



The five (spring football)



We really want answered

When you finish the season ranked No. 3 in the nation, as the Nebraska football team did last season, there is little margin for error.

Coming off of a 12-1 season that included a Big 12 Conference Championship and staring at a possible 13-game schedule next fall, there is only one way for NU to finish better – to win all of its games.

In other words, NU needs a national title. “(The expectations) were high the first two years,” said Coach Frank Solich of his first two campaigns, in which NU won 21 of 26 games. “The team, in setting its goals, set them about as high as you can set them.

“There probably is a thin line between being able to get it all done and losing a couple of games. And there certainly is a thin line between losing one game and three or four.”

If the team’s hopes stay beyond the losing threshold, it will have to answer five questions between the 15 spring workouts, which started Monday, and the Red-White Spring Game on April 15.

1. Will Nebraska be able to find enough capable bodies to play linebacker?

The cupboard is almost bare. Gone are Julius Jackson, Eric Johnson, Tony Ortiz and Brian Shaw, who were four of the top five linebackers. They filled the top two spots on the depth chart at both the strong side and weak side position.

New Defensive Coordinator Craig Bohl has his hands full as inexperience reigns at both positions.

Randy Stella might be the most notable player at the weak side position. Last fall he made a name for himself on the punt team, blocking two punts. Mark Vedral is the only other candidate with viable experience at the position.

At strong side, the top two candidates aren’t exactly household names, either. Only those fans who stayed around late in blow-out wins, and the families of Scott Shanle and Rod Baker, know who they are. And Shanle is the only player at the position on scholarship.

But come fall the linebacker positions will get a much needed infusion from five linebacker recruits, and Solich said all will have a chance to play as a true freshman.

2. What will Nebraska do with all of its I-backs?

NU has I-backs coming out of its ears. Since Ahman Green left following the 1997 season, Nebraska has used an I-Back-by-committee approach to counter its lack of a top-flight running back. And the stable will be large this spring.

The top three, Dan Alexander, Correll Buckhalter and Darran Diedrick, all return, as do three other scholarship players. Finding time for DeAntae Grixby, who returns from a knee injury, along with Robin Miller and Josh Davis, who are coming off of a redshirt seasons, will be difficult. Throw 2000 recruit Thunder Collins into the mix next fall, and Solich has a problem on his hands.

Buckhalter and Alexander will receive limited attempts, Solich said, as they have already

proven themselves. The others will have an opportunity to set themselves apart from the pack.

Of all the questions that need to be answered this spring, this has to be Solich’s favorite.

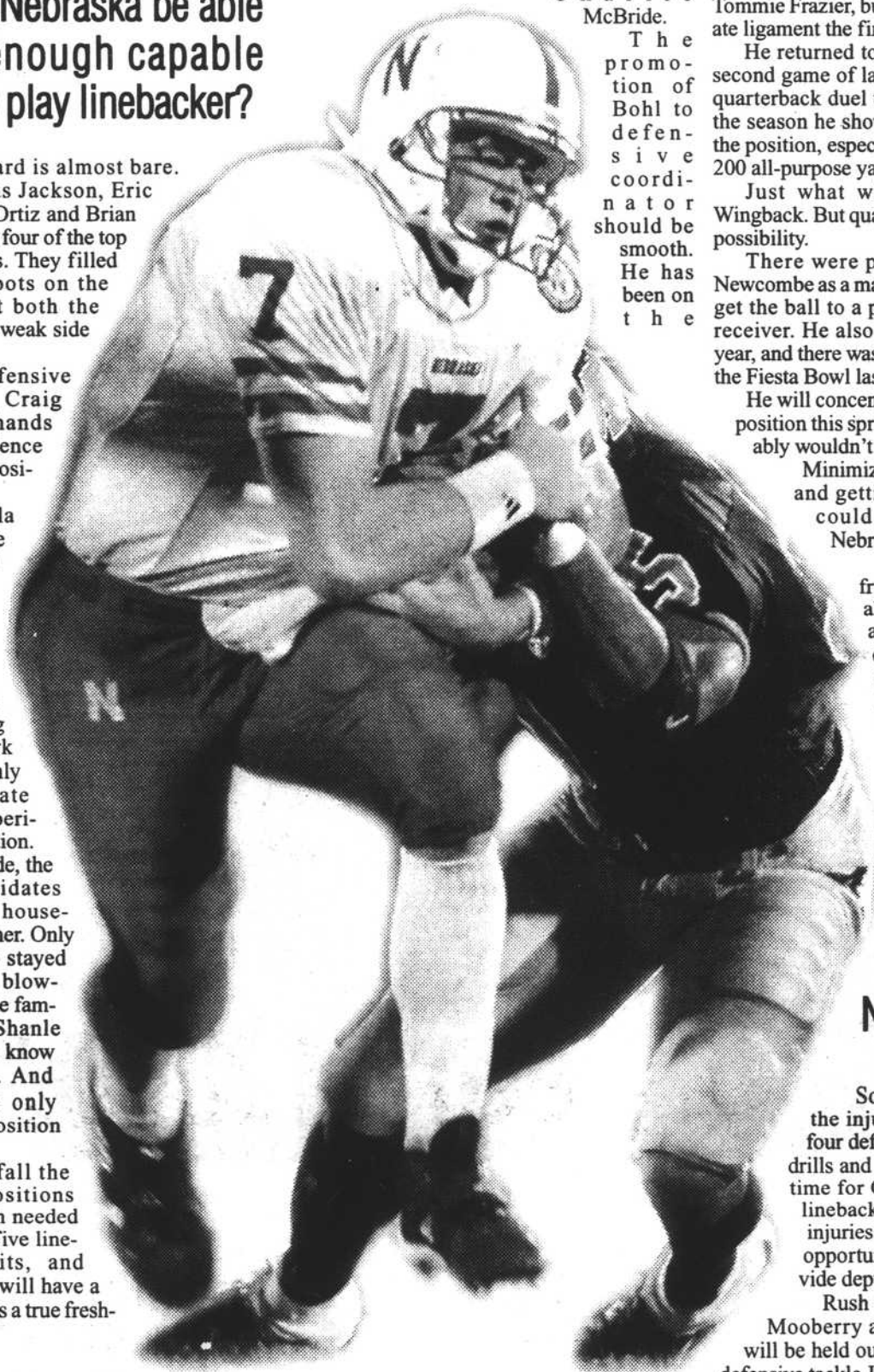
“There’s no question when you look at it that the (running back) position is a strong position for us not only in quality but in quantity,” Solich said. “We’ve had years before that we’ve had similar situations. They just have to do the best they can and see how it all plays out knowing that it’s a position that not everyone stays healthy.”

