

Awaiting Iowa **9** days and counting

Miller steps into No. 1 fullback role

BY DARREN IVY
Senior staff writer

Ask junior fullback Willie Miller how many blocks he threw during his high school days at Bellevue West, and his total statistics probably wouldn't add up to the number he will make in Nebraska's first game Sept. 4.

Miller was a star I-back and wasn't called upon to block anyone. Receiving the majority of handoffs his senior season, Miller rumbled for a school-record 1,527 yards and 18 touchdowns and was named the Midlands' offensive player of the year by SuperPrep magazine.

But in the recruiting process, NU Coach Frank Solich — then the running backs coach — made it clear to Miller that he would be a blocking fullback for the Cornhuskers.

"Blocking has been something I really had to work at," said the 6-foot-1, 240-pound Miller. "In high school, I always carried the ball and never blocked. Now it is the reverse, but I can handle that now. I don't know if I could have in high school."

With the graduation of Joel Makovicka, Miller will be one of the main players responsible for clearing a path for the Husker quarterback and I-back.

And Miller is ready.

"It is one of the most important positions," Miller said. "It is not a glory position, but the offensive line and fullbacks are the ones who make everything happen."

"I know that when an I-back gets a 70-yard run, I had a part in it — or if the quarterback is able to make a completion, I played a part in blocking for him," he said. "If I rock a linebacker and put him on his butt, it feels as good as scoring a touchdown."

Though it requires more responsibility, Miller said, being the No. 1 fullback is a comfortable position to be in. The offense, he said, comes more naturally because he doesn't have to worry about competing with anyone.

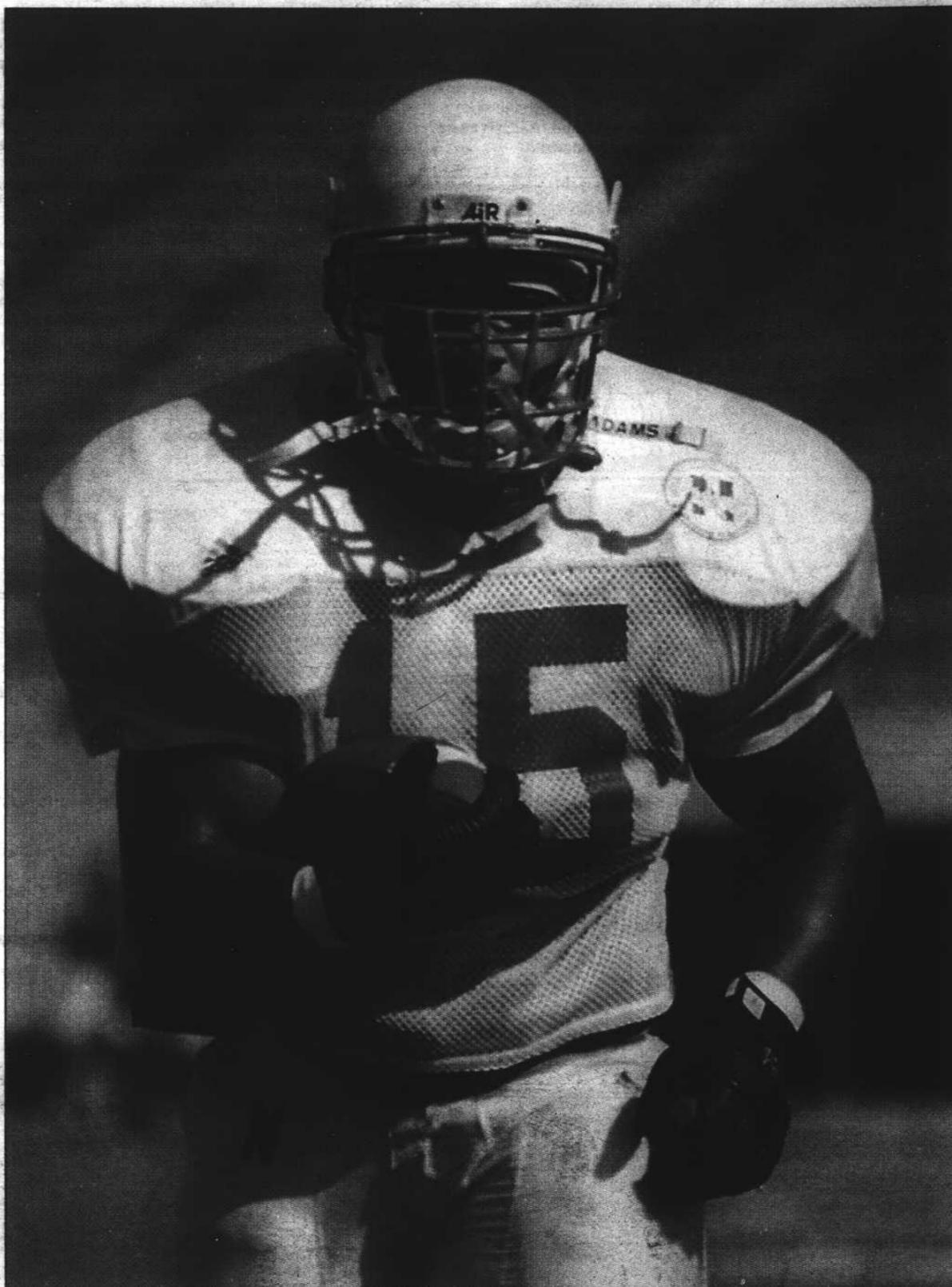
"You can focus so much better," said Miller, who has carried the ball 29 times for 151 yards and three touchdowns in his two years at NU. "I am worried about being a leader and taking care of business. Being number one, everybody looks to you for intensity during practice. I am the one who sets that (intensity)."

