

Battle in football trenches gets ugly

BY SAMUEL MCKEWON
Senior staff writer

It's a strip of land, maybe 3 or 4 yards wide. About 12 yards long. Only a tiny piece of the 100-yard field on which the game football is played.

To go inside it is to delve inside fear, rage, embarrassment and machismo. The biggest, strongest men of the game live and breathe there, struggling for leverage and battling for an advantage that might mean the difference between winning and losing.

It is an area commonly called the trenches. Within it is violence, brutality and, ultimately, the place where games are won and lost.

"It's just pure hate that goes on down there," said NU center Dominic Raiola. "Everything that's pent up from whatever, you let it out there."

While the job often goes unnoticed by television cameras and newspaper reporters, the fact is never lost on the offensive and defensive linemen who do battle, play in and play out.

Such was the case in the Cornhuskers' 24-17 victory last year over Oklahoma State. The Cowboys had forged their way inside the NU 1-yard line by the last play of the game.

On the final play, the Huskers' defensive line, which had been outplayed most of the game by the OSU offensive line, won the battle that mattered the most.

Oklahoma State tailback Nathan Simmons was stood up right before the goal line. Nebraska won and preserved its 37-year winning streak against the Cowboys.

"You can't have any fear at all, and you can tell when guys do," said NU offensive lineman James Sherman. "You have get ready to collide with another person play in, play out. It feels good, especially when you get the upper hand."

But it isn't always easy. Linemen inside the trenches are more likely to play hurt, Sherman said. The tactics inside the pile are often dirty. As rush end Aaron Wills said, "Anything goes."

"You hear of guys scratching out each other's eyeballs, although that's never happened to me," Wills said. "I know it goes on, though."

Describing how, exactly, it works in the trenches or how to succeed there isn't easy. Both Wills and Sherman struggle for the right words, as if it's easier to describe with a hit.

There's always the classic definition from former San Francisco 49ers guard Harris Barton, who equated playing in the trenches to getting into a car and crashing into a brick wall

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AARON WILLS
NU rush end

over and over for 60 minutes.

Wills sees it in a similar way.

"You go 100 miles per hour, and you thrash into this guy," he said. "And you can't stop. Because the guy across from you won't stop."

Said Sherman: "All means necessary is what comes to mind. If I can knock somebody down, I'll do it. If somebody's just standing around and the whistle hasn't blown yet, I'll go and knock them down. That's the way it has to be."

The physical game might be matched only by the mental antics that go on. More often than not, Wills said, the defensive players are the ones that do the trash-talking. Sherman said the offensive players get their share in. But both said the mental part of the game is critical.

It can be the difference between beating a lineman or not, Wills said. While not every player likes the trash talk, every player does try to gain the

advantage, Wills said.

"I'm not going to scream and yell," Wills said. "But if I make a play early in the game, I'll go right to my guy, 'You're going to have to do better than that, because I'm coming like that on every play.' And then you have to come like that every play."

Wills and Sherman both said that's not hard to do, even when they're tired. A lot of it comes from practice sessions, when the No. 1 offense will size up against the No. 1 defense. The trend was started in the early 1990s by then-Nebraska Head Coach Tom Osborne to simulate game speed during the week.

Sherman said it does a lot more for the Huskers than constantly going against scout teams.

"That's game intensity right there," Sherman said. "We aren't going up against better players all season than those guys right there."

"It's the best test we could get."

Nebraska target for Big 12 foes

BY JOHN GASKINS
Staff writer

Wednesday night, the Nebraska volleyball team prevented one catastrophe from repeating itself. Saturday, it will have to do it all over again.

After avenging another Coliseum upset by beating Kansas on Wednesday, the No. 8 Huskers (10-3 and 2-1 in the Big 12 Conference) will travel to Texas for the second straight week to take on No. 16 Texas A&M (11-2 and 2-1) on Saturday at 7 p.m. Last year, the Aggies beat NU in College Station for the Huskers' only loss of the regular season.

Head Coach Terry Pettit has never taken losing well, and he put team members through an intense workout after their upset loss to No. 17 Kansas State at home last week. Though junior outside hitter Nancy Meendering said the Huskers don't dwell on the KSU flop, it has been a motivation factor.

"We don't talk about it much, but I think it's still on our team's mind," said Meendering, who leads NU with 4.65 kills per game. "Every day, I think that match is an incentive for us, if nothing else, to get in there and work hard."

The hard work paid off as the Huskers put behind them the unusual trauma of having three losses before October to come back and beat Texas Tech on the road Sept. 25 and sweep Kansas on Wednesday.

But Meendering said the relief from those two wins won't last long because Nebraska, winners of 21 of 23 Big Eight/Big 12 Championships, wears a big target on its back wherever it goes. The KSU loss only added fuel to the rest of league's fire to dethrone the defending champions.

"I think they get pumped up because before K-State beat us, there may have been some teams that were thinking, 'Oh, they're Nebraska,'" Meendering said, referring to the defeatist attitude conference foes might have had last year.

"But after Kansas State beat us, they're thinking, 'Well, we can beat them, too.'"

Certainly, the Aggies (11-2 and 2-1) don't have many reasons to be lacking confidence. They were one of two teams in the nation to beat a more experienced Nebraska squad last year and were picked to finish second behind the Huskers in this season's Big 12 Preseason Coaches Poll.

Pettit said he picked A&M to finish No. 1 in the conference based on their returning starters. Despite losing All-American Stacy Sykora, who fired up the Aggies in the five-set thriller over NU, A&M returns a powerful lineup in the middle.

Senior middle blocker Amber Woosley has carried the Aggies thus far, averaging 4.16 kills per game and 1.32 blocks while recording a .414 hitting percentage.

"I don't think we can let their middle have a field day and expect to be successful," Pettit said. "We're going to need to run a diversified offense. We can't just go there and set Nancy. We're going to need to have other people in double figures in kills."

If the KU win was any indicator, Pettit need not worry about broadening the offensive attack. With Meendering slowed to an unusually low 10 kills, the Huskers relied on senior Mandy Monson and bench warmers Katie Jahnke and Kim Behrends to combine for 32 of NU's 53 kills en route to its best offensive output of the season.

Meendering, the preseason Big 12 Player of the Year, who smashed the school record for kills in a game (39) against K-State, doesn't have a problem with spreading the wealth.

"I thought the rest of the team really stepped up, especially the left-side hitters," Meendering said. "It was really neat to see, because I see them in practice every day and I know they are great players."

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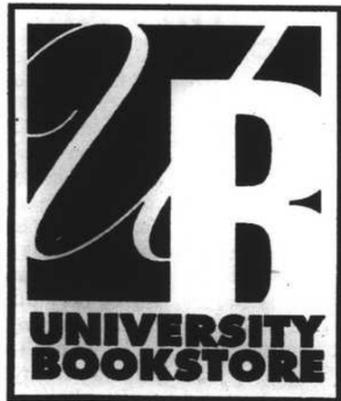
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