

On the road again

Coaches enjoy the thrill of the chase

- Turner Gill
- Nelson Barnes
- Frank Solich
- Craig Bohl

Frequent Flyers

A typical week of recruiting for Nebraska coaches means racking up a lot of miles.



Illustrated here are the paths of the Husker coaches Jan. 25-29.



MICHAEL GARBER/DN



Craig Bohl
Linebackers
Recruiting Area -
Southeast

"Recruiting is a lot of time and effort - and that is just the way it is."

BY MIKE KLUCK
Special Projects Reporter

Nebraska Offensive Line Coach Milt Tenopir remembers the recruiting trip when he woke up in a Las Vegas hotel room, but thought he was at home.

In his state of slumber, he walked the same path he normally walked at his house to go to the bathroom.

But by the time Tenopir realized he wasn't in his home, the door to his hotel room had already closed behind him. Tenopir was left standing in the hotel hallway with nothing but his underwear on and had to convince a hotel security guard to let him back into his own room.

Ask any of the 112 Division I-A football coaches who have spent the last six weeks traveling highways, maneuvering through airports and waking up in hotel rooms and they will likely give you a story similar to Tenopir's.

And they do all this in the pursuit of getting a star 17- or 18-year-old high school football senior to sign a letter of commitment to their university on signing day - the first Wednesday in February.

A tough job

Recruiting is a job that most college football coaches are untrained to do when they start coaching. But no matter how good of a football coach they are, if they don't succeed at recruiting, they won't be coaching very long.

"You've got to experience recruiting as you are in it," Nebraska Head Coach Frank Solich said. "You become aware of how important it is - but you are constantly learning. To this day I'm still learning."

But recruiting is not just a learning process. It is a test of survival - physically and mentally. Coaches must deal with cross-country travel, weather and battling other coaches for a recruit.

Mentally, recruiting stresses the mind. Nebraska coaches have become accustomed to winning 95 percent of their games on the football field, but during a typical recruiting season in which coaches are dealing with 20 or more athletes, a coach would be lucky to get 20 percent of the athletes to commit.

Recruiting is not just a two-week job in December and January. It's a yearlong process of watching tapes, making and keeping contacts, and then making decisions while trying to prepare for a football game.

"Recruiting is a lot of time and

effort - and that is just how it is," Nebraska Linebackers Coach Craig Bohl said. "You're spending time away from your family, you're not home a consistent amount, and then the travel wears on you."

Unpredictable success

Nebraska coaches have had success throughout the years recruiting, but not comparable to the success on the field.

Most of the Husker recruiting classes over the past 20 years have ranked outside of the top 10 as determined by many recruiting analysts, but the football program has consistently been in the top 10 in the nation.

Entering the national championship seasons of 1994 and 1995, the Cornhuskers didn't boast recruiting classes ranked in the top 10. This year, Nebraska has a solid recruiting class, and many analysts have predicted that it could be a class in the top five.

"It's very unpredictable," Solich said. "There are many reasons a person decides to come or not come to your school. There are guys that I have felt we had a good shot at and felt like Nebraska is the best place for them. Then at the last minute it falls through on you."

The Nebraska coaches said the first thing to do in recruiting is to start with a wide base of athletes who are either interested in attending NU or who are athletes that Husker coaches would like to see playing for Nebraska.

Once the coaches have their list, they begin narrowing down the athletes by talking to them, their parents, coaches, teachers, girlfriends, etc.

"You try to talk to as many people you can to find out about their background," said Nebraska Quarterbacks Coach Turner Gill.

The right athlete

Since the coaches recruit throughout the country, one of the first things they must determine from a player is whether he is comfortable with leaving his home and area of the country to travel to Nebraska.

Also, during this period of time - which is usually at the end of summer and throughout fall - NU coaches are determining which players would fit into the Husker system.

Many of the NU coaches said although they are trying to get some of the best athletes in the country, they are also looking for athletes that work hard and believe in team commitment.

