

Huskers hope to be healthy for

By SAMUEL MCKEWON
Senior editor

Last Friday was one of those good days for the Nebraska football team.

Practice was short. Recruits were in town. Post-practice media coverage was light.

And NU Coach Frank Solich was upbeat about the eventual recovery of his 11-1 team after it got banged up in the Big 12 Championship game against Texas. Solich said the forecast for most of his injured players looks good for the Fiesta Bowl, to be played Jan. 2 at Sun Devil Stadium against Tennessee.

"The guys that were banged up, they're on the process of recovery," Solich said. "I think we'll have about everybody for the game."

That possibly includes tight end Tracey Wistrom, who partially tore his posterior cruciate ligament the week of the UT game. Solich said Wistrom would have "a chance" to play against the 9-2 Volunteers, who won the national championship last season.

"We thought, right around the Texas game, that Tracey might be able to come back for this one," Solich said, referring to the Fiesta Bowl.

Also returning for the game will be starting middle linebacker Carlos Polk and starting I-back Dan Alexander, who suffered a mysterious, deep laceration on his hand during the 22-6 win over the Longhorns. Solich said he expects Alexander to get about 7 to 10 days of practice in before the game.

As for the opponent, many Huskers consider it to be the toughest of the season, though NU has been beaten once already by Texas and played a one-loss Kansas State. With coaches out of town on recruiting, Solich said, not everyone on the staff has seen a good deal of film.

"Some of it will come down for getting prepared for what they're doing on both sides of the ball."

FRANK SOLICH
NU coach

But the book on the Vols isn't too hard to figure out. Their defense is predicated on speed, Solich said, with strong cornerbacks. Offensively, Tennessee can run and pass with effectiveness. Its two losses were both on the road, and both times the Vols had a chance to win the game on a final drive.

"We've had our chance to see a little film, but the guys on the road will have to do a little bit of catch-up," Solich said. "But we have a good feel for what they were doing."

"Some of it will come down for getting prepared for what they're doing on both sides of the ball. Some of it will come down to conditioning."

Defensive Coordinator Charile McBride not only said the Vols were the best team overall but the best offensive team all year.

At times, they have been. Tennessee returned a good deal of its offensive firepower from last season, including quarterback Tee Martin and running back Travis Henry.

It also has running back Jamal Lewis in the fold again after he tore his anterior cruciate ligament in an early 1998 game. Lewis, at the time of his injury, was considered one of the two or three best running backs in the country by several preseason publica-



I-BACK CORRELL BUCKHALTER cuts through the Texas defense in the Big 12 championship game, gaining 55 yards on the play. Buckhalter broke the record for the longest run in a Big 12 championship game.

RIGHT: NU QUARTERBACK Eric Crouch outruns the diving Raymond Cato from Oklahoma State. Crouch and the Huskers are going to the Fiesta Bowl to take on Tennessee on Jan. 2, in Tempe, Arizona.

tions.

Because of stiff competition from Henry, Lewis never got as many carries. Still, the two combined for more than 1,800 yards before the season was over, and Martin threw for more than 2,300 yards.

"Tennessee has as good of backs as anyone in the country," McBride said. "They're all big backs, big strong backs. The quarterback is probably the most athletic quarterback we've faced. Martin can really run and

throw. He's a guy that will run quarterback draws and sprint out."

Statistically, Tennessee's offense outgained last year's 13-0 squad in one less contest. What separated the two teams more than anything else was luck.

In 1998, Tennessee was outgained in its first two games yet squeaked by Syracuse 34-33 and Florida 20-17. Then, the Vols were handed victory against Arkansas when UA's quarterback fumbled while trying to keep his

balance.

Florida and Arkansas got their revenge this season with late-game wins.

"They only lost a couple of games by a combined five points," McBride said.

Had Tennessee not lost to Arkansas 28-24, it might have had a chance to find itself in the national championship game against Florida State. Instead, UT heads to the Fiesta Bowl for the second-straight season.

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