

Nebraska took high road to victory

Osborne's last season marked by intensity

BY MIKE KLUCK
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MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — Nebraska wasn't supposed to be playing in the 1998 Orange Bowl.

The dynasty was supposed to be over after winning back-to-back national championships in 1994 and 1995. An 11-2 season in 1996 was rumored to be the first steps to the Cornhuskers falling back within the pack.

Colorado, after all, had talent and experience coming back, and then there was Big 12 Champion Texas, which returned James Brown at quarterback and Ricky Williams at running back.

But nobody knew about the focus the Huskers had.

"Starting last January, this was one of the most focused groups of players I've ever been around," Nebraska Coach Tom Osborne said after the Huskers' 42-17 victory over Tennessee in the Orange Bowl Jan. 2.

"They knew exactly where they wanted to be this Jan. 2nd. The reason we were here was not by accident. Some of the guys here a lot of guys in that locker room, you know, made a commitment to get here, worked very hard in the offseason, and they worked hard this fall."

And nobody knew that this was going to be Tom Osborne's last season.

Osborne didn't announce his retirement until Dec. 10, but said he had been considering retirement since the beginning of the season.

However, Osborne didn't want to announce his retirement until May.

"I would have much preferred to have gone away in the spring," Osborne said after the bowl game. "I think an ideal scenario for me would have been to go through recruiting, go through spring ball, and then disappear in May."

Still, when the Huskers opened their season on a steamy Saturday in August against a team nicknamed the Zips, nobody knew what to expect.

Even after Nebraska rolled to a

59-14 victory over Akron and gained 644 yards, people still didn't know what to expect.

Akron's two touchdowns late in the second half, although not coming against NU's No. 1 defense, still gave senior defensive tackle Jason Peter some concern.

"The way we played today won't cut it once we really start getting through the season," Peter said after the contest. "If we play like this against Washington, we will lose."

Before the Huskers could face the Huskies, they first had to face Central Florida, a program competing in its second season at the Division I-A level.

But the Golden Knights were no slouches for the Huskers, taking a 17-14 lead at halftime before losing 28-24.

The Central Florida game also created the most controversy for Osborne, who put in backup quarterback Frankie London in the second quarter. London led the Huskers in an eight-play, 65-yard touchdown drive to give NU its first lead of the game.

Osborne said the move was predetermined before the game, but when senior quarterback Scott Frost returned in the next series, he was greeted by a chorus of boos from the Husker faithful.

"The thing I want to get clear to everyone who was in that stadium, what we are trying to do is make ourselves a better football team," Osborne said. "We are not demoting Scott Frost; we are putting in Frankie London because we wanted him to play when the game was tight."

Frost sent the boobirds into hiding the following week when NU took on then-No. 2 Washington in Seattle.

Nebraska scored on three of its first four possessions to jump to a 21-0 lead and went on to a 27-14 victory.

Frost scored the Huskers first two touchdowns on runs of 34 and 30 yards and finished the day with 97 yards on the ground and 88 yards through the air.

Junior I-back Ahman Green and junior fullback Joel Makovicka each rushed for 129 yards as the Huskers sent notice to the rest of the nation.

"I think a lot of people had written us off, so this was a statement by the team," Frost said. "People are going to have to watch out for us."

