

NU to stay with run

BY ADAM KLINKER
Staff writer



There's a history behind Nebraska football's passing success against Kansas.

The veteran Husker squad is well aware of the eight- and nine-man fronts the Jayhawk defense is known to run at the Cornhuskers, usually discouraging many run attempts.

Of the top 10 pass efficiency rating games and passing yardage games in NU history, three have been against KU — more than any other team the Huskers have faced. Two of those have come in the last four seasons.

But there's pride at NU. There's pride in the long history of the running game, the very watchwords of the Husker offense.

Quarterback Bobby Newcombe said it takes pride to get up after two dismal running games and get right back on the NU rushing treadmill.

"We're not going to change anything we're doing right now," Newcombe said. "We're not going to go to the pass. We're not going to take away our running game. We're going to go into every game with the game plan that we've run in the games we've won."

Although the running game will remain the top weapon, Coach Frank Solich said he expected to run fewer options against Kansas and throw a few more passing plays into the mix, knowing KU's use of multiple defensive fronts and the past passing successes NU has had against the Jayhawks.

The latest big passing game against KU was Scott Frost's 254-yard, three-touchdown performance in 1996.

Solich said he knows KU will run

many eight-man defensive fronts, but he is not yet ready to deviate from the running game.

"We can expect any number of defensive fronts for them to major in," Solich said. "You've got to work a little bit of everything."

With eight or nine men on the line, Solich said, a hole could mean a big play, as fewer men would be in the defensive backfield to stop a break-away run.

But if the ground game can't get the necessary holes in the KU defensive line, Solich said, the only other option is to pass.

In NU's 28-21 loss to Texas A&M, the Husker passing game netted 204 yards to the rushing total of 141 yards.

One hundred sixty-seven of those passing yards went to sophomore split end Matt Davison for a new school record.

Davison also said although there might be a different approach with KU on Saturday, don't expect any shattering trends in the Husker offense.

"I don't think we're going to get away from Nebraska-style football," Davison said. "We've thrown it more this year than we did last year, but it's not going to be a deal where we're starting to put it up 35 to 40 times a game."

"I think the coaches have a lot of confidence in the passing game right now. That's a real confidence booster for the offense — knowing that if we can't run the ball we can get it done another way."

Haafke's experience 'bittersweet'

HAAFKE from page 9

Saturday, he had caught two passes for 15 yards this season.

"It was kind of a bittersweet day for me," Haafke said. "Knowing that it was probably one of the best games I've ever had and then one play kind of dampers the rest of it."

But Haafke, who said he didn't know he was running a different play than Newcombe until he was on the bus to the airport, didn't get down on himself.

That didn't surprise Brown.

"The way he's handled this thing — being blamed for something that wasn't really his fault — he's not going to cast the blame on anybody else," Brown said. "He'll take what he's got to take. That's the kind of person he is. It's a tribute to his folks and the kind of person that he is."

Haafke has displayed that kind of mentality since he was recruited as a walk-on out of South Sioux City High School, Brown said.

His poise especially showed last spring, Brown said, when Haafke learned he would begin his senior season ranked fourth on the depth chart.

As a junior in 1997, Haafke played in eight games and was used primarily as a blocker in third and fourth quarters of games that were already under control.

"He came back this year, and he had the odds against him a little bit," Brown said. "A lot of guys would have wilted at that point."

"He fought back. It was like,

'Man, I'm going to go out there and make it real hard for Coach Brown to say no to me.' That's the mentality he took."

Haafke said he took Brown's advice and caught 300 footballs five times a week all summer.

His hard work is finally paying dividends.

"I'm happy with the situation, but I'm not content by any means," Haafke said. "I always thought that if I work hard and give my all 100 percent all the time, something good will always come out of it — either in football or in life in general."

Haafke's physical and mental toughness has prompted Brown to make highlight tapes to be used as inspiration for future walk-ons.

"He's a great example of five years of just hard hauling every single day," Brown said. "I mean just carrying the load every day — busting, hard every day. He's one of the most intense practice players, and one of the hardest workers we've had around here."

"Never has he ever complained about one down of playing. Never has he complained about not getting a ball or getting an opportunity. He's always kept his mouth shut and worked hard. When a coach sees a guy fight back and refuse to die, my hat's off to that guy. I have tremendous respect for him."

But Haafke admits that at more than one point in his career, he has thought about just throwing in the towel.

His battles with adversity even date back to high school.

Haafke recorded 1,100 all-purpose yards as a junior, but saw action in just four games as a senior after a table saw took a good chunk out of two of his fingers.

A highly recruited Division II player, Haafke sat on the sidelines for the majority of the season while his team finished 0-9.

But that experience, he said, might have ended up helping him while he served as a scout teamer his first two seasons in Lincoln.

"The first day that I came in, they put the depth chart on the board, and I was listed ninth out of 10," Haafke said. "I called my dad that night and told him, 'Don't expect me to ever see the field.' But he encouraged me to stick with it."

"Quite a few times, I even thought about trying to transfer to (the University of Nebraska at) Kearney after my second year. I had it in the back of my mind. But I decided to stick it out."

"I've never really wanted to give up on any challenge that's put in front of me. I didn't want to be known as the guy who tried it out and didn't finish it."

In other news:
Nebraska I-back DeAngelo Evans, who missed practice Monday, left practice early Tuesday because of a tailbone injury and is questionable for Saturday's game, NU Coach Frank Solich said.

"I don't think with the way missed practice time has been going (Evans) can start at this time," Solich said.

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