Miller's work ethic has never been questioned, but senior fullback Ben Kingston said he had some reservations about how Miller would adjust to being a Division I fullback.

"He came in, and he was just a really big guy," Kingston said. "I had watched tape of him in high school, and he hardly blocked anybody. He came in here and really got after it. He has improved a lot. He has also gotten a lot faster."

After watching Joel Makovicka and Cory Schlesinger at fullback, Miller knows he has big shoes to fill this fall — but he

Please see MILLER on 10



NEBRASKA FULLBACK Willie Miller will take over starting duties this fall. As a sophomore last year, Miller took 19 carries for 86 yards and scored two touchdowns. KELLI KELLOGG/DN

Sports Opinion

Just suiting up as Husker worth time, sweat for Perino



David Wilson

Sitting on the back of a four-wheeler underneath South Stadium, a worn-out, sweat-drenched Jeff Perino has no trouble smiling when he talks about his return to football.

It's hot — and he's been practicing in full pads for hours — but still Perino's eyes widen as he recalls three knee surgeries and the doctors who thought his playing career was over in 1996.

With just one year of eligibility and the top two quarterback slots already decided for the fall, it's not like Perino doesn't know what he's getting into.

Assuming Bobby Newcombe and Eric Crouch stay healthy, Perino will likely see just a handful of snaps at the end of games that are

out of hand.

Still, suffering through two-a-days and a daily fall practice schedule sure beats having to just sit and watch on Saturday afternoons.

But there was a time when making a return to the football field didn't even cross his mind.

He had, of course, been declared medically exempt in the summer of 1997 — meaning he was not capable of playing college athletics.

Ultimately, the decision to quit was his, but the Cornhusker training staff wasn't encouraging him to return in the fall of '97 following two surgeries on his right knee cap. He was still in too much pain.

"There was no easy way out of it," Perino said. "You just kind of throw everything in the trash can — like I never came and tried or anything."

"It wasn't a waste. I felt like I had a good experience coming here and being a part of it, but it was gone in a heartbeat, and I was just a student. It was really tough," he said.

Even tougher was sitting among 75,000 fans in Memorial Stadium watching his former teammates in the fall of 1997.

Just one year earlier, Perino had walked the sidelines on Saturdays and even saw limited action in seven games behind starter Scott Frost.

"You just kind of throw everything in the trash can — like I never came and tried or anything."

JEFF PERINO
NU quarterback

The action came following the second knee surgery in January 1996 (Perino redshirted in 1995 after a stellar career at Durango (Colo.) High School, where he first dislocated his knee cap).

The decision to go on medical scholarship and never play football again — to free up a football scholarship — came in the summer of 1997, and Perino underwent surgery once more in December.

But he just couldn't take being away from the program, so he joined as a student assistant coach last fall, which wasn't much easier.

"I liked being up there and having the headset

on," he said. "I got deep into the mental game."

"The hard part was watching — seeing mistakes or seeing a receiver open and thinking, 'Gosh, I wish I was down there. I would have loved to make that play,'" he said.

As his itch to get back on the field grew, his knee began feeling stronger.

So finally, Perino went and talked to the great Al Papik, then NU's Athletic Department administrator who worked with the NCAA to get Perino off medical exemption. Perino said he may even be granted a rare sixth year next fall.

But for now, he's not expecting big things. He knows where he stands — and has understood the quarterback situation all along. For Perino, just suiting up is enough.

"I didn't expect anything," Perino said. "I'm just out there competing to the best of my ability, and that's all I can do. I don't know how much playing time I'll get. I just want to be there for the team whenever they need me."

So will the time and sweat be worth his while? "Right now, I don't know," Perino said, "but it's fun being back."

Dave Wilson is a senior news-editorial major and the Daily Nebraskan sports editor