



DN file photo

Former Nebraska All-American linebacker Broderick Thomas signals to a Memorial Stadium crowd.

involving No. 1 Nebraska and No. 2 Oklahoma on Nov. 25 in Norman, Okla.

The game, which had been moved to Thanksgiving to get a national television audience, featured a 72-yard punt return for a touchdown by Nebraska's Heisman Trophy wingback, Johnny Rodgers, and a 74-yard Husker drive in the final seven minutes that ended with the go-ahead touchdown.

The victory enabled an undefeated Nebraska team to represent the Big Eight in the Orange Bowl on Jan. 1, 1972. Then when Colorado, Nebraska and Oklahoma all won their bowl games and Stanford upset previously-undefeated Michigan, it prompted new Big Eight director Chuck Neinas to hand out bumper stickers that said, "1 + 2 + 3 = Big 8." It was the first and only time that one conference had had three teams at the top of the national poll.

Duke, who had resigned in November 1971 as commissioner, said he had no

regrets about not being in charge at the end of the 1971 season.

"I often tease Chuck about coming in and getting 'The Game of the Century,' plus the three teams finishing atop the polls," Duke said. "But I agree with something Dan Devine said. It was a DC-3 conference when I went into it, and it was a four-engine jet when I left."

Oklahoma again would lead the Big Eight to the top of the polls as it won back-to-back championships in 1974 and '75.

But the '70s weren't just about national champions. In 1978, Oklahoma's Billy Sims captured the Heisman Trophy just as Rodgers had in 1972. Also in the decade, the Big Eight produced four Outland and two Lombardi trophy winners.

The parity the conference saw in the '60s, however, ended in the '70s. Either Nebraska or Oklahoma finished atop the conference every



DN file photo

Former Nebraska I-back and Heisman Trophy winner Mike Rozier escapes a Kansas tackler, while quarterback Turner Gill watches. Rozier ran for 285 yards in the game in 1983.

season except 1976, when Oklahoma State, Colorado and Oklahoma all shared the crown.

That dominance continued throughout the 1980s as Nebraska and Oklahoma either won or shared the crown until 1989, when Colorado emerged as champion.

Even though the national championships diminished in the 1980s, with Oklahoma winning the league's only crown in 1985, the conference continued to shine.

Nebraska finished the 1980s with a 103-20 record, the nation's best record over the 10 years. The Huskers had arguably the best team of the decade in 1983, but a failed two-point conversion prevented the Huskers from giving

Tom Osborne his first national crown.

The conference, however, was highlighted throughout the '80s by individuals more than teams.

Triplets emerged in 1983 when Nebraska's offense averaged 50 points a game and boasted three Heisman candidates, including quarterback Turner Gill, wide receiver Irving Fryar and running back and eventual-Heisman winner Mike Rozier.

The triplets re-emerged in 1988 at Oklahoma State, when the Cowboys had quarterback Mike Gundy, All-American wide receiver Hart Lee Dykes and running back Barry Sanders, that year's Heisman winner. The Cowboys finished the '88 season with a 10-2 record, the third time in the 1980s that Oklahoma State had won at least 10 games. During the '88 season, Sanders set an NCAA record by rushing for 2,628 yards, including four 300-plus yard games.

But the most visible player in the Big Eight in the 1980s may have been

Oklahoma linebacker Brian Bosworth, better known as "The Boz." Despite his spiked and colorful haircut, Bosworth won the Butkus Award in 1985 and 1986. But after testing positive for steroids and being banned by the NCAA from the 1987 Orange Bowl, Bosworth forfeited his senior year of eligibility and jumped to the pro ranks.

The low point of the decade for the Big Eight, however, was the demise of the Kansas, Kansas State and Missouri programs. In 1988 and 1989 the three schools won a combined 11 games while losing 54. Each school had at least three different coaches in the decade.

The end of the '80s sparked the emergence of the Colorado program,

as the Buffaloes won the conference crown in 1989 for the first time since 1961.

The first half of the 1990s has started again with the Big Eight Conference making runs at the national title. Colorado won the conference and national crown in 1990, and Osborne won his first crown last year with Nebraska.

But possibly the biggest highlight of the 1990s may have been the resurgence of the Kansas and Kansas State programs. The Wildcats, who won just 21 games in the 1980s, finished the 1995 season with its third-straight nine-win season.

With four conference teams going to bowl games, current Big Eight commissioner Carl James said that the Big Eight's final year could top its glory year of 1971.

But as the sun sets and the lights are turned off at Sun Devil Stadium on Jan. 2 after the Fiesta Bowl, so will end the Big Eight football conference.

“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.”

Former Big Eight commissioner Wayne Duke