

## A Painful Season

### Injuries force Huskers to scramble in trying 9-3 campaign

BY SHANNON HEFFELFINGER  
Senior staff writer

For Eric Crouch, 1998 will never stand for the first season since 1977 that the Nebraska football team lost three games.

The Cornhuskers' first-year quarterback won't think of the death of NU's 40-game, regular-season conference winning streak. He won't dwell on the often lackluster offensive production. He won't allow himself to wonder what might have been if nine starters hadn't missed a combined 45 games.

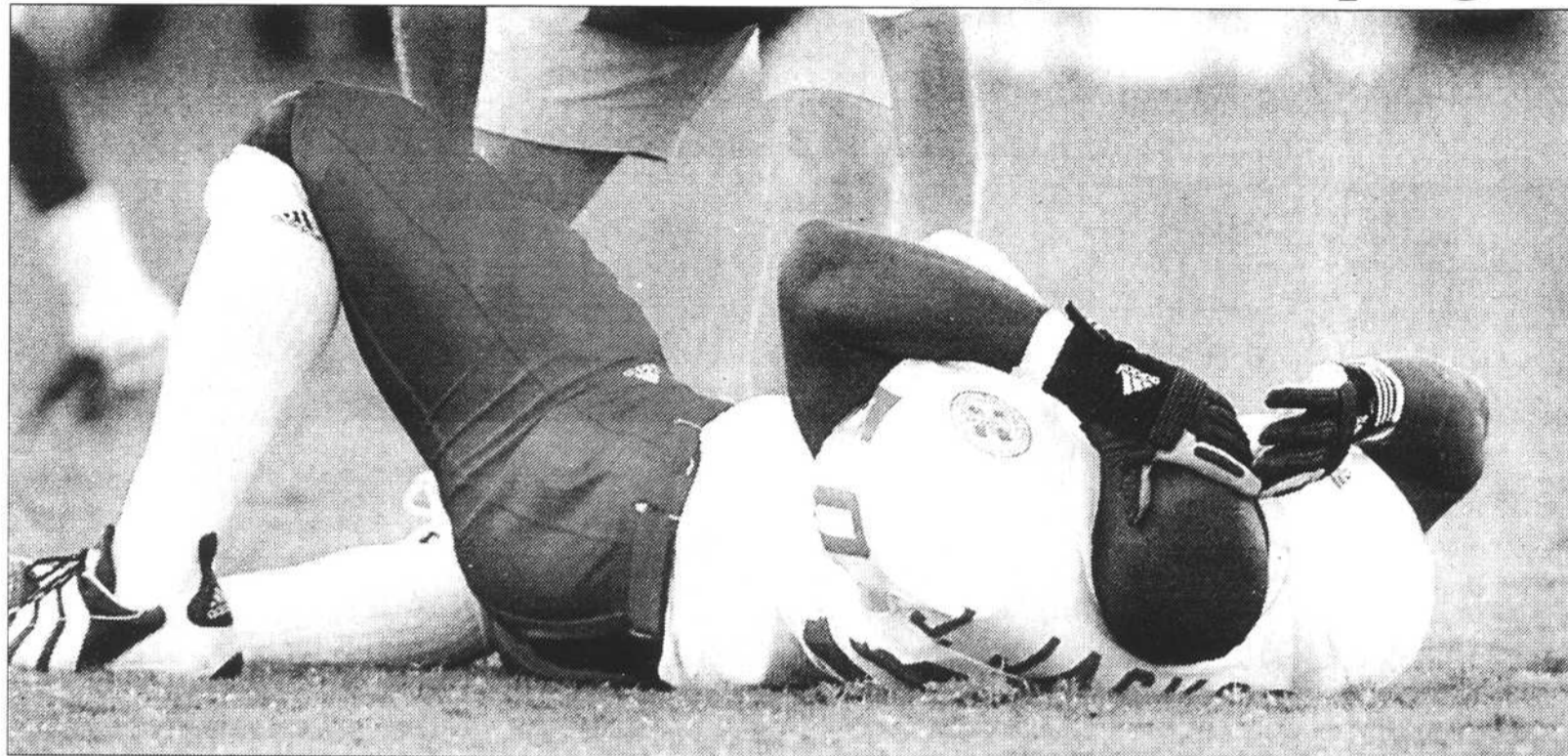
For Crouch, 1998 will stand only for the season in which the football challenges were outnumbered only by the personal ones. And the only thing he wants to remember are the lessons learned by a young team that faced as much adversity as any other Nebraska team in recent memory.

