

Rekindling the Rivalry

Huskers know Missouri is ready after last season's narrow victory

By SAM MCKEWON
Senior editor

One stinking play. That what's Missouri Coach Larry Smith called it at the time. Nebraska fans called it something different. To them, it was The Play. The Catch.

The Immaculate Reception, Part II. It was the play where Shevin Wiggins kicked the ball up in the air, and Matt Davison caught it as time ran out to tie the Tigers 38-38 and send the game to overtime.

Nebraska went on to win 45-38. Davison's catch saved the national championship. It also may have rekindled a rivalry.

Now the No. 7 Cornhuskers (6-1 overall and 2-1 in the Big 12 Conference) know No. 18 Missouri (5-1 and 3-0) is expected to come to Memorial Stadium and upset NU in a 11:37 a.m. game Saturday.

"What they did last year worked last year, so yeah, it makes sense that they think they could come up here and do it again," Sam linebacker Brian Shaw said. "We had some breakthroughs last year, so I'm sure they'll come in with some confidence."

What Missouri did last season doesn't necessarily fit the description of how it played Nebraska in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the rivalry was still thriving. Then, the Tigers did it with defense, holding the Huskers under 40 points in every game from 1973 to 1986.

Last year, the Tigers went the offensive route, piling up 386 total yards on the Blackshirts and scoring 38 points. It still wasn't enough.

And even though Missouri has kept the margin of victory against NU at 10 or below eight times in the last 19 years, MU hasn't actually beaten the Huskers since a 35-31 upset in 1978.

Which is OK. Smith said, since his team isn't looking at history.

"I don't think players live by jinxes," Smith said. "Really what you got to do is focus on what you can do to beat Nebraska, not what beat you in the past."

Part of the past that Smith would like to relive is the physical nature of the game. NU-MU games always were considered hard-hitting, and late hits and cheap shots entered the fray.

Shaw said the 1997 version of the Nebraska-Missouri series was much more physical than in the past.

"It was very physical," Shaw said. "You're talking about two of the most physical teams in the Big 12, and you're going to get that kind of game."

Another new element in the rivalry is the play of quarterback Corby Jones. Jones is playing for the third time in Lincoln. Last season, he almost single-handedly willed the Tigers on to victory, passing for 233 yards, rushing for 60 and scoring four touchdowns.

Nebraska quarterback Bobby Newcomb played in last year's game as a wingback and has high praise for the senior from Columbia, Mo.

"He's a tremendous athlete," Newcomb said. "I can relate to what he's trying to do offensively. He's a guy I can look up to."

Simply the best

These are the five best games in the Nebraska-Missouri rivalry (in descending order).

Nebraska 38 Missouri 38 OT - 1997
The Huskers needed a miracle catch by Matt Davison to pull out their overtime victory and save a national championship. MU failed to convert on a key third down that allowed Nebraska to have a chance to tie the game.

Missouri 35 Nebraska 35 - 1978
It was the day James Wilder ran wild. The sophomore running back had 181 yards on 28 carries as Missouri upset the Huskers one week after NU had knocked off No. 1 Oklahoma.

Nebraska 0 Missouri 0 - 1981
Nebraska didn't score until there were 23 seconds left in the game. Turner Gill, a sophomore at the time, handed off to Phil Bates for the winning score.

Missouri 34 Nebraska 34 - 1976
In the shadow of the north end zone of Memorial Stadium, quarterback Pete Woods hit Joe Stewart for a 98-yard touchdown pass on third down. It was the longest pass play in Missouri and Nebraska history. It propelled MU to victory.

Nebraska 25 Missouri 20 - 1985
Dale Klein hit a NCAA-record seven field goals to help the Huskers stave off Missouri. I-back Doug DuBose put the game away with a 22-yard touchdown run.

JOHN FRANKLIN



ILLUSTRATION BY MELANIE FALK
THERE HAVE BEEN PLENTY of great people and moments in the Nebraska/Missouri rivalry.

From left: Former MU Coaches Tom Osborne and Bob Devaney, MU Coach Larry Smith, former MU I-back James Wilder, Nebraska and Missouri quarterbacks Scott Frost and Corby Jones and former MU Coach Al Onofrio.

Missouri benefits from loss

By JAY SAUNDERS
Staff writer

It is not very often that one play can affect both teams in a positive way.

But when Nebraska split end Matt Davison caught a ball tipped by fellow Cornhusker Shevin Wiggins for a touchdown last season against Missouri, that is exactly what happened.

For the Huskers, that play on help to win a share of the national championship.

Even though Missouri lost that game, the Tigers have reaped the benefits of a nail-biter against the No. 1 team in the country.

