

The Silver Years

After 2½ decades of record-breaking seasons, Tom Osborne is still keeping the Huskers in championship condition

BY DAVID WILSON
Senior Reporter

Tom Osborne can't get away from the game he loves. He came to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1962 to pursue master's and doctoral degrees in educational psychology, but Osborne wasn't ready to give up his 10-year football career. So he contacted newly-hired Coach Bob Devaney about a position as a graduate assistant.

"When I came here, I really didn't plan to be a coach," Osborne said. "I approached Devaney primarily because I knew just breaking cold turkey in athletics would be hard for me."

Two hundred forty-two wins later, Osborne owns two national championship rings and 12 conference titles. As he enters his 25th year as Nebraska's head coach, he has never won fewer than nine games and has led his team to a bowl game every year.

An outstanding athlete at Hastings High School, Osborne starred at Hastings College before playing three seasons in the NFL with the San Francisco 49ers and the Washington Redskins.

Though it was a big part of his life, Osborne said, he thought he would be ready to leave athletics after finishing graduate school. But even with his doctorate in hand, Osborne wasn't ready to leave.

"There was pressure on both ends," Osborne said. "The academic side wanted me to be a graduate adviser. I couldn't

do both. So at age 28, after two or three years of straddling the fence, I just decided that I would really miss football too much. The academic side of it looked more secure, but I just wasn't ready to give up football."

Osborne went to Devaney in 1968 and told him he'd need a \$10,000 contract to survive financially. Devaney agreed and offered Osborne a position as a full-time assistant. Five years later, Devaney retired and Osborne took over as the Cornhuskers' head coach. The 60-year-old Osborne is the nation's winningest active coach and ranks seventh on the all-time chart.

"I doubted I would last more than five years," Osborne said. "The fortunate thing was that Bob was the athletic director, and Bob had also selected me as the coach. So I knew that I had complete backing there."

But Devaney left big shoes to fill. Over an 11-year career, Devaney compiled a 101-20-2 record at Nebraska and led the Huskers to national titles in 1970 and 1971. In his final season in 1972, the Huskers finished 9-2-1 and won the Big Eight Championship.

As a first-year head coach in 1973, Osborne also led NU to a 9-2-1 finish. But the two seasons, Osborne said, were perceived quite differently.

"Bob had a certain place in people's hearts," Osborne said. "So I just knew there would be inevitable comparisons. I wouldn't say that I couldn't make it, I just felt that the odds were pretty good."

In his final years as an assistant, Osborne was a finalist for jobs at South Dakota and Texas Tech and was also offered a job at Augustana College in South Dakota. But he couldn't turn down Devaney's offer.

"The only place I've ever been is here, and the only guy I've ever coached under is Bob Devaney," Osborne said. "When Bob said, 'I'd like to have you replace me,' I said, 'Here's a sure deal.' I knew I'd always regret it if I didn't."

Not everything has remained constant through Osborne's career.

"I think the thing that has changed the most is the fact that our culture has changed," Osborne said. "One of the difficult things as a coach is many times we're being held accountable for behavioral standards that were prevalent in the '60s and early '70s that if you look at our culture, you don't see that going on. So as a result we spend a good portion of our time dealing with personal baggage. Players are carrying more baggage and yet athletically, they are more gifted."

Osborne has dealt with his share of off-the-field problems involving his players, yet has still maintained a 74 percent graduation rate—ranking first in the Big 12 Conference. But things are not getting any easier for today's student-athlete, Osborne said.

"Players are having to jump through more hoops," Osborne said. "I admire today's athlete. He's walking a fine line most of the time."

Along with winning national championships in 1994 and 1995 came more national attention, Osborne said. But the criticism, Osborne said, did not have a negative effect on his players.

"The more heat there was, the more they pulled together," he said.

Osborne attributes his success over the years to good player work ethics and a top-notch walk-on program. And despite a near 40-year age difference, Osborne said, he typically does not have a problem relating to players.

"I think if you are generally interested in a person, they will respond to that," Osborne said, "even though I'm a white guy from a small town in Nebraska."

Turner Gill, who played for the Huskers from 1980 through 1983, said Osborne can usually relate to anyone. Gill, who threw for 3,317 yards in his career at Nebraska, returned to Lincoln in 1992 to serve as the Huskers' quarterback coach.

