

Huskers eager for UT game

By JOHN GASKINS
Staff writer

At 2:38 p.m. Saturday, the two-week buildup from players, coaches, media and fans about No. 3 Nebraska (6-0 and 3-0 in Big 12 Conference play) and No. 18 Texas (5-2 and 2-1) will finally end, as the two teams settle the battle on the field.

But what a buildup it has been. Talk of the start of a rivalry between two powerhouse programs with storied traditions. Talk of a matchup that has enough conference and national championship implications to capture a national television audience.

And, of course, talk from Nebraska players lusting for revenge from two losses to Texas in three years — one that knocked NU out of national championship contention (a 37-27 loss in the 1996 Big 12 Championship game), the other which ended a 47-game home winning streak (last year's 20-16 Texas upset in Lincoln).

But the talk is almost over now, and so are the two weeks the teams have had to prepare for each other.

"This week, the attitude has been 'Let's hurry up and get this thing going — let's get our season on,'" said NU Defensive Coordinator Charlie McBride. "I think the players are kind of tired of practicing."

The Cornhuskers are especially eager to carry the momentum of three straight 24-plus-point victories and a Longhorn chip on their shoulders into Austin. Texas is the only team NU has never beaten in Big 12 Conference play.

"Everybody that was here remembers what happened last year," NU center Dominic Raiola said. "That just intensifies the situation. They've beaten us the last two times they've played us. It's like Nebraska can't beat Texas — what's wrong?"

"We're a different team this year, and we want to show we can beat them."

You don't have to go far to validate the magnitude of the game. The matchup pits the Big 12's best defense in Nebraska (allowing just 230 yards and 9.7 points per game) against the conference's best offense in Texas (averaging 459 yards per game).

On the other side of the ball, Texas' 10th-ranked defense (nationally) will try to stop a Nebraska offense that ranks seventh in the nation in scoring at 39 points per game.

"We have a lot of concerns because I think they're an excellent, balanced football team," NU Coach Frank Solich said. "Can they step on the field and beat anyone in this country? I think they could."

Nebraska will try to stop an offensive charge led Major Applewhite, who has thrown for over 200 yards in 17 consecutive games. Supporting him will be the Big 12's third-leading rusher in tailback Hodges Mitchell and leading receiver in Kwame Cavil.

Solich said such talent has given Texas the capability to run game-breaking plays on an NU defense that has suffocated every offense it has faced so far.

Plays like the 76- and 37-yard strikes Applewhite threw to UT

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reversal of fortune



Photo Negative By Lane Hickenbottom

Crouch looks to turn bad memory into NU victory

By SAMUEL MCKEON
Senior staff writer

Eric Crouch needs no time to jog his memory. He remembers the third-down-and-five from the Texas 7-yard line.

He remembers option left. And he remembers fumbling. He remembers losing to Texas 20-16. He remembers the feeling of walking off that Memorial Stadium turf a loser for the first time in 47 games at home and having to walk past UT Coach Mack Brown heaved atop his team's shoulders singing "The Eyes of Texas" with the Longhorn band.

"It hasn't left my mind — not once, not yet," Crouch said of that third-quarter fumble near the Texas goal line with Nebraska ahead 13-10. UT quarterback Major Applewhite hit a 75-yard pass five plays later to jump start the Longhorns' comeback and eventual victory.

"I'm pretty hard on myself," Crouch said. "When you're a competitive person, those are things that are going to bother and motivate you."

"I was a young quarterback, inexperienced. I tried to make a play on my own, and if I had just kept the option play to the outside — everything looked good out there — it would have been a touchdown. It's something that has stuck in my mind. It's still there."

From that moment until Crouch's next shot at UT — Saturday at 2:38 p.m. in Austin, Texas — it will have been a long, strange, 357-day journey for the sophomore, which has taken him through every peak and valley a college quarterback can go through short of major injury.

There was the breakthrough game against Kansas State. The loss to Arizona in the Holiday Bowl and a four-loss season. The no-contact spring practices. The battle with Bobby Newcombe for starting quarterback through summer and fall. Losing that battle. Changing positions. Switching positions with Newcombe. Leading the team. And then, in true capitalist fashion, getting his own line of hats (not his idea).

Texas, then, represents a full circle that had a lot of wobbles in it. But it's a circle that changed Crouch's outlook on the game.

"A lot of guys on the team last year didn't have a great attitude about playing, including myself," Crouch said. "My attitude has improved ten-fold."

"So has my knowledge of the game. Last year, after watching the tape against Texas, there were a lot of defenses I probably should have seen, blitz packages I

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NU focuses on winning key conference game

By BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON
Staff writer

Nebraska has become accustomed to hanging conference championship banners from the rafters of the NU Coliseum.

But if it is to add another this year, a win at Texas Saturday is necessary, Head Coach Terry Pettit said.

The 13th-ranked Huskers will take on the No. 10 Longhorns (14-3 overall and 8-1 in the Big 12 Conference) at 8 p.m. in Austin in a game equally as important to the Big 12 volleyball standings as the

gridiron game hours before will be to the football standings.

"I think for either team to have any chance to win the conference, they'll have to win the game," Pettit said.

NU (15-4 and 7-2) has climbed to within one game of K-State and Texas in the race for the conference title heading into Saturday night's game.

The Wildcats had owned a two-game advantage over the Huskers until an upset loss to Baylor on Wednesday night.

"This is the toughest conference in the country in my mind," Pettit said. "When you've got four teams

“We have two days to prepare for Saturday, and we will be ready.”

JILL McWILLIAMS
NU setter

ranked 14th or better, that's a pretty challenging situation."

The addition of the Texas schools to the old Big Eight has added to the competition, and Pettit says looking at the Longhorns is like looking in the mirror.

"We recruit the same athletes,"

he said, "and in many ways, out of all the universities in the Big 12, they are the most similar to us."

Texas and Nebraska are the only schools to claim the conference title since the formation of the Big 12.

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