"If I had to rate my experience as the quarterback this season on a scale of one to 10, I'd rate it a 10," Crouch said. "This has been a big year for me and the team. I've learned more than I ever expected to about football and about myself."

"The things we have had to go through this year have been tough, and it's been different because most Nebraska teams haven't had to deal with that. We played close games week in and week out, and I know we're better players for it. We've lost some big games and things haven't always turned out the way we wanted them to, but things like that build character."

Several unusual events tested the 9-3 Huskers' character during NU Coach Frank Solich's first season. Texas A&M ended NU's 40-game regular-season conference winning streak Oct. 10 in College Station, Texas. Three weeks later, Nebraska dropped its first game at home in 48 contests and eight years.

NU nearly rebounded against then-



LINEBACKER JULIUS JACKSON lies on the ground after he was injured during the Texas A&M game. Injuries to nine starters for a combined 45 games hurt the Huskers in 1998.

MATT MILLER/DN

No. 2 Kansas State on Nov. 14, but lost its third game of the season 40-30 in Manhattan, Kan.

Three losses didn't provide the only character-building tests for the Huskers. Missouri, Oklahoma State and Colorado played NU down to the wire. Nebraska defeated Colorado 16-14 without an offensive touchdown, preventing the end of a 30-year, nine-win streak.

Crouch said the Huskers' lack of offensive production hurt them in close games, and Solich agreed.

"We did not execute well on offense," Solich said. "We had too many

breakdowns. On big-play opportunities, we just did not convert."

Injuries to key players slowed the offense, which averaged only 253.8 yards per contest — Nebraska's lowest total since 1976.

A new offensive line, knee and tailbone injuries to preseason No. 1 I-back DeAngelo Evans and a knee injury that caused preseason No. 1 quarterback Bobby Newcombe to play less than full speed or not at all after the season opener hindered Nebraska's rushing attack.

NU ranks seventh nationally in rushing and finished without a 1,000-yard rusher for only the third time since

1969.

Injuries to I-back Dan Alexander and receivers Kenny Cheatham, Lance Brown and Frankie London also slowed Nebraska's offense.

But despite the Huskers' struggles, senior tight end Sheldon Jackson said the 1998 season has not been disappointing for him.

"I've had a blast," Jackson said. "This is the first time we've been able to play because it's fun, not because we're chasing the national title or the conference championship. There's been less pressure. We haven't had all of that other stuff in the back of our minds."

For just the second time in six years, the Huskers will play in a bowl game that doesn't hold national championship implications when they travel to San Diego for the Culligan Holiday Bowl on Dec. 30. But after a trying season, Jackson and Crouch both said the Huskers will not lack motivation.

"We have to finish it up," Crouch said. "We can't look past this. That's always sitting in the back of your mind, telling you it was a down year. Yeah, we were 9-3, but it could have turned out a lot differently. We will work hard in the bowl game and in the spring to make sure it doesn't happen again."

## Brown promises 'no playing around' next year

BY DAVID WILSON  
Senior staff writer

Ralph Brown's eyes light up when he talks about his senior season. Of course, that won't come until next year.

Don't get the Nebraska cornerback wrong — the first thing on his mind is sending this year's 21 seniors out with a 10-win season.

But he can't help but smile when thinking about the Cornhusker defense, which will return eight starters next season.

