

Johnson comes off bench for spark

By Matthew Hansen
Staff writer

Nebraska First Baseman Dan Johnson has the size of feet you'd expect a 6-foot-2, 215-pound guy to have.

His shoe size, though, seems to be increasing with every home run he hits.

One of four players assigned the daunting task of filling the giant cleats of 1999 National Player of the Year Ken Harvey, Johnson has emerged as the Husker to fill the power-hitting void.

And after tearing through the Big 12 Conference schedule with a slugging percentage near the astronomical 1.000 mark, the question must be posed.

Is Johnson going to have people asking, "Kenny who?"

No, according to Johnson, Coach Dave Van Horn and catcher Justin

Cowan. But they all agreed Johnson's performance this season was special in its own right.

"There is no replacing Ken Harvey," Johnson said, sitting in the visitor's dugout after Sunday's Kansas game. "What he did here is unmatched, so I'm not trying in any way to replace him."

His play suggests he is trying, though. One out of every six times Johnson has gone to the plate, the ball has cleared the fence. These are numbers that anyone this side of Mark McGwire would be envious of.

Cowan said Johnson's power was impressive.

"He just has so much strength up there," Cowan said. "He has got just as much power as Harvey. Dan can hit it out any time, to any part of the park. Not very many people can do that."

Of course, Harvey also hit nearly .500 last year. Johnson is sitting at .333.

There is another difference. Harvey seemingly never came out of the Husker lineup last season. In fact, he started 55 of the Husker's 60 games. And the left-handed Johnson, despite leading the team in home runs, slugging percentage and on-base percentage, plays only against right-handed pitchers.

Platoon Player

As Johnson sits in the dugout, talking to a reporter, children periodically come up to him for an autograph, evidence of his growing stardom.

But that status is offset, maybe purposely, by the item in Johnson's hands.

It is a broom, and it is Johnson's task to sweep the assorted sunflower seeds out of the visitor's dugout.

It is a task Johnson doesn't seem to mind, just like he doesn't mind being a cog in the Husker baseball wheel.

"It's whatever is best for the team

right now," he said, broom in hand. "I have been getting a lot of chances lately, and we're playing good right now, so that's all I'm concerned about. Whatever (Van Horn) puts up as the lineup, we go with."

Cowan said the other first basemen, including Dan Wright, Jim Bailey and Matt Hopper, who is primarily a designated hitter, were all good players.

But he also said he loved to see Johnson's name penciled in on the lineup card.

"The way he's swinging right now, it is awfully tough to keep him out of the lineup," he said. "Any time you have a guy like Dan that can step to the plate and the next thing you know hit a two-run homer, it is a great threat."

"I'll say one thing. I sure enjoy having him in the lineup behind me."

Fitting in

Van Horn's philosophy, which emphasizes speed and bat control, would seem to be a bad fit for Johnson, who describes himself as primarily a power hitter.

But instead, the slugger has fit right in to the Husker system, according to Cowan.

A prime example occurred during last Sunday's game against Kansas.

In the eighth inning, Johnson stepped to the plate. The crowd buzzed in anticipation. Kid Rock blared from the speakers.

You could just imagine Johnson ripping the Jayhawk hurler's offering over the right field fence.

But it didn't happen. Much the opposite. Instead, Johnson bunted, moving the NU runner to second.

It hasn't always been this way. While playing junior college baseball

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OU looking to regain old reputation

By John Gaskins
Staff writer

Nebraska and Oklahoma football fans starving for the revival of what was once the fiercest rivalry in college football may get their wish on Oct. 28 when the teams meet in Norman.

In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, the series often upheld virtually every standard needed for the perfect arch rivalry: two top-ranked football powerhouses, the last game of the regular season, on Thanksgiving weekend, for the conference title, with national title implications on the line.

But in the three few years before the formation of the Big 12 Conference put the series on hiatus in 1998 and '99, Oklahoma failed to uphold its end of the rivalry bargain. The Huskers beat the Sooners 37-0, 73-21 and 69-7 to turn the rivalry into a joke.

OU fell gradually from grace after Barry Switzer resigned amidst an NCAA violation investigation, which led to the program's probation in 1989. The Sooners went through three coaches in nine years and became worse with each one.

But since that embarrassing 62-point setback to NU in 1997, the program got the shot in the arm it needed with the 1999 hiring of former Steve Spurrier Assistant Bob Stoops.

In one season, the 42-year-old Stoops turned OU into a team to be reckoned with again, leading it to a 7-5 record and its first winning season and bowl appearance in six years. Now the question is, do the Sooners have what it takes to make Nebraskans cringe as they did in Switzer's days?

"I don't know if we're there yet," first-year Offensive Coordinator Mark Mangino said. "Certainly, we'd love that kind of rivalry with Nebraska again. But to have a rivalry, both teams must win. We're trying to take it one game at a time right now."

Stoops has drawn OU closer to top dog by hauling in a big-name and proven coaching staff. He hired former OU quarterback Cale Gundy, who was the leader on some of OU's last winning teams in the early '90s. Former Heisman runner-up Chuck Long, who was at Iowa the same time Stoops was an assistant coach there, is the Sooners' quarterback coach.

Spurrier's son, Steve Jr., is the co-defensive coordinator. Mangino joined the staff in January after Offensive Coordinator Mike Leach left to become coach at Texas Tech. Mangino came fresh off coaching Kansas State's offense to national prominence for eight years under another program-healer, Bill Snyder.

However, it was Leach's pass-happy system and the budding of an unlikely gunslinger in junior college transfer quarterback Josh Heupel that were

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Though he isn't seeing much time this spring, Dan Alexander will battle Correll Buckhalter for the No. 1 I-back spot next fall. Several NU players are battling for the backup spots during these workouts. DN File Photo

NU I-backs contain depth of past years

By John Gaskins
Staff writer

With probably plenty of thoughts occupying him after Friday's spring football practice, Nebraska Coach Frank Solich could have been forgiven if the answer to one measly historical question slipped his mind.

But for the life of him, Solich could not remember the exact year that the Huskers last had as much depth at the I-back spot as he believes they will in 2000.

He remembered that a few years ago, when he was NU's running backs coach, there were five I-backs playing regularly — Lawrence Phillips, Ahman Green, Damon Benning, Clinton Childs and Jay Sims.

When asked if 1995 was the year he was referring to, Solich nodded in agreement and grinned.

"Yeah, that was a good year, you could say," Solich said.

That year, Nebraska won a second-consecutive national title and led the nation in rushing with more than 400 yards per game, its second best output in school history. The team's I-backs featured three of the top-25 players on NU's all-time rushing list — Green (second), Phillips (sixth) and Benning (24th).

Not too shabby a comparison for the 2000 running backs to hold themselves to.

The top three I-backs — senior Dan

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“At Nebraska, something we've always done is wear down teams. This year, we're going to have even more depth and potential to wear people down.”

Dan Alexander
NU I-back