



Josh Wolfe/DN
LEFT: A SMALL video camera records Coach Frank Solich as he talks about the next season of Nebraska football.

Steven R. Bender/DN
BELOW: NEBRASKA COACH Frank Solich answers questions Wednesday during the first media conference of the 2000 football season. This season will mark Solich's third year as coach for the Huskers.

Expectations run high for NU's 2000 season

By Joshua Camenzind

Staff writer

Who can stop the Nebraska offense?

On the day that fall practice officially begins, that is the million-dollar question.

Dominic Raiola, the Huskers starting center, thinks he knows the answer.

"Ourselves," he said. "All I can

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Jason Schwab
 NU offensive lineman

say right now is that I don't see any flaws in it."

Nor do many others.

With the Cornhuskers returning 10 starters, a Heisman Trophy candidate in quarterback Eric Crouch and virtually all of the offensive line from a year ago, many will ask what are the missing ingredients.

Matt Davison said there are none.

"I think all of the pieces of the puzzle are there," he said. "We have been getting a lot of attention offensively and it is rightfully deserved."

The reason for most of that attention is the man behind the wheel - Crouch. Coming off a campaign in which he led the team in rushing and passed for 2,158 yards, Crouch is now receiving national recognition.

All of this comes less than a year ago when Crouch was relegated to the backup role behind Bobby Newcombe.

"He is one of the best in the nation," Davison said. "It is pretty set in stone that Eric Crouch will be our starting quarterback if he is healthy."

"Everybody understands how great a player he is. He really makes our offense click and having the same guy take the snaps creates unity."

Crouch is surrounded by experience at every position - especially at offensive line.

NU lost starters Adam Julch and James Sherman from a group that was dominant at the end of 1999 and plug-in Jason Schwab and Toniui Fonoti. Schwab missed last season due to injury but started every game in 1998, while Fonoti was a backup as a true freshman.

Those two, along with the likes of Raiola, Dave Volk and Russ Hochstein, are looking to quiet the skeptics this season.

"We don't need anybody to tell us that we are No. 1," Schwab said.



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Raiola said that while the line is talented and confident, it still has a lot to prove on the field before it can be considered among the top lines in Nebraska history.

"We are starting off with a clean slate," he said. "We didn't lead the nation in rushing and we haven't won a national championship yet, so we really haven't done anything yet."

NU Head Coach Frank Solich agreed.

"Just to say that we are going to step up there and knock everybody off the line of scrimmage and move the ball down the field is not right," he said. "We are going to be in a lot of battles."

Those that will be responsible for carrying the ball are not lacking in the experience department as well. The Huskers return their top five rushers in Crouch, Dan Alexander, Correll Buckhalter, Dahrnan Diedrick, Willie Miller and Bobby Newcombe.

Are there enough balls to go around? Crouch doesn't think it matters.

"Anybody I hand off to will do

a fine job," he said.

But Crouch must also throw when needed and is again met with experience at those positions.

Davison and Newcombe will receive the majority of attention at the wide receiver position and the tight ends include First-Team Big 12 selection, Tracey Wistrom.

"Tracey is a proven player in all aspects of the game," Solich said. "He is the complete package."

While there is no question of the talent at the skill positions, there is a question of butterfingers in the group.

NU led the nation in fumbles with 49 - losing 25 of them. It is something that Solich called "maddening."

"We did not get it done last year," Solich said. "It was about as frustrating as it can get."

Solich said NU did improve at the end of the season at taking care of the ball but the offense cannot afford to leave the defense in the same positions it did a year ago.

"We have to give our defense a chance," he said. "We cannot put the ball on the ground on the very first play of the game the way we did a couple of times last year."