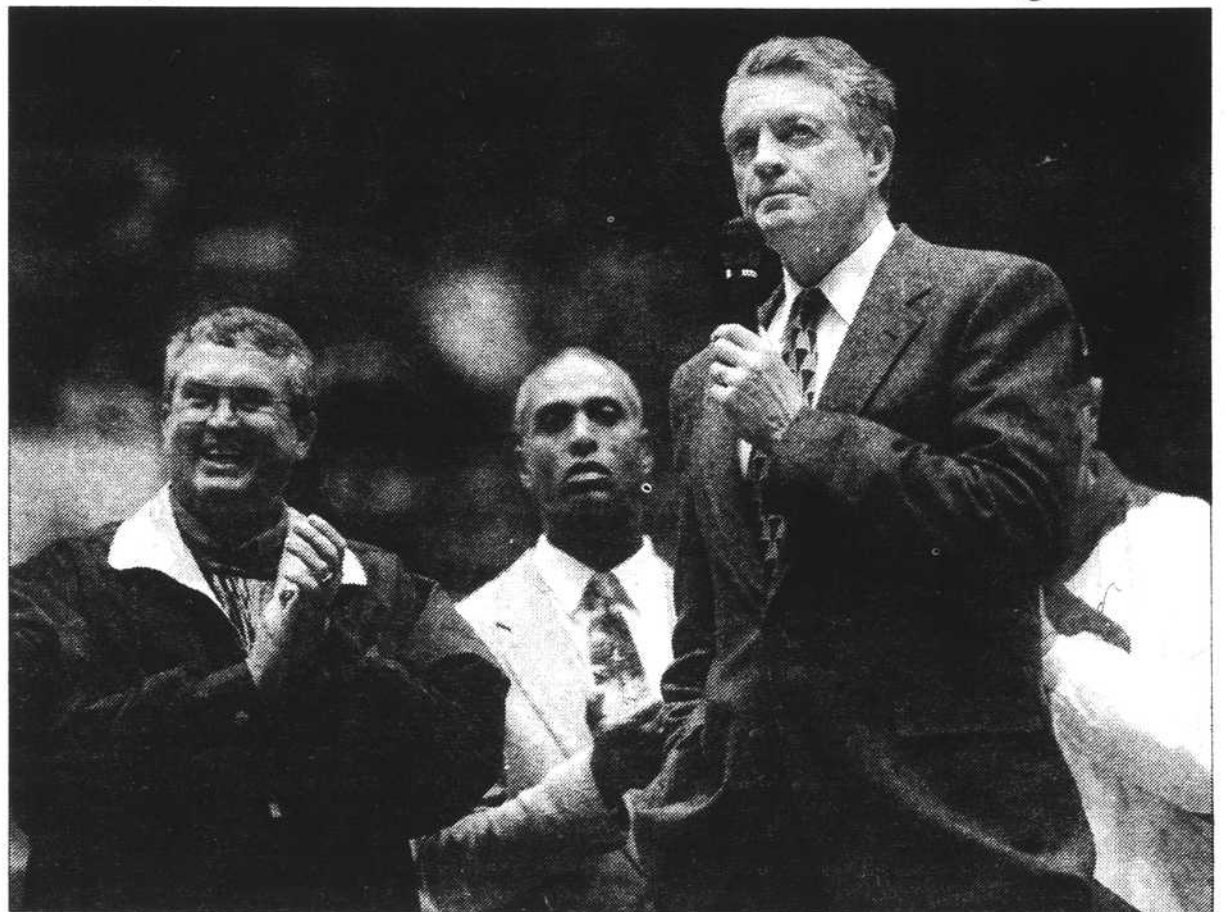
The win jumped the Huskers from No. 7 in The Associated Press poll and sixth in the coaches' poll to No. 3 in both polls.

It also set up another battle with top-20 opponent Kansas State.

Before the game Osborne said the Wildcats would be the Huskers toughest opponent remaining on their schedule. But Nebraska had little trouble in a 56-26 victory.

Green continued on his pace with his third game over 100 yards. Green finished the game with 193 yards and four touchdowns.

The junior from Omaha Central would finish the season with 12 straight games with more than 100 yards rushing. The only game he had with fewer than 100 yards was against Akron, where he ran for 99. Green finished with 2,083 yards including



SCOTT McCLURG/DN

WITH NU ATHLETIC DIRECTOR Bill Byrne at his side, Nebraska Coach Tom Osborne addresses the crowd at the Bob Devaney Sports Center as the Huskers celebrate their national championship.