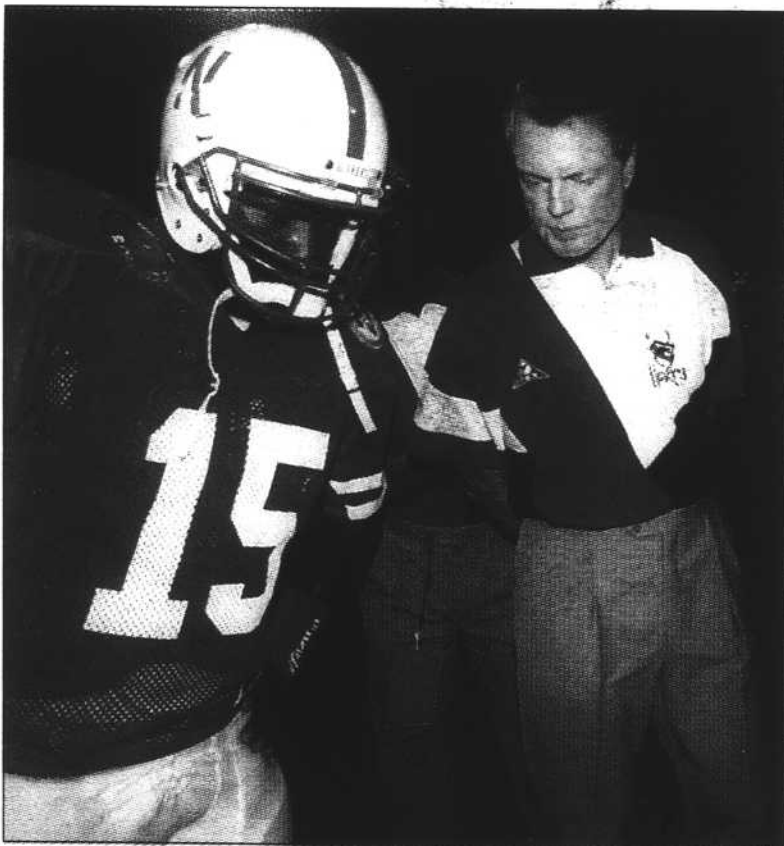
"I've been on both sides—as a player and also as a coach," Gill said. "I've learned a lot from him. Not just Xs and Os, but as a person and about life. In coaching, he wants to help the young kids to become better citizens in the United States—and he's done that."

In the three years he started at quarterback, Gill helped Nebraska to a 33-5 record and led the Huskers to three Orange Bowls. Osborne said the 1983 offense was one of the best he's ever coached. But the 1994 Husker squad might have been the best team he's coached.

"Probably the most satisfying year in coaching I've ever had was in '94," Osborne said. "We overcame a lot of injuries and we got about as much out of that team as we could."

After an undefeated season, Nebraska downed Miami in the Orange Bowl 24-17 and Osborne won his first national championship on Jan. 1, 1995.

"Winning the game against Miami in the Orange Bowl



QB not among concerns

BY ANTONE OSEKA
Senior Reporter

Starting quarterback is usually a concern of a head coach. Not for Tom Osborne.

The Nebraska coach is so comfortable with starting quarterback Scott Frost that he forgot to mention him during his rundown of the team during Media Day.

"We will have a quarterback this year," Osborne said after his oversight was brought to his attention.

Frost is solid in the starting role, but the big question is, who will be the backup? Osborne is leaning toward either junior Monte Christo or sophomore Frankie London.

"It looks like Monte Christo and Frankie would be the two guys in closest contention there," Osborne said. "It's not unlikely that one of the two freshmen might

enter into the picture somewhere."

Freshmen Eric Crouch and Bobby Newcombe might see some playing time this season. Crouch, from Millard North, and Newcombe, from Albuquerque, N.M., are two of the most talked about freshmen recruits this season.

The rest of the backfield is what worries Osborne. After Jay Sims' knee injury in the first scrimmage of the year and with Ahman Green's back problems, NU doesn't have a healthy I-back. If Green is healthy he should see most of the snaps by the season opener against Akron on Aug. 30.

"Offensively, the biggest concern we have is injuries to the running backs," said Osborne, who is celebrating his silver anniversary in coaching this season. "We lost some awfully good players to serious injury. We got through the spring game and I breathed a sigh of relief, then two days