



T hree & O ut

NU's national championship season filled with drama

BY SAM MCKEWON
Senior Reporter

Booing fans. A decisive upset. A redeemed quarterback. A miracle foot. A near collapse. A retiring legend. Crazy polls. And finally, in the dead of night, a national championship by the narrowest of margins.

The Nebraska football team saw it all in 1997.

In a year that seemed like business as usual, and ended as anything but, the Cornhuskers took their fans on a wild ride for their third national championship in four years. And while there were no arrests, no media embarrassments or team turmoil, NU overcame plenty of adversity on the field.

The Huskers also had to deal with knowing they would lose their coach of 25 years, Tom Osborne, after the season. Simply put, Nebraska took Osborne out on the top.

Of course, Nebraska's run to the title began in typical fashion, a blowout win against a lesser team. For the Huskers, the opening of a season has rarely been any other way.

Nebraska 59, Akron 14

Nebraska missed a field goal on the opening drive of the game against Akron.

That was pretty much the highlight of the day for the Zips.

Using its regular dose of option football, NU thrashed Akron 59-14 in front of 75,124 fans at Memorial Stadium.

The offense rolled for the Huskers, piling up 644 yards on a smaller, outmanned Akron defense and scoring on six straight possessions.

The quarterbacks shined for Nebraska, compiling 408 total yards, including 172 passing yards.

"The offense was better today," quarterback Scott Frost said. "Everything just clicked better. I think we are ahead of where we were last season at this point."

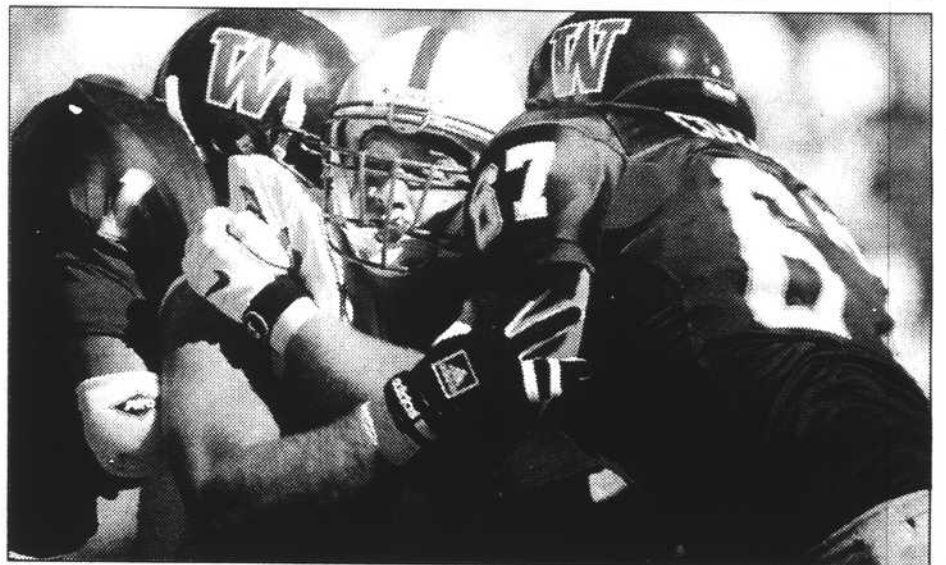
Akron was the first of two teams on Nebraska's schedule who were criticized for being easy opponents. The Zips may have fit that bill, but, as Central Florida would prove in the next game, looks can be deceiving.

Nebraska 38, Central Florida 24

The halftime score seemed like a mistake. But there it was high atop the north endzone: Central Florida 17, Nebraska 14.

But the No. 7 Huskers rebounded in the second half and hung on for a 38-24 victory in front of 75,327 fans at Memorial Stadium.

Nebraska contained UCF quarterback Daunte Culpepper enough in the last 30 min-



PHOTOS BY MATT MILLER/DN

TOP: NU JUNIOR FULLBACK JOEL MACKOVICKA carries the ball against Washington early in the season. Mackovicka rushed for nearly 700 yards last season.

BOTTOM: NU'S GRANT WISTRUM won the Lombardi Award last season, given to the top defensive lineman. Wistrom was drafted by the St. Louis Rams with the sixth pick in this year's NFL Draft.

utes — although he still threw for 318 yards — and scored 21 points for the 14-point win.

"I was somewhat concerned it was that close," Osborne said.

The game was punctuated by a cadre of booing fans who heckled Frost in the first half. They called for Frankie London, who had led the Huskers to a touchdown on the Golden Knights in the first half.

Osborne said he would not demote Frost regardless of the fans and regardless of how maligned he might be.

Frost showed his detractors one week later just how good he and his Nebraska team could be.

Nebraska 27, Washington 14

Husky Stadium in Seattle is one of the loudest sports venues in the nation, but its Washington fans never had a chance to roar.

Nebraska jumped out to a 21-0 lead against No. 2 Washington and used a punishing running game to beat the Huskies 27-14 in front of 74,023 mostly silent fans at Husky Stadium.

"I think this is just a statement by the team," Frost said. "People are going to have to watch out for us."

Frost scored two touchdowns in the first quarter, one on a quarterback draw and another on a bootleg option. NU took a 21-7 lead into halftime.

UW cut that lead to 21-14 in the third quarter. The Huskies lost their top quarter-

back, Brock Huard in the first quarter, but freshman Marquis Tuiaosopo threw for 272 yards in a backup role.

It wasn't until Joel Makovicka scampered 43 yards on a fullback dive from the NU 3-yard line that the Huskers put the game away.

After a week layoff, Nebraska would play another tough opponent. Nobody knew how tough they were until the end of the season.

Nebraska 56, Kansas State 26

Kansas State lost one game in 1997. It was to Nebraska, in a game that proved how good the Huskers could be.

No. 3 NU thrashed the No. 17 Wildcats 56-26 in front of 75,856 fans at Memorial Stadium in a game that was never close after KSU tied it at 7-7 in the first quarter.

"This is a nice hurdle to have behind us," Osborne said.

Junior I-back Ahman Green scampered for 193 yards and four touchdowns against Kansas State, which fell to 3-1 on the season. NU improved to 4-0.

The Huskers dominated both sides of the ball, racking up 473 yards on offense and holding KSU to 260 total yards. Wildcat quarterback Michael Bishop was intercepted twice in the game.

After two wins over ranked teams, Nebraska settled in for two lesser opponents, the first being Baylor.