

Governor, chancellor support retirement

BY ERIN GIBSON
Senior Reporter

Twenty-five years ago, then-NU President D.B. "Woody" Varner wrung his hands and stepped into a press conference after making a controversial recommendation.

Together with Nebraska coaching great Bob Devaney, Varner had suggested a young coach lead the Nebraska football program rolling off two consecutive national championship titles.

Wednesday, Varner again watched a teary-eyed legend step down and a promising new coach take the podium. But this time, he and wife, Paula, sat meekly among throngs of reporters and television cameras.

"He's made me look good for 25 years," Varner said with a quiet smile, adding he and Osborne have remained close friends since that first fateful day in 1972.

Many state and university leaders Wednesday shared stories of Osborne and his career. Some recalled the quality of his character and their surprise at his leaving the profession. Others noted his contributions to Nebraska during his lifetime in the state.

But University of Nebraska-Lincoln Chancellor James Moeser detailed more recent events: The decision-making process that led to Osborne's retirement and Frank Solich's new coaching position.

Moeser said Osborne asked to meet with him and Athletic Director Bill Byrne early in the football season. At that meeting, Osborne expressed his intent to retire this year, but he said he couldn't leave his coaching position without a promise his staff would remain intact.

"Tom Osborne's major concern when he spoke with us was that the character and quality of the football program remain intact," Moeser said. "He said, 'I don't want someone else coming in here and jerking my kids around by the face masks.'"

Osborne asked that, should he step down, the university name NU Running Backs Coach Solich as his successor.

"I made kind of a personal commitment to Tom at that time that I would support that," Moeser said.

After the meeting, Osborne didn't commit to retirement until just before the Big 12 championship game in San Antonio, Moeser said.

At that time, Byrne asked the Office of Affirmative Action if he could appoint Solich coach, per Osborne's request, without an outside search to fill the position. When the office approved the bypass of university policy, the

coaching change jelled.

Osborne knew he would soon play a different role in the Athletic Department.

But he promised to continue his university roles outside Memorial Stadium, Moeser said, including continuing to lead the UNL libraries fundraising effort with his wife, Nancy.

Gov. Ben Nelson said Wednesday he never knew Osborne played a role in a library charity.

"He and Nancy are modest people," Nelson said.

They have been, at least since Nelson attended graduate school with Osborne in 1964.

That year, the two young families moved in next door to each other at 1429 and 1431 C St. They shared a small laundry room and a few laughs when Nelson tried to make homemade wine there.

Nelson, who said he was surprised by Osborne's announcement Wednesday, wants to see his friend and ask him one question about retirement: "Does this mean you and I get to hunt and fish together more than we have in the past?"

Now, the two grab their guns and fishing lines whenever their busy schedules afford, Nelson said. In July, the two fished together last on a lake in McCook. Nelson claims he caught the biggest fish, but says Osborne - who wore a silly, floppy hat out on the lake - would argue otherwise.

But no matter who has caught the biggest fish or who has brought down the most birds, Nelson said Osborne won all contests years ago.

"Tom Osborne has done what is the most difficult thing in the world," Nelson said. "That is to follow a very successful person in his field and do even better."

NU Regent Robert Allen of Hastings said he remembered when he doubted Osborne could match Devaney's coaching prowess. And, after the second year Nebraska lost a football game to Oklahoma, Allen told Osborne about it in a letter.

"I told him he was too predictable," Allen said, who worked in a retail business in Hastings.

Osborne wrote back, "I think I know more about retail than you know about football," Allen said.

Allen said he's glad Osborne stood up for himself those many years ago, because he now knows Osborne as one of the best college coaches in history. And he hates to see him go.

Nelson agreed: "Do I wish he was still coach? Yes. So does everyone else in Nebraska."

But, he said, "It's a wise person who knows when to hang it up."

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