

NU recruits fill 'big' gap

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You've seen them run, and you've seen them jump in person. You've been able to see their personalities. Along with knowing what you're getting, you get them on campus."

The camp is attended by many out-of-state athletes, but the Husker coaching staff doesn't always find recruiting success in all parts of the country. Virtually none of the recruits who signed Wednesday were from the Southeast portion of the nation.

NU also failed to sign a player from Florida, and landed just one from the state of Texas — both high school football hotbeds.

"It's difficult to get players out of Florida," Solich said. "We were close, but close doesn't count. If we don't get players out of a given state, we're going to find them (elsewhere)."

Nebraska did find success outside the continental United States, inking two players from Hawaii — neighbors Tamotu "Junior" Tagoa'i, a defensive lineman and Toniui Fonoti, an offensive lineman — and Patrick Kabongo, a 6-foot-6, 315-pound rush end from Montreal.

Tagoa'i will follow the footsteps of St. Louis School graduates and current Huskers, Tony Tata and Dominic Raiola.

Fonoti, from Kahuku High School, said he hopes to be able to play as a true freshman and could possibly leave on a church mission after two seasons. Solich said a player's five-year eligibility clock does not run while he is on a church mission.

While Fonoti isn't the only player hoping to make an immediate impact in Lincoln, only four or five athletes have seen the field as true freshmen at Nebraska over the past few seasons. Solich said he expects that trend to continue in the fall.

Despite the gurus who rate NU's recruiting class around 20th in the nation, Solich said, he has no concerns with this year's Husker class. The National Recruiting Adviser's Bobby Burton ranked Nebraska's class at No. 17.

"I really don't put too much stock in that," Solich said. "We've won national championships with classes that weren't rated as high as others at that particular time."

Experts praise the Huskers' class

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might not have with the backup situation. It's very beneficial. Both kids are marvelous athletes."

Rounding out the backfield for NU's 1999 recruiting class is fullback Judd Davies of Millard North High School in Omaha.

As usual, the bulk of Husker recruiting attention went to building on the already strong NU tradition of the offensive and defensive lines. The Huskers gained 11 offensive and defensive linemen.

"They did really well there," Burton said. "The crux of recruiting is getting what you want. Nebraska's done that."

One reason for NU's influx at the line positions is the perception of Nebraska as a cornerstone school for linemen, where development and projection of players is the greatest.

Over the years, the Husker offensive line has been widely regarded as the solid bastion for the NU running game with large, physical linemen helping to buffer that reputation. Coupled with NU's rigorous strength and conditioning program, Wallace said, high school linemen are very attracted to Nebraska.

"Because Nebraska has such a reputation about offensive line development, a lot of people believe they will sign a youngster and make him better," Wallace said. "Nebraska does that very well."

Though the Huskers got the players they needed, NU struggled in recruiting in one respect — being able to find recruits in the Southeastern United States, a region where

Burton believes the athletes are more willing and likely to stay home.

"It's tough shooting down there," Burton said. "The SEC is really rolling. Nebraska would like to see some more talent out of there, but the SEC is making it a tough sale."

But overall, both Burton and Wallace agreed that the Huskers did very well in their recruiting season. Wallace said NU netted nine SuperPrep All-Americans and did it quietly, the recruiting style adopted by Husker coaches.

"There's not a lot of fanfare," Wallace said. "Nebraska gets a lot of players before they get into big recruiting battles. That's a big factor for some of these kids — that they don't have to undergo the pressure and attention like they might had they signed with another school."

And much of that silent success is due to the recruiting practices of NU Coach Frank Solich, who carries much of the same demeanor and presentation as that of former Husker Coach Tom Osborne.

"Based on the feedback, the recruits like Frank Solich a lot," Wallace said. "He's like Tom Osborne in that he's very calm, it's a no pressure situation and he inspires confidence in himself and his players."

And, as Wallace said, the recruiters aren't the only ones who are deadpanning the job — the NU recruiting class of 1999 should also prove to be a hushed but steady group.

"There's not a lot of glitz in the group," Wallace said. "But there's an awful lot of talent here."

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