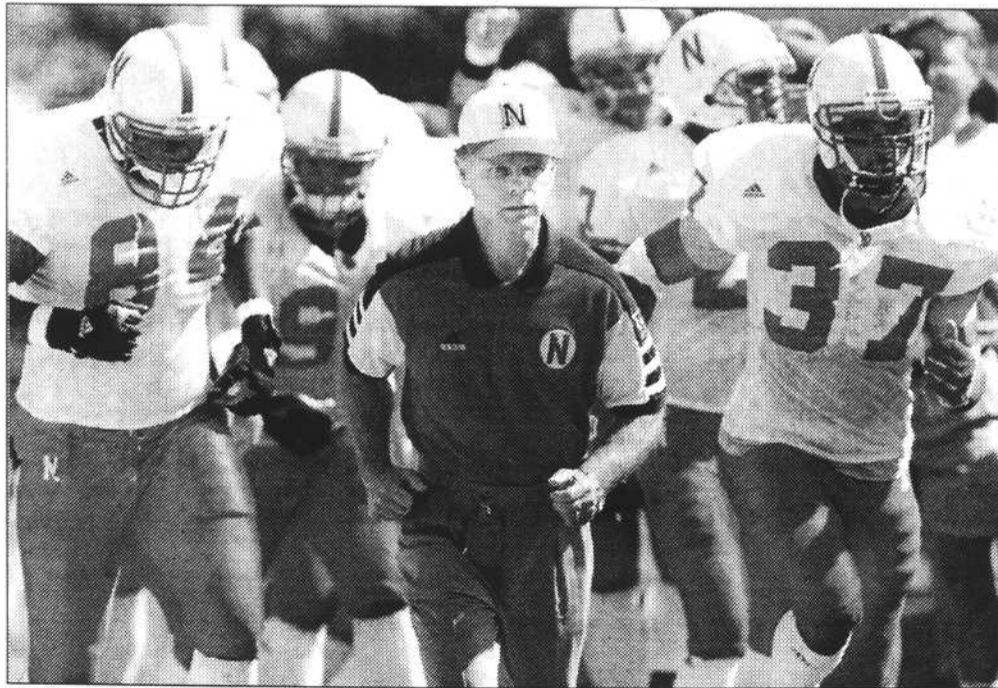
"I'm going to be yelling at people," Brown said. "When I'm a senior, I don't want to go out a loser. It's going to be a different Ralph Brown next year. I'm not going to let things slide. It's going to be all seriousness out there in practice. No playing around. We're here to win."

The Huskers, who will enter the Holiday Bowl on Dec. 30 with a 9-3 record, should return a total of 13 starters next season — not to mention many non-starters that have seen significant playing time.

Nebraska's first three-loss season since 1992, Brown said, will serve as motivation in the fall.

"My freshman year, when we lost to Arizona State and then to Texas in the Big 12 Championship, it gave us the motivation to come back that next year and win it all," Brown said of the 1996 season. "Me being a senior, I think we're going to get on everybody going into next year to make sure they practice hard and make sure our focus is better, so we won't make the same mistakes that we did this year."

Redshirt freshman Eric Crouch, who saw action at quarterback in eight games this season, also expects bigger and better things from Nebraska next season.



NU HEAD FOOTBALL COACH FRANK SOLICH leads the Huskers on the field before the Texas A&M game in College Station, Texas, earlier this season. NU looks for more success next season.

MATT MILLER/DN

The Husker offense will return five starters, losing two starting offensive linemen, two starting receivers, a tight end and a fullback.

"The guys that are going to be coming back are definitely going to be great players," Crouch said. "They're going to work hard knowing that we can be a great team. We are a great team now, but we can be the best."

The offensive line, Crouch said, which

entered this season without much experience, will also likely be much improved.

The Huskers averaged 4.8 yards per carry this season, down from 6.2 in 1997.

"They were definitely a young group of guys that didn't have much experience coming into this year," Crouch said. "But when I talk about them today, they have a lot of experience under their belts. Overall, they've really come along."

Another question mark comes on special teams, where NU loses senior kicker Kris Brown and senior punter Bill Lafleur. Both set NU kicking records.

Looking to fill their shoes are Josh Brown, who will be a redshirt freshman next season, and Dan Hadenfeldt, who currently backs up both Kris Brown and Lafleur.

Nebraska Kickers Coach Dan Young said Josh Brown will have a shot at challenging for a starting spot at both kicking positions.

"He's got a very strong leg," Young said. "He's a very talented athlete. As a kicker, coming in, he probably tested as well as any kicker as we've had. We're going to give him an opportunity to show what he can do."

Josh Brown, a Foyil, Okla., native, redshirted this season and learned under Kris Brown, Young said.

"I think it's good for him to get his feet on the ground and go through a year and go through spring ball," Young said. "He knows what the challenge is ahead of him."

The defense, Ralph Brown said, also knows what challenges lie ahead.

Though it will be tough losing senior rush ends Chad Kelsay and Mike Rucker, along with linebacker Jay Foreman, Brown said, he is confident with the younger players who play behind them.

"I don't think it's going to hurt us at all," Brown said. "The seniors that we lose, their backups have been playing for a couple of years already — so they already have the experience to go out there and do the job."

"When we came to play, we showed everyone that we could be the best defense in the country."

And that's exactly what Brown is expecting next year.