206 in the Orange Bowl.

"The past few games have showed us that when we start rolling we are a very hard team to stop," Green said after the Kansas State game. "We proved to ourselves that we can get the job done and we plan to get stronger every week."

Although Nebraska's 49-21 victory over Baylor in a rainstorm in Waco, Texas, appeared to be a typical NU win, Osborne was disappointed in the defensive reserves, who gave up two late touchdowns to the Bears, including one on the last play of the game.

The defense took note, posting a shutout the next week against Texas Tech in a 29-0 homecoming win at Memorial Stadium.

The Blackshirts held the Red Raiders to 127 yards of total offense.

"I thought their defense was every bit as good as I thought they would be," Texas Tech Coach Spike Dykes said afterwards.

Nebraska's performance compiled with then-No. 1 Penn State's one-point victory over Minnesota moved Nebraska into the top position in both polls.

The Huskers rolled over their next two opponents with a 35-0 victory over Kansas and a 69-7 win against Oklahoma that marked Osborne's 250th victory as NU's head coach.

Osborne also was the coach who took the shortest time to reach the 250-win plateau — just 25 seasons and 302 games to reach the mark.

"No one wanted to let Coach Osborne down today," senior defensive end Grant Wistrom said after the game. "Although he downplays it, we knew that 250 wins meant a lot to him. He is the greatest coach in college football, and it would have been a shame to ruin his chance at 250 victories today."

Although there were fireworks after Osborne's 250th victory, the Huskers provided the fireworks in victory No. 251.

With no timeouts remaining,

“

*... We wouldn't let down
with our season
on the line.”*

TOM OSBORNE
NU head coach

Nebraska trailed the upstart Tigers by seven with the ball 77 yards away from the endzone and 62 seconds remaining in the game.

Frost drove the Huskers in nine plays to the Missouri 12-yard line.

Then Nebraska pulled off the play that will live in Husker history forever.

Frost hit Shevin Wiggins with a pass on the goal line, but immediately the Missouri defender knocked the ball free. As Wiggins was falling to the ground, he kicked the ball up. The ball came back to the turf, and a diving true freshman receiver, Matt Davison, caught the ball inches before it hit the field.

Nebraska made the extra point and went on to win the game 45-38 in overtime when Frost scored on a 12-yard run.

"The ball was just a couple of inches from the ground," Davison said. "A couple of inches from no national championship."

Despite the win, the Huskers weren't able to maintain their hold on the top spot in the rankings and fell to third behind Florida State and Michigan.

NU took out its frustration on Iowa State the next week, scoring 63 points in the first half while rolling to a 77-14 victory.

Nebraska closed out its regular season with a 27-24 victory over Colorado, which also gave NU the Big 12 North Division Championship.

But the score was closer than the

game indicated as Nebraska led 27-10 with five minutes remaining.

The Buffaloes rallied with a touchdown, an onside kick, another touchdown, a defensive stand and just one yard short of a first down at midfield that could have put CU in position for a tying field goal.

"On offense, I am disappointed because we had a chance to go up 35-10 and put them away but we didn't," Osborne said. "On defense I am disappointed that we weren't able to stop them on two late drives."

Nebraska's last stop before a possible national championship game was a trip to San Antonio and the Alamodome for a game against Texas A&M in the Big 12 Championship.

The Huskers made sure there was no possible chance for an upset — like 1996's loss to Texas — as NU rolled to a 37-3 halftime lead and 54-15 victory.

But it was last year's Big 12 Championship loss to Texas, which knocked the Huskers out of the national championship picture and gave NU its focus for this season and a return trip to Miami and the Orange Bowl.

"Our battle cry throughout summer workouts was that we always had a big chip on our shoulders with what happened to us in St. Louis," Wistrom said. "It was what I focused on in the heat during the summer. We were convinced it wasn't going to happen again, that we wouldn't let down with our season on the line."

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