

Alexander emerges as impact player against KU

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
Senior staff writer

When Dan Alexander heard Correll Buckhalter announced as the Nebraska football team's starting I-back minutes before the Kansas game Saturday, he didn't jump to conclusions.

The Cornhuskers' No. 3 I-back, Alexander thought that Buckhalter's promotion meant only that NU's coaches had moved No. 1 I-back DeAngelo Evans down a notch because of injury. As usual, Alexander — a highly-touted recruit in 1995 who has played little since — wasn't expecting to contribute much to the Huskers' fortunes.

But Nebraska's 41-0 bashing of the Jayhawks proved anything but usual for the Wentzville, Mo., native. Alexander rushed 15 times for 91 yards, both career bests.

"When I realized DeAngelo wasn't going to play, I was thinking, 'Well, maybe I could get in,'" Alexander said. "It turned about to be a nice surprise that I got to play as much as I did. It was nice to get into the flow and contribute. "It was the most fun I've had in awhile — to get in there and make a difference. I haven't played that much since high school."

As the Cornhuskers prepare to play

host to Alexander's home-state team, Missouri, on Saturday at 11:37 a.m., Alexander, who often picks up several yards after contact, hopes to show more of his power-running style.

Every Big 12 school, Notre Dame and Florida recruited Alexander in 1995. Many warned Alexander he might not play much at Nebraska. Injuries haven't helped his cause. Alexander tore his anterior cruciate ligament in the 1997 spring game and missed part of his freshman season.

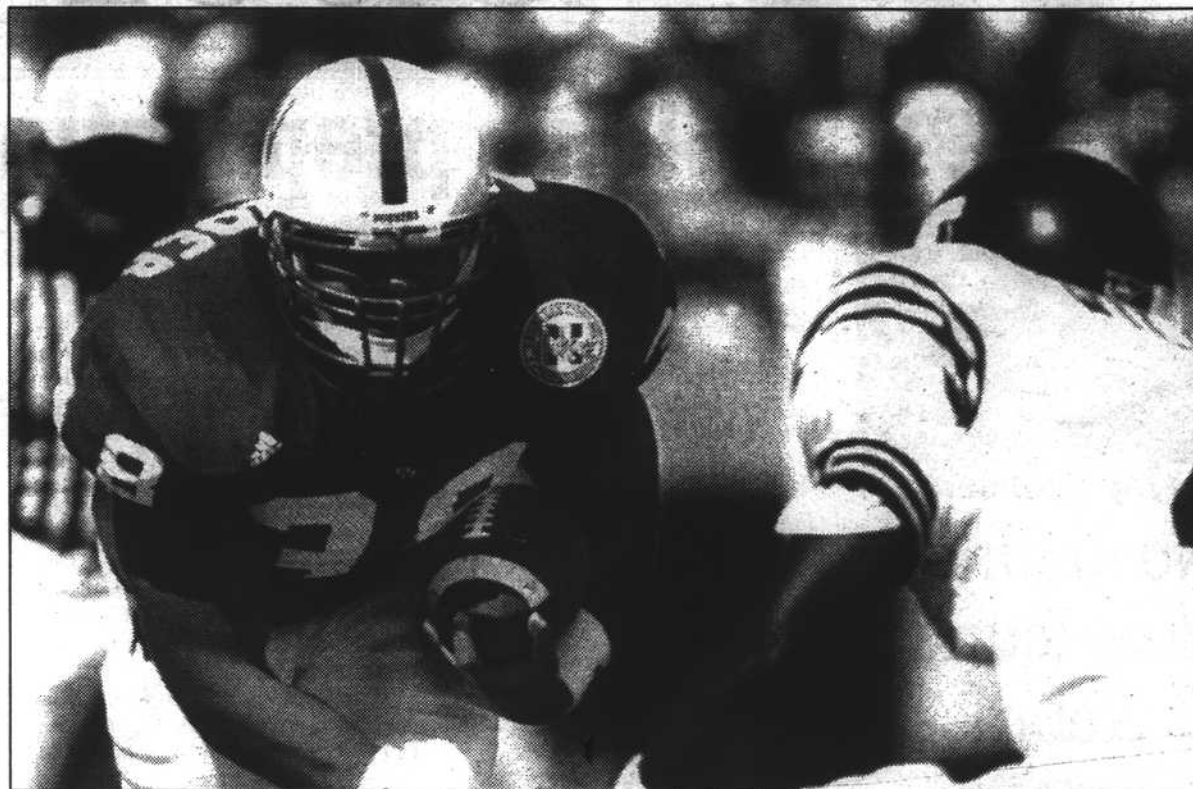
But as his fortunes turn, Alexander wants his friends from Missouri to know he didn't make a mistake by accepting NU's scholarship offer.

"It's been frustrating sometimes," Alexander said, "but I've tried to put that into God's hands. I am here to get an education."

"Also, if I had gone to another school, I might be starting. But I wouldn't be the best player I could be. That's what you get here. It's a good feeling."

NU Coach Frank Solich praised Alexander's play Saturday. He said the I-back's attitude has pleased Husker coaches.

"When you have guys who still come out and give a tremendous effort and a great attitude who puts himself behind the team, you have yourself a player who will contribute to the suc-



NU'S DAN ALEXANDER has been improving in his backup role at I-back, and saw extensive playing time against Kansas in the absence of DeAngelo Evans. Alexander posted a career-high 91 yards with 15 carries Saturday.

