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Former players remember Osborne as father, mentor, want him to exit happy

BY TED TAYLOR
 Senior Reporter

Father, adviser, counselor and friend.

Those are the words former Husker players used Wednesday to describe Head Coach Tom Osborne.

Some of those players went on to the NFL, others saw their playing days end with a final play at Memorial Stadium, but, for many, strapping on the white and red helmet for T.O. was more than just a football experience, it was a life experience.

"He was both a coach and a father figure for me," Denver Broncos lineman Neil Smith said after hearing the news of Osborne's retirement. "He was there all those years I was away from home."

Osborne was able to exude a positive, supportive feeling toward players even during his first few years as head coach, said Tom Vering, a Husker linebacker from 1975-1979.

"Even back then he was almost like a father figure," he said. "When you needed a stern talking to, he would give it to you ... with words that put life into perspective."

Steve Taylor, who just last season retired from an eight-year career in the Canadian Football League, agreed.

"He was such a great influence on my life professionally and personally," said Taylor, who played for Osborne from 1985-89. "And probably 95 percent of his players got that from him."

And the players got that from a calm, cool coach who, the players confirmed, never had to go beyond the limits to get his point across.

Players said he never even cussed at them.

"He didn't have to," Vering said. "Just his presence around the players, what he said, his tone of voice ... what he said, you went out and did."

Smith recalled a half-time speech

"He was both a coach and a father for me. He was there all those years I was away from home."

NEIL SMITH
 Denver Broncos lineman

Osborne gave after an unHusker-like first half against Iowa State.

"He came in and said 'Dad gummit, we need to play better,'" Smith said. "And that's as close I ever heard of him cursing."

"But he caught the eye of everyone in that room with that statement and we came out and dominated the rest of the game."

"Those are the types of things you never forget."

Smith called the coach's decision "very surprising," but he understood why Osborne decided to call this year his last.

"I think you come to a crossroads where you know exactly what you want to do in life," he said. "He just came to the point where it was his time (to go.)"

Johnny Rodgers, the most recognized name in Husker football history, said he felt a loss after hearing Osborne's news Wednesday.

"I feel like I am losing a coach myself," the 1972 Heisman Trophy winner said, "even though I haven't been playing for 20 years."

Vering said the news conference Osborne held Tuesday where retirement was mentioned gave him an indication the 25-year Husker head coach was thinking of calling it quits.

"I don't know if anyone in the state would say there is a good time for Coach Osborne to retire," he said, "but this is probably the best time to do it."

"If he had gone on for another five or 10 years, he probably would have regretted even more all the time he has spent away from his family."

Rodgers said the news was "sort of sad," but probably the best for Osborne's health.

"It has to be more of a health concern than a willingness to bow out," he said. "Sixty years old isn't really that old, but it's probably time for him to take a little rest."


Husker fans should take heart, Rodgers added, people were worried about continuing the success of the program when a young Tom Osborne took the reigns from the venerable Bob Devaney in 1973.

"Frank, having been around him for the last 19 years, might bring even bigger and greater things," Rodgers said. "That might sound hard to believe, but when coach Devaney left, people were saying the same thing."

And regardless what happens in this year's Orange Bowl game against Tennessee, Osborne's career at Nebraska will come to an end on a high note.

"All good things come to an end," Smith said.

Thank you Coach Tom Osborne for all you have given to the Lincoln community and the State of Nebraska!



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