

UT coach not getting caught up in 'rivalry' hype

By JOHN GASKINS
Staff writer

Mack Brown has not forgotten that Halloween night last year in Lincoln, when his Texas players proudly hoisted him on their shoulders and marched off the Memorial Stadium turf celebrating the biggest victory in recent UT football history.

And the second-year head coach didn't downplay the significance of breaking Nebraska's seven-year, 47-game home winning streak after the 20-16 upset.

So as coffee shops, sports bars and dinner tables all over Nebraska and Texas buzz this week about the creation of a rivalry between the third- and fourth-winningest football programs in college football history, Brown hasn't denied that Saturday's 2:38 p.m. televised match-up against NU in Austin, Texas, will be a big game.

"When all of us were little," Brown said, "everyone knew who Texas was and who Nebraska was, and that's what makes it special. Anytime two of the traditionally best programs through the years play, I think it would be considered a rival game."

But despite last year's win and UT's 37-27 upset over NU in the 1996 Big 12 Championship,

don't count on Brown getting too carried away about the whole rivalry thing. Not yet, at least.

Brown said both the third-ranked Cornhuskers and 18th-ranked Longhorns have different teams from years past, and all the history talk is just talk by kickoff.

"There will be a lot said of those two games, but after the first bit of contact, none of that matters," Brown said. "I think there is enough motivation - when Nebraska's No. 3 in the country fighting to win a national championship coming into Austin - without talking about last year or three years ago."

A lot has changed in UT's offensive lineup since last year's game, in which the Longhorns were able to make enough big plays down the stretch to stun the NU defense. The Longhorns lost the core of their offense in the NCAA Division-I all-time leading rusher, Ricky Williams, who tallied 150 yards against the Huskers.

Texas lost all five of its experienced offensive linemen that opened up Williams' attack, and the Longhorns are also without split end (and current Dallas Cowboy) Wane McGarrity, who caught the game-winning touchdown a year ago.

Despite all that, the Longhorns have managed to put together the Big 12 Conference's best and the nation's 10th-best offense averaging more than

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459 yards per game.

"We're really surprised that we've moved the ball as well as we have this year," Brown said. "You can't take away the fact that last year at this time we had eight starters that had been around for a long time. It will be interesting to see how our front guys respond to the quickness of the Nebraska defense."

Returning is UT quarterback Major Applewhite, who could provide the toughest challenge yet to a stingy Blackshirt unit that leads the conference and ranks in the top four in the nation, in both scoring (fourth at 9.7 points per game) and total defense (third at 230 yards per game).

Applewhite, the preseason Big 12 Offensive Player of the Year, has lit up scoreboards and statistic sheets with performances not usually seen from sophomores. He ranks second in the Big 12 in both passing (298.7 yards per game) and total offense

(290.6 yards per game) and has thrown for more than 300 yards in four contests this season.

But Brown is just as impressed with the play of Williams' replacement at tailback, sophomore Hodges Mitchell.

Although he isn't putting up the Heisman-Trophy numbers Williams did last year, Brown said Hodges' 96 yards per game (third best in the Big 12) and his threat as a backfield receiver (third in the Big 12 with 127 all-purpose yards per game) provide UT with a potent ground attack.

Brown said the Longhorns will need that attack if they have any hopes of knocking off NU for a third time.

"When you watch Ricky Williams, expectations are really high when you expect your tailback to gain 250 yards a game," Brown said, "but we're pleased with Hodges."

Lone Star Huskers feel sting of Longhorn wins

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that choice.

"People were laughing. I took it personal. This is a really big game for me to show everyone that I picked the right place."

The game is also personal for Craver because he has some friends who are Longhorns.

"I have heard from my people back home that (Lee Jackson and Montrell Flowers) are talking a lot of stuff," Craver said. "I am going to let the game speak for itself."

Not only will the game be personal for Finley and Craver, it will be an important one for the Huskers' Big 12 Conference and national championship aspirations. That alone is motivation, said freshman rush end Justin Smith, who chose NU over Texas.

"Each game is another team that stands in our way of winning a national championship game," said the 6-foot-4, 250-pounder from Sherman, Texas. In addition to the normal focus, there is motivation from losing the last two meetings with UT, said Nebraska senior linebacker Julius Jackson.

"When we play Texas, there is a lot of hostility," said Jackson, a Gainesville, Texas, native. "I am 0-2 against them, and I have a lot to prove."

A win over Texas would vindicate

the six Texans on the Nebraska roster, but it also would give the Huskers an edge in recruiting Texas players.

Jackson is well aware of that.

"I am going out to represent Nebraska and to prove we are a better school than Texas - that we are more dominant and more physical when we are on the field," Jackson said.

Finley chose to leave his home state to play for the two-time defending national champion Huskers. Many other Texas high school players might do the same if NU defeats Texas on Saturday in Austin.

As for Finley, the mocking calls from Cuero have already started. Saturday, he will be ready once and for all to shut them up.

"They talk a lot of smack," Finley said. "A victory would cut down on that and make my trips home a whole lot easier."

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