MIKE WARREN/DN

cess of your football team," Solich said. Alexander said he makes a conscience effort to have a good practice

mentality. "You'd think I would want to get frustrated, but I won't," Alexander said.

"I want the coaches to see me and know that if they need me, I will try just as hard as anyone else in there."

Gillespie: Rushing game on track

BY JOHN GASKINS
Staff writer

With all the commotion over Nebraska's unusually unproductive running game after the near-loss to Oklahoma State and 28-21 loss to Texas A&M, one would think that first-year Running Backs Coach Dave Gillespie would be hitting the panic button.

But the subdued Gillespie did what coaches usually do — he made adjustments, went back to the basics and worked the players a notch harder the following week in practice.

"Obviously, there is some consternation and frustration when things aren't going as well as you'd like," Gillespie said.

"But I think like typical Nebraska players, the reaction to that was to not get down, but to bristle up and find out what's wrong and get after it and make it work."

The payoff? A 41-0 thrashing of Kansas and a ground attack that produced a season-best 466 yards on 79 carries.

And despite what some might consider a down year for the traditionally dominant rushing attack, the Huskers now lead the Big 12 Conference in rushing offense at 270.4 yards per game.

"I think we executed a lot better," senior fullback Joel Makovicka said. "Still, it's something where we're not satisfied and not saying 'now we can run all over anybody.'"

However, after winning the national



rushing title five of the last seven seasons, that's what is expected out of the Husker ground game. For Gillespie, who took over his position for current Head Coach Frank Solich, that's a lot to live up to.

"Frank was the premiere running backs coach in the country," Gillespie said. "And despite his stature, those are big shoes to fill."

Gillespie, who played running back for NU from 1974 to 1976, came off a four-year stint as an assistant at Kansas, where he coached the defensive line for two of those seasons.

"He brings an understanding of defense and defensive techniques and how we can overcome those techniques," sophomore I-back Dan Alexander said. "I think he has helped us a lot in that way."

"He really made a smooth transition and learned the offense well," Makovicka said. "It's kind of like having two coaches out there. He really coaches similar to Coach Solich."

However, the circumstances surrounding the Huskers' offensive attack have been anything but smooth this year. Plagued by injuries and inexperience in both the backfield and offensive line, Nebraska's offense has hobbled all year long.

Rock bottom of the rushing let-down came against OSU and A&M, where Nebraska rushed for just 73 and 141 yards, respectively.

"(As far as) our lack of productivity in those two games, certainly a lot of credit has to go to those two football teams," Gillespie said.

"On the flip side of that, maybe emotionally we weren't where we needed to be and our mentality wasn't where it needed to be."

As a result of that, Alexander said, Gillespie and the other coaches toughened up practices. He said Gillespie had the backs running a lot more in practice than in past weeks.

"He's trying to get us to be more physical, and be able to stick in there and hit people, a lot of stuff that promotes mental toughness," Alexander said.

The main aspect of improving the rushing game has been getting back to the heart and soul of NU rushing, the up-the-middle power attack.

"We really wanted to get back to the basics and run the ball between the tackles," Makovicka said. "They told the linemen to get after people, and for the most part, they did that."

After such an up-and-down year for the running game, Gillespie said he's not sure what to expect, other than the backs to work harder than ever to improve.

"I think our guys understand that if they don't prepare in practice to be ready for a physical, head-knocking game, they're going to have their head handed to them."

NU women's soccer team hopes to keep momentum

BY CHRISTOPHER HEINE
Staff writer

There's little doubt Nebraska's women soccer team has played tougher opponents this season.

Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Portland. Texas A&M.

One of the keys to a successful season, though, is beating teams with lesser records. The Cornhuskers have two contests of that type this weekend.

The first is against Oklahoma (7-7) Friday night at Abbott Sports Complex. The Huskers (11-2-1) then play again at home Sunday against Oklahoma State (7-5-2) at 1 p.m.

NU Coach John Walker knows how important it is to take the Oklahoma teams seriously.

Walker said a drop-off in effort might cost the Huskers more than a couple of victories as they try to build momentum for postseason.

"First off, we need to maintain and improve our level of play," he said.

"They (both teams) are clearly capable of beating us if we don't play to our potential."

Walker said a loss in NU's final two games could cost them a bye in the next month's conference tournament.

"We want to be No. 1 (in the Big 12)," he said. "We don't want to be playing in the quarterfinals."

Sandy Smith, the Husker's team captain, said the team's upperclass-



men will keep NU on the right track.

Smith said it didn't take long for this year's squad to find out the importance of playing every team hard.

"We learned that in the first game by losing to Milwaukee-Wisconsin," she said.

"We have to come out excited and pumped no matter if it's Portland (No. 6) or Oklahoma," Smith said.

Lindsey Eddleman, who scored the game-winning goal last Sunday against Kansas, said the Huskers are practicing hard.

"We know every game is important," said the junior from Lakewood, Colo.

"We can't afford to take anyone lightly," Eddleman said.

Walker said winning this weekend can only help NU's chances later on.

"We need to put ourselves in good position for the NCAA tournament," he said.

Walker said Nebraska's schedule has a strong power rating. The 5th-year coach said playing Big 12 teams like Oklahoma and Oklahoma State is the reason why.

"Every team in the Big 12 is tough," he said.



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