

Sports Opinion



Sam McKewon
NU football
faces tests
come spring

SAN DIEGO — Looking at Nebraska in its 23-20 loss to Arizona, I didn't see the silver lining in the dark cloud of NU's season.

Some did. I see a Nebraska team that has enough potential and big players returning for next season to erase anyone's thoughts of the long, unexpected 1998.

Not me. I see a Nebraska team with more questions than answers heading into the spring. I see a team that has to replace three defensive linemen.

I see a team with a quarterback controversy that will linger for too long. I see a DeAngelo Evans, who, for all his talent, has produced almost zero in two years at I-back.

I see an offensive line that has to replace two starters and will continue to have growing pains next year.

I see a coach in Frank Solich who hasn't discovered the wonders of the trick plays. I wonder if he ever will.

Most of all, I see a Nebraska team that still has not come to terms with exactly where it is in the national scheme of things.

Things move in cycles in football. Every team experiences ups and downs in national scene. Few teams are great every single year. None are, really. And eventually, the teams on top are figured out by the opposition. It's either that, or they screw up.

Texas. Miami. Alabama. Clemson. Penn State. Southern California. Georgia. All have been powerhouses at one time or another. All have been figured out. Oklahoma and SMU sold themselves down the river with violations.

NU may be entering one of those downswings. The Cornhuskers were in a down period in the late 1980s/early 1990s. It was then that Tom Osborne decided to change the team defensively. It resulted in three national titles.

Osborne did that same thing in the early 1980s by switching completely to the option. It resulted in some of the best teams and offenses NU has ever had.

It may be time for that again. Not big changes, mind you. But a few. A re-evaluation of the attacking defense might be good.

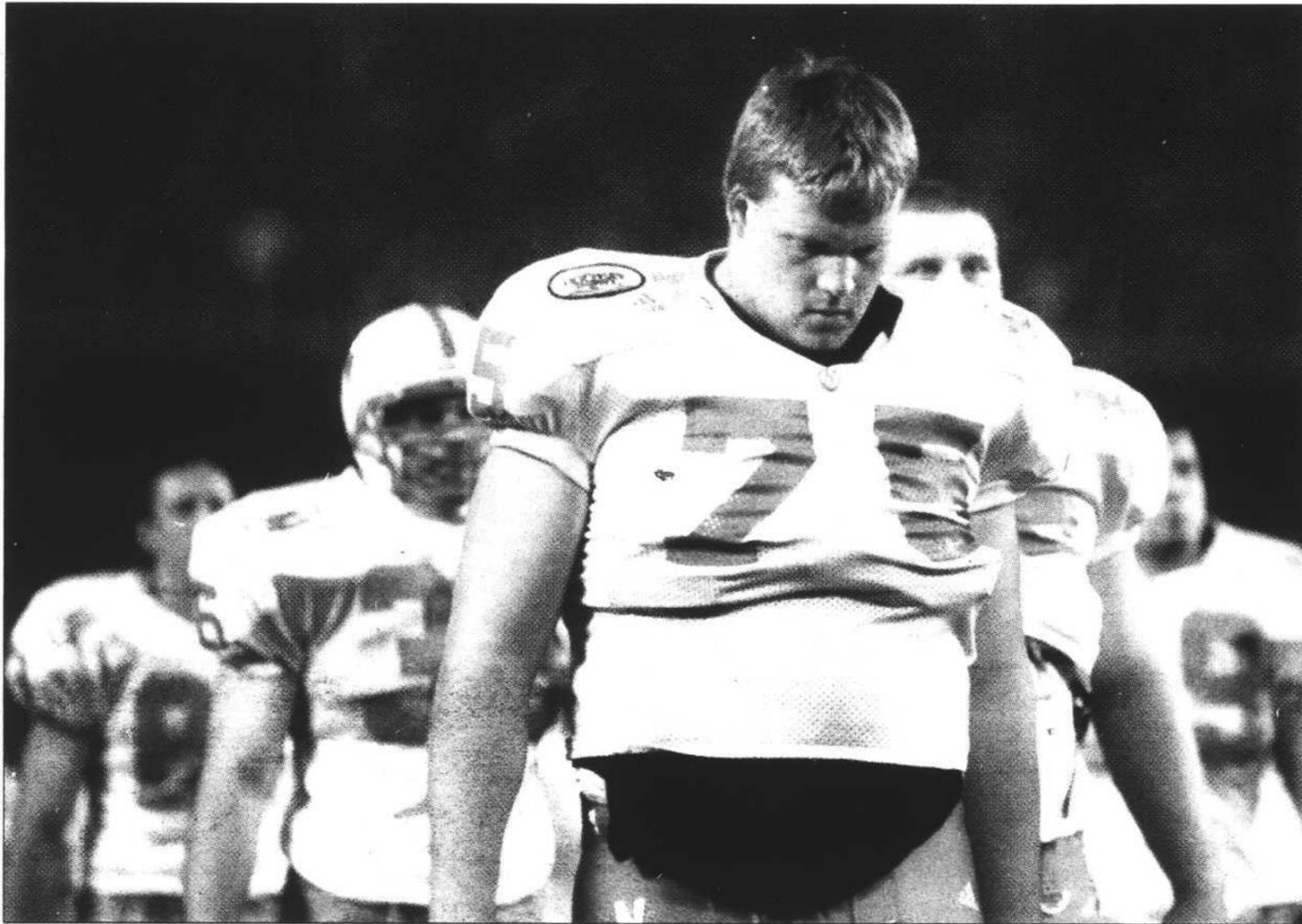
Solich also needs to look honestly and fairly at NU's offense and realize the shortcomings it produced.

