

QB Confidential: Starter still not known

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER
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Eight games into the season, quarterback questions still linger for the Nebraska football team.



Newcombe

Cornhuskers as they prepare for a rematch of the 1996 Big 12

A career day Saturday for No. 2 quarterback Monte Christo, increased injury concerns surrounding starter Bobby Newcombe and a fresh and recovered Eric Crouch all point to a potential controversy for the

Championship.

Seventh-ranked NU will play host to Texas on Saturday at 2:35 p.m., and coaches may not determine a starting quarterback before that day.

Does NU Coach Frank Solich:

■ CONTINUE to start Newcombe, whose knee injury has prevented him from showing the big-play ability that won him the job in the spring?

■ PICK Monte Christo, the fifth-year senior who took advantage of his most important chance to contribute by guiding the Huskers to a 21-13 come-from-behind victory over Missouri?

■ OR turn to Crouch, a redshirt scout-team quarterback in 1997 who came within one big play of nabbing the starting job last spring?

A different quarterback has provided an answer every week thus far. But as Nebraska enters a crucial month that

includes games against Texas, No. 3 Kansas State and No. 24 Colorado, the need for stability grows more important.

Solich and NU Quarterbacks Coach Turner Gill plan to take a day-by-day approach to the question. Crouch said the quarterbacks will accept any resolution.

"There's no tension between the quarterbacks right now," said Crouch, who has started two games. "It was there during the spring and even in fall camp a little bit, but we are at the point in our season where the team can't really afford a big quarterback controversy."

Newcombe hinted Tuesday that he may eliminate himself from the mix. The sophomore, who tore his posterior cruciate ligament against Louisiana Tech on Aug. 29, will continue to dis-

cuss his options with his father, Robert Newcombe, and his doctors.

"My father is concerned because it's been eight weeks and it's still keeping me from running full speed," said Newcombe, who has passed for 647 yards this season. "He's worried about the long term — how it would affect my future. I'm taking that into consideration. These last few games, I've been taking chances being out there."

The oft-injured Christo sympathizes with Newcombe.

"You have to give Bobby credit for the courage he has shown," Christo said. "He has a lot of heart, but he's been limited, and it's frustrating for him, and it's frustrating for the offense. It's a tough situation for him. He's a great player, but he's not the same player he was during the spring."

Injury also has limited Crouch this

season. He missed NU's last three games with a hip pointer, but returned to practice full speed Monday.

Ironically, Christo, who has undergone four surgeries during the past four years at Nebraska, has remained unaffected by injury this fall. He owns the highest pass completion percentage of the three quarterbacks at 65.2 percent.

Christo maintains that his goal is winning games, not earning the starting job. And Newcombe and Crouch agreed they don't want the situation to hurt the team.

"It's a little overwhelming," Crouch said. "At the beginning of the season you don't expect things to be unsettled at this point. But I think the coaches have done a good job of handling the situation and doing what's best for the team. It's tough, but we're going to get through it."

A player to count on

NU's Christo steps into quarterback spotlight

BY DAVID WILSON
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Don't think Monte Christo hasn't pondered throwing in the towel a time or two since he walked on the Nebraska football team five years ago.

A senior quarterback, Christo has spent more time with the trainers than he has on the field running the offense on Saturdays.

He hadn't even attempted a pass until this season.

But Christo wouldn't let himself quit.

Not after suffering a ligament tear in his right thumb (twice). Not after cracking a vertebra. And not after undergoing lower-back disc surgery or suffering a season-ending knee injury.

His persistence is finally paying off. The 6-foot, 195-pounder from Kearney relieved an injury-slowed Bobby Newcombe off and on in the first quarter against Missouri last Saturday before playing the entire second half.

His two-touchdown effort helped NU to a 20-13 victory.

"That's the reason why I came here," Christo said. "For something like this."

Suddenly, Christo has been thrown into the quarterback mix.

Nebraska Coach Frank Solich said a

decision will be made later this week as to whether Christo, Newcombe or Eric Crouch will start under center Saturday against Texas.

"Personally, I feel like I can go out there and lead this team," Christo said. "Whether it be starting or just coming into whatever role it is."

And Christo has always known his role. NU Quarterbacks Coach Turner Gill said.

"Going into this season, I talked to him and told him that he probably wouldn't be getting a lot of snaps because of Bobby and Eric," Gill said. "He said, 'Hey, Coach, I started something, and I want to finish it.'"