"Everybody can sign a kid,"

Nebraska Defensive Ends Coach Nelson Barnes said. "You want to make sure the kids you sign are those you want to sign."

Most information about a recruit is learned throughout the football season, which involves calling coaches and kids after the Huskers finish their daily practice.

"A lot of times my wife will complain during the season because she will say I'm home, but I'm not at home," said Nebraska Receivers Coach Ron Brown. "Meaning that although I'm home, I'm not really concentrating or spending time with the family. Since I recruit a lot of the kids in the West Coast region, I can be up to midnight making recruiting calls."

By December, the NU coaches will have their list narrowed to an average of 20 or 30 athletes per coach. The coaches said the Big 12 Championship game and preparation for a bowl game take away time from being on the road.

But when they are able to hit the road, it becomes an enduring process.

It's no vacation

Brown said he remembers the year he was recruiting a kid from St. Louis, who later decided to go to Tennessee. Brown was in St. Louis for a recruiting trip but missed talking to the athlete and flew to his next visit in Phoenix.

Upon arrival in Phoenix, Brown called the athlete in St. Louis. He wasn't home, but the athlete's mom said if Brown was at his house at a certain time, he could speak to him for 20 minutes. Brown caught the next flight back to St. Louis and was at the athlete's house at the desired time - but the athlete never showed up.

"I had a nice visit with his mother," Brown said.

After the visit, he proceeded to catch the next flight to Phoenix and continued with his recruiting.

Nebraska coaches said they can't eliminate those wasted trips where recruits don't show up, but they try to be as prepared as possible so those things don't happen.

But even when those mishaps don't happen, a recruiting day can be a long one for a coach.

Solich said one time he was recruiting in the East Coast and was in three or four different cities and states in the same day before finally checking into a hotel room.

The next morning, he received a phone call from then-Head Coach Tom Osborne, who asked him where he was, and Solich couldn't remember.

"It was kind of embarrassing," Solich said. "I just kept stalling him, hoping I would remember

where I was. But it's not that uncommon when you hit so many different homes and states."

Meeting new people

Although recruiting is somewhat of a numbers game, Nebraska coaches said recruiting involves developing relationships.

"You meet so many families and young people when you're recruiting and you hear how football impacts their life," Brown said. "There are also a lot of heartache stories out there, and as a coach you almost become like a surrogate parent."

Gill said the success of recruiting is meeting people, spending time with them and then being able to talk to them. He said it is important to determine if Nebraska should be in the kids' future.

"Nebraska is not the place for everybody," Gill said.

Since the recruiting process is such a stressful time for athletes, Nebraska coaches said it is important for them to have solid relationships with the athletes.

"The pressure on these athletes is so much at times," Brown said. "Overnight these kids are becoming public figures."

Because of new pressure on the athletes, Brown said, he doesn't enjoy the hype that goes into recruiting. The number of recruiting publications



Ron Brown
Receivers
Recruiting Area -
Southwest

"It's important to have everybody on the same page. If you are going to have a recruit visit a professor, you want to make sure they are there to meet him."

and fans' interest in recruiting have grown tremendously over the years, he said.

With the pressure on the kids, Brown said, relationships often deteriorate with the kids he has worked with.

"This is an intense time for a few months," Brown said.

Despite the intensity, the travel, the late hours, the pressure, the disappointments and all the other factors that go with recruiting, Nebraska coaches said they still enjoy the job - all except maybe the time on the road or time away from the family.

"You meet a lot of tremendous people out there," Solich said. "Sometimes it's frustrating, but you meet a lot of good people, and to me that's enjoyable."



Milt Tenopir
Offensive Line
Recruiting Area -
Southwest

"Being able to relate to people - that's what recruiting is about."



Frank Solich
Head football coach
Recruiting Area -
entire country

"No question that it is important that you have coaches on your staff willing to work hard on the recruiting process."



Nelson Barnes
Rush ends
Recruiting Area -
Southwest

"You try to convince and show the kids that it would be an honor to have them in your program."