It's time to look at the whole system. It would be easier to sit back and wait for the team to reload. It might happen. It's fair to expect it. It's happened every other year.

But what if the reloading doesn't happen? Another 9-4 season? Fans might have accepted that in 1990, but after three national titles, they won't stand for it. The clouds will only get darker.

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"We had some chances to make plays in the first half and we didn't."



A season of lost chances

Turnovers, rushing woes doom NU in first four-loss season since 1968

BY SAM MCKEWON
 Senior editor

Arizona 23
 Nebraska 20

SAN DIEGO — Jay Foreman looked tired.

The middle linebacker had just finished his career at Nebraska with a Holiday Bowl loss. Here was a player who won two national titles as a Husker, one just last year. And here he was watching NU go through its worst season since 1968.

The 23-20 defeat to Arizona was not even an hour old and Foreman and many other Huskers knew why they had lost — a striking contrast to the foggy bewilderment of the Texas game and fiery anger of the Kansas State game. With no more games left to play, it seems pointless to be furious.

Foreman, who had been the most vocal about NU's superiority after the KSU loss, had no indignant speeches prepared outside the Qualcomm Stadium's locker room. Rather, it was a simple analysis of the loss to No. 4 Arizona (12-1), coupled with Nebraska's performance all season.

"We should have played better tonight," Foreman said. "Shoulda played better all season, really. We've been in a funk the whole season."

Foreman paused. "But you know what, that's just the kind of team we were," he said. "We just expected to win. We could have been undefeated, but we could have been 6-6, too. With the way we played, we're a little bit lucky not to have more losses."

No. 17 NU ended up somewhere in between — at 9-4 and outside of the top 10 for the first time in six years. And

afterward, players were disappointed about the loss.

But they were used to it, if only a little. They had seen it three times already. And Nebraska saw it in almost the exact same fashion as it saw its final loss of the season.

NU was unable to establish a consistent running game throughout the contest. In fact, the attack was stagnant — gaining only 87 yards on 34 carries for a 2.5 average. Arizona, by contrast, gained 107 yards. UA running back Trung Canidate out-gained NU by himself. That hadn't happened since the 1992 Orange Bowl.

The Huskers lost the lead, too — the third time it resulted in a loss. NU did answer a Wildcat touchdown with an eight-play, 88-yard drive of its own. Of course, it came after quarterback Eric Crouch had been intercepted by UA's do-everything cornerback Chris McAlister, who promptly fumbled the ball right back to Nebraska.

When Crouch, who completed 12 of 28 passes for 198 yards and two touchdowns, hit tight end Tracey Wistrom with a 4-yard touchdown pass,



SCOTT McCLURG/DN
ABOVE: NEBRASKA linebacker Jamie Burrow and fullback Billy Legate scramble for the ball with Arizona's Dennis Northcutt after an Arizona fumble.

TOP: NEBRASKA OFFENSIVE TACKLE Kyle Kollmorgen walks off the field following the Holiday Bowl held at Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego. The Huskers were defeated by the Arizona Wildcats 23-20. It was the fourth loss for the Huskers this season.

the Huskers regained the lead at 20-16 and seemed poised to win a game they almost threw away in the first half.

"We had some chances to make plays in the first half and we didn't,"

Coach Frank Solich said. "We didn't get things going on offense, and we made some mistakes on special teams."

After Arizona took the game's opening kickoff and moved nowhere, the Wildcats punted — and wingback Shevin Wiggins fumbled back to UA. Arizona led 3-0.

NU then had a Kris Brown field goal blocked. Two possessions later, UA kicker Mark McDonald nailed a 25-yard field goal. 6-0, Arizona.

Arizona led 9-0 when McAlister returned a punt 65 yards for a touchdown. It was nullified for a block in Joel Makovicka's back, a questionable call at

best. All the while, Nebraska's defense was plugging the awaiting dam burst, stopping the Wildcats inside the NU 20 three times. The Huskers, led by Holiday Bowl defensive MVP Mike Rucker, held Arizona to 99 yards in the first half and -1 yards rushing.

But it seemed like the Blackshirts were on the field the entire first half, something that would take its toll in the fourth quarter.

NU countered in the second with 13 points — two field goals and a 45-yard touchdown pass from Crouch to Wiggins. The Huskers led 13-9 at half-time.

"The beginning of the second half, we had a chance to put them away," tight end Sheldon Jackson said. "But we didn't do it. We didn't get any points in the beginning of that second half."

It was Arizona that scored first in the second half, and not until the fourth quarter. The Wildcats, who had plunged into the NU defensive line without success for three quarters, found a new weapon: the cutback.

"It's just the big running plays that

"We could have been undefeated, but we could have been 6-6, too. With the way we played we're a little bit lucky not to have more losses."

JAY FOREMAN
 NU linebacker

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