"I admire that."

But it wasn't that easy, said Christo, who tore a ligament in his right thumb midway through spring ball.

The injury, which required surgery, pushed Christo as close to calling it quits as he had ever been.

"It was tough to accept because that was really my last chance to make a move on the depth chart and put myself in position to play," Christo said. "But if you can get used to something like that, I guess I'm the one person that's gotten used to it."

Injuries forced Christo to miss the entire 1995 season and take a redshirt year. After playing in five games as a



MATT MILLER/DN

THOUGH HE HAS SUFFERED numerous injuries throughout his five-year career, NU senior quarterback Monte Christo has finally been given an opportunity to show his talent on the field.

sophomore, Christo suffered a cracked vertebra early last fall before returning for minimal action in five games.

Against Missouri, Christo rushed 20 times for 67 yards, both career highs. He scored the first two touchdowns of his career. He also completed one pass for 7 yards.

"I think it's tremendous that Monte has been given the opportunity to show his talent," Solich said.

He hasn't seen this much action since he ran the option at Kearney High in 1993.

"It seems like it has kind of been a roller-coaster ride for me," Christo said. "With all the injuries I've had, it's been

kind of gloomy at times, but I'm just glad that I was able to persevere and get through the tough times. Fortunately, things turned out good for me."

Kearney High Coach Riley Harris never had any doubts.

"It would have been easy not to continue," Harris said, "but with his attitude, I knew that was never going to happen."

Christo turned down Division II offers to walk on at Nebraska after former Husker Coach Tom Osborne showed up at his door to tell him he could eventually earn a scholarship.

Playing behind quarterbacks Tommie Frazier, Brook Berringer and

Matt Turman in 1994, Christo was thrown right into the fire for a few plays as a true freshman against Missouri.

Frazier had blood clots, Berringer had cracked ribs and a deflated lung, and when Turman went out, Christo was the only quarterback left on the 60-man travel roster.

"It's kind of ironic," Christo said. "There's some scary similarities to this year with all the injuries at quarterback."

So in steps Christo. "He's been through an awful lot as a young person," Gill said. "He's been beat up. But the thing I like about him is that he's stuck with it."

Train Hill at Pioneers a challenge for cross country runners

BY CHRISTOPHER HEINE
Staff writer



Nebraska cross country runners refer to hills, turns and rough footing as "interrupters."

One can sense the annoyance when the runners talk of the obstacles that break their paces.

However, when they speak of "Train Hill," their voices are tinted with agony.

Train Hill is the last climb of the hilly and jerky 8-kilometer course the Cornhuskers call home at Pioneers

Park.

It is long. It is steep. It is mean. NU runner Marcus Witter said Train Hill is a painful stretch.

Saturday morning the Huskers will have company in their pain as they play host to the Big 12 Championships.

Witter said the entire course is tough. But he said Train Hill, which must be climbed twice in the race, is on a level of its own.

"You turn the corner and see this

hill and you're like 'Oh man,'" he said.

Husker sophomore Amie Finkner said the fact the hill is the tallest on the run doesn't go unnoticed.

"Just when you think you're done, it goes up another notch," she said. "A lot of people give up mentally at that point."

Nebraska sophomore Todd Tripple said the final climb of the Train Hill can affect every runner's finish.

"Everybody hurts on the hill," he said. "I know if I keep mentally strong I will catch some people in front of me."

Finkner said NU's experience with

the hill should help this weekend.

"I think it intimidates a lot of teams," she said. "I don't think it will be a big issue for us, though."

Train Hill is far from the only hardship runners will experience at Pioneers this weekend.

Competitors will have to adjust to a series of smaller hills and sharp turns — as well as rough footing because of seasonal erosion.

Husker Amy Wiseman, who finished sixth at last year's Big 12 meet, said her team has a big advantage.

"We know where the turns, grooves, bad spots and holes are," she

said. "People who haven't run here before will be just following the crowd. Pretty soon they'll step in a hole or miss a turn and lose spots."

Witter said the course, which is located on the north side of the park, is the second toughest run in the Big 12. He said Kansas has the most difficult one.

This sophomore from Kearney said it's hard to manage the number of hills at Pioneers.

"People seem to die more on hilly courses," he said. "You don't want to start out too hard — the hills will take it out on your legs."