"(The game) helped us, no question," MU Coach Larry Smith said. "Any time you play Nebraska and do well or beat them, you will gain a little attention because they have had so much success in the past."

The second-largest crowd in Missouri history saw the game. A crowd of 61,846 people packed into MU's Memorial Stadium.

In addition to the fans, a national

television audience on ABC watched diligently during what was called "Judgment Day."

The Davison touchdown then was shown on highlight reels across the country. In February, the play was named the college football play of the year at ESPN's "Espy Awards."

People were accustomed to seeing Nebraska on sports highlights, but that play put the Tigers on the football map.

"A lot of people said that play could have helped us more than it helped them," Missouri offensive lineman Todd Neimeyer said. "It gave us publicity and it probably helped us in recruiting."

According to this year's Missouri football guide, that game and that play showed Missouri football was back from the dead.

One year later, as MU prepares for a rematch in Lincoln, Smith said he wishes that play would die.

"A lot of people want to focus on that one play," Smith said. "I have been coaching long enough to know those things happen."

"You don't forget them, but you

can't dwell on them."

What Smith said the Tigers will be dwelling on is how they played Nebraska last season.

Quarterback Corby Jones threw for a season-high 233 yards. And although the running game only mustered 153 yards last year, the Tigers have found a rushing weapon in senior Devin West.

"We know what we did last year," Smith said. "We lined up and blocked and tackled and played our game."

There are not a lot of similarities between this year's game and last year's epic battle. The Tigers will be coming to Lincoln, and Jones is not 100 percent.

"We have a big challenge in front of us," Neimeyer said. "I think (the play) is something we put behind us. This year is a new ballgame."

This year is a new ballgame, but Smith said this is a new Missouri team—even if the Tigers didn't win one of the best college football games of the season.

"Nobody walked out of that locker room feeling we'd been run over," Smith said. "We knew we lost the game, but we knew we weren't beaten."

Gill's concussion, 1978 upset part of NU-MU series

By DARREN IVY
Staff writer

Last year's miraculous touchdown catch by Matt Davison to tie the ballgame at the end of regulation is the freshest memory of the Nebraska-Missouri series in most people's minds.

However, over the years the series has produced many other great games and memories.

Former NU receiver Frosty Anderson remembered Coach Tom Osborne's first game against Missouri in 1973.

The Cornhuskers were ranked second in The Associated Press polls, and Anderson was leading the Big Eight Conference in receiving yards.

In the first quarter, Anderson was hit by All-American defensive back John Mosely and separated his shoulder. He remembered watching from the sidelines in the fourth quarter as NU fumbled the ball on its own 6-yard line and a Tiger defender picked it up and took it into the end zone for a 13-6 lead.

The Huskers scored, but Osborne didn't want a tie.

"We went for 2 to win, but we failed," Anderson said. "Their fans were going crazy." Osborne went through three decades of MU-NU games.

"They were always physical, hard-hitting games," Osborne recalled. "You knew you better have your chin straps fastened up when you played them."

Other than last year's game, the 1978 and 1981 games were Osborne's most memorable.

In 1978, the Huskers had just come off their first win against Oklahoma in six years, when Kellen Winslow, James Wilder and the rest of the Tigers came into Lincoln and upset No. 2 NU 35-31.

Current Linebackers Coach Craig Bohl, who was an MU player at the time, missed that game with a broken leg, but he remembered the disappointment.

"It was a big emotional letdown," Bohl said. In addition to the mental anguish, the players were physically beat up too, Bohl said.

"It was a 16-round, knockdown-drag-out fight," Bohl said. "You would go into the training room Monday, and it was a MASH unit. Those were the games our guys really enjoyed." The 1981 game was Turner Gill's second start as a quarterback.

"They blitzed from every angle," Osborne said. "Turner got hit on about every play."

Gill, now in his seventh year as a NU coach, also remembered that 6-0 victory. The Huskers won in the last 20 seconds of the game.

"It was my so-called first big test," Gill said. "I got knocked around all day, but I scored on our last drive."

The next year against the Tigers, Gill didn't

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TOM OSBORNE
former NU coach

finish the first half. He was carrying out a fake, when Randy Jostes, a Ralston High School graduate, popped him under the chin, knocking him unconscious.

Many Nebraska fans were furious, calling it a blatant cheap shot. Jostes' parents even received death threats.

Gill doesn't hold any hard feelings.

"I wouldn't personally call it a cheap shot," Gill said.

The Huskers went on to win that game 23-19.

Husker coaches and former players feel the rivalry is back to the intensity it was during the 1970s and early 1980s.

"When I came to the Big Eight after some time away, we were beating Missouri handily each year," Bohl said. "Now you are seeing Missouri, how Missouri really is. We are prepared for a 16-round donnybrook."