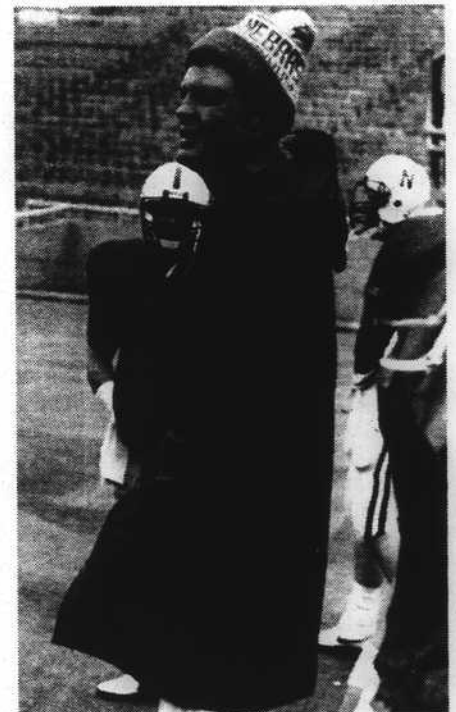
In 1969, Missouri, coached by football legend Dan Devine from 1958 to 1970, tied Nebraska for the league crown. But more importantly, the Tigers became the team of the '60s, not losing more than three games during any season that decade.

The Tigers' success at the end of the decade gave Big Eight fans a preview of what was to come in the next few years.

The '70s started with Nebraska winning its first national title to become the Big Eight's first national champion with a 17-12 win in the Orange Bowl. But each of the other seven conference teams had at least four losses.

At the end of the 1971 season, the story was different.

The Big Eight reached its pinnacle by televising "The Game of the Century,"



DN file photo

Nebraska coach Tom Osborne conducts practice at Memorial Stadium.