3. Will the coaching changes mean anything?

The Huskers will have to find some way to replace six starters, including two All-Americans and 18-year Defensive Coordinator

Charlie McBride.

The promotion of Bohl to defensive coordinator should be smooth. He has been on the



Osborne, I know I can’t replace Charlie McBride,” Jamrog said.

“But with a great support staff and a strong work ethic, I will do everything I can to get the job done. I hope to carry on the Nebraska tradition and instill the pride of being a Blackshirt.”

4. Which hat will Bobby Newcombe wear next season?

He was recruited as a quarterback. He moved to wingback as a freshman in 1997, eliciting comparisons to Johnny Rodgers for his acrobatic catches and exciting punt returns.

He returned to quarterback in the spring of 1998, winning the job, and was compared to Tommie Frazier, but he tore his posterior cruciate ligament the first game of the season.

He returned to wingback again, after the second game of last season, when he lost the quarterback duel to Eric Crouch. The rest of the season he showed flashes of brilliance at the position, especially at Kansas when he had 200 all-purpose yards and two touchdowns.

Just what will Newcombe do now? Wingback. But quarterback is, yes, still a slight possibility.

There were periods of frustration for Newcombe as a mainly running offense tried to get the ball to a player that was primarily a receiver. He also was Crouch’s backup last year, and there was talk of his playing I-back at the Fiesta Bowl last January.

He will concentrate solely on the wingback position this spring, and Solich said he probably wouldn’t take snaps at quarterback.

Minimizing Newcombe’s frustration and getting him the ball regularly could be key to a possible Nebraska title run next fall.

“You’re going to have some frustration as the season goes along when you’re as talented a player as Bobby, and some of the other players are, in that they just don’t get their hands on the ball as much as they would like,” Solich said.

“It’s built around, to a degree, the system, but we realize the talent that Bobby has and tried to do a lot of things last season to utilize that talent.”

5. What about NU injuries?

Solich put a positive spin on the injury situation that will hold four defensive linemen out of spring drills and limit the amount of practice time for Crouch and starting middle linebacker Carlos Polk. He said the injuries will give younger players the opportunity to step up and will provide depth for the team next fall.

Rush ends Chris Kelsey, Brandon Mooberry and Justin Smith definitely will be held out of spring practices, as will defensive tackle Jeremy Slechta.

To counter the injuries, Erwin Swiney, Jason Schwab, Matt Shook and Mike Demps are expected to be back from injuries that caused them to miss all of last season. Tight end Tracey Wistrom should be close to full speed after suffering a knee injury at the end of last season, and Polk should be healthy by the middle of spring.

The main concern on Solich’s mind is Crouch’s shoulder. After the Fiesta Bowl, Crouch underwent successful surgery on his throwing shoulder, and Solich said he wouldn’t have contact or be able to throw at the beginning of spring drills, but by the end of it, he should be at full speed. He will not participate in any spring scrimmages or the spring game.

These are the five questions. Most teams have far more than that. Then again, most teams don’t have the realistic expectations that Nebraska does. But the answers to those five questions will go a long way in determining the success of the 2000 season.

Nebraska staff since the 1995 season as linebacker coach, and he took a leading role in the Nebraska special teams.

The former Nebraska player and graduate assistant had twice been a defensive coordinator at both Rice and Duke before his return to Nebraska.

Solich said Bohl was an ideal selection for the job because of his experience, his leadership, his coaching ability and his work ethic.

McBride’s retirement also left a vacancy at defensive line coach.

Like the promotion of Bohl, Solich wasted little time in naming Jeff Jamrog as McBride’s replacement.

Jamrog, another former Nebraska player, had served the previous three years as defensive coordinator and inside linebacker coach at New Mexico State. When he was officially hired on Jan 21, he was confident that he could handle the job.

“Just like you can’t really replace a Tom