

# I-backs could slow NU offense

Finally, an instance where the word "juggernaut" isn't hype-filled and unfair. The 2000 Nebraska offense makes you want to use verbs like steam-roller and conjure up imagery of exploding scoreboards.



Matthew Hansen

But there's one problem with this point-producing machine, and it's in a place Nebraska fans never, ever have to look.

I-back. The I-backs are the weak sisters of the offense. Crouch, the wide-receiving trio, the offensive line—all outstanding. The backs? Not so good. That's strange.

It's a hard sell, especially with a depth chart loaded from top to bottom with former heavily recruited runners. Nebraska gets former prep standout running backs who become standout college running backs, and sometimes standout NFL running backs.

In a given year, the Huskers may have a secondary that gets burnt a lot, linebackers too slow to keep up with the Florida schools, a quarterback that couldn't throw a bean bag through the clown's mouth (see Mickey Joseph), but never, ever, a bad I-backing crew. Right?

Well, not this year, and not last year either. In '99, Eric Crouch carried the ball, and the backs, too. He was the first quarterback to lead the Huskers in running since a guy named Rex Fischer in 1955.

Coach Frank Solich doesn't want him to do it again this year. The chances for injury are too high. But, unless something changes, and the I-backs stop fumbling the football, start juking defenders and overall begin to live up to their potential, Crouch is this team's I-back.

Look at the alternatives. Dan Alexander is a 150-pound chess whiz trapped in a physically amazing body. He sometimes runs over people, but he isn't hard to tackle.

He rarely runs by people. He never, ever runs around people. He might have worse hands than any NU back in the last 20 years, and Husker backs aren't usually renowned for their catching ability.

He's the starter. Correll Buckhalter would start, but he makes costly mental mistakes. He also fumbles, much like Alexander.

Dahrran Diedrick would start, but he has a hard time staying out of trouble. He's a fumbler, too. That leaves everybody's Junior College All-American Thunder Collins.

Collins could very well be the next coming of Mike Rozier. He also could be the next coming of Leodis Flowers. Thing is, I don't know. Neither do you. Neither does Frank Solich.

We all will. Be patient. What you shouldn't be patient for is for youngsters Josh Davis and DeAntae Grixby to gain their place at the running backs' table. They aren't much worse than the trio that will play for the Big Red. Then again, they aren't much better. They have done nothing to distinguish themselves from the pack and earn playing time.

Collins is the only one with that chance, and remember, you, I and Frankie are all still in the dark on that one.

Don't think for a minute that the backs, who are below average by Husker standards (which are admittedly high), will sabotage the running game.

In fact, the rest of the offense will do an excellent job of propping them up most of the time. This is where you start salivating at the offensive prospects of a mammoth line, an experienced and potential game-changing wide receiving trio and Crouch, a quarterback who will garner Heisman attention at the end of the season.

Even last year, Alexander averaged a gaudy 6.5 yards per carry, with Buckhalter and Diedrick not far behind. Don't think for a minute they would gain these chunks of yardage at some place like the University of Kansas.

None of the three rushed for 1,000 yards or was consistently good at the position. Alexander, Buckhalter and Diedrick did nothing to prove they were the solid No. 1 I-back, something Solich and his staff want very

# Schwab's recovery strengthens Husker pipeline

The offensive tackle provides experience and talent to the already strong nucleus made up of Dominic Raiola, Russ Hochstein and Dave Volk.

BY DAVID M. DIEHL

Jason Schwab is celebrating an anniversary of sorts.

It's been almost exactly a year since the ACL and MCL in Schwab's left knee gave out smack in the middle of fall camp. His knee required major reconstructive knee surgery and a senior year on the sidelines.

With the injury and its subsequent anniversary, it's been quite awhile since Schwab has seen action. NU's 23-20 loss to Arizona in the 1999 Holiday Bowl was the last time the 300-pounder was down in the trenches.

That's 19 months without live, Big Red, smashmouth football.

Nineteen months without a pancake block. Nineteen months without a left tackle pull. Nineteen months too many.

In that time, Schwab has watched his team leave behind its embarrassing 1998 9-4 record and 20th place finish. He'll play for 2000's Cornhuskers, who are ranked No. 1 in the preseason.

Now, when Sept. 2 and San Jose State roll around, Schwab is looking to put the ghosts of those 19 months behind him and help back up the Husker's preseason No. 1 status.

"1998 was pathetic," he said. "I'll be the first one to say it. Our offensive line didn't have it. We had a lot of talent on that team, but we just didn't come

together like we have in the past couple of years.

"This year, it's unbelievable, I mean, we're all like brothers."

Beginning his sixth year with his NU brothers, Schwab said the only remaining scars from the injury are just below the kneecap, not between his ears.

"It's something I don't think about anymore," Schwab, 23, said. "Injuries are a part of the game; it's just unfortunate that it happened to me."

"Your season could be over at any second. Everybody knows that. That's just motivation to go out there and play harder. Injuries are just a part of football."

Schwab graduated in May with a communication studies degree and is taking 15 hours of classes on his master's degree.

He said he can't wait to run out of the tunnel for the first time in a long time.

"I'll be like a little kid again," Schwab said with a grin crossing his boyish face. "It'll be like I'm a freshman all over again. It's going to be exciting."

However, Schwab would never have had the chance to go through another "Tunnel Walk" if it wasn't for the NCAA's granting him his sixth year of eligibility.

It was just after the Fiesta Bowl last season, and Schwab was back home in Egan, Minn.

A morning phone call from Offensive Line Coach Milt Tenopir turned out to be the best wake-up call Schwab has ever had.

Schwab was out cold when a 9 a.m. phone call from his coach on Jan. 5 delivered the news.

"We got it buddy," Tenopir said on the other end of the line. "We got your sixth year."

"Oh, okay," was the only reaction a half-comatose Schwab could muster.

"Then I woke up a little bit, and it hit me," the former walk-on said. "I was like 'Good Lord, I got my sixth year.' I kind of went off the hook then."

Schwab's return to this year's offensive



HUSKER OFFENSIVE TACKLE Jason Schwab stretches just before afternoon practice Monday. Schwab sat out last season after injuring his left knee, but his 1998 starting experience helped him earn his place back on the line this fall.

"Having Jason back is like gaining another starter."

Milt Tenopir  
offensive line coach

line nucleus of Dominic Raiola, Russ Hochstein and Dave Volk provides the Huskers with the experience and talent to dominate games and control the line of scrimmage, Schwab said.

"I can't think of another line I'd rather run behind," I-back Dan Alexander said.

"Having Jason back is like gaining another starter," Tenopir said. "We lost two (Adam Julch and James Sherman), but we gained back one."

Having Alexander and the other running backs run at will over the opponent is the ultimate goal, Tenopir said. But manhandling the defense like that isn't entirely in the O-line's hands.

"It totally depends what the other guys throw at us," Tenopir said.

"A lot of things are involved, more than just fine linemen. We got to have wideouts and tight ends blocking. There are a lot of things involved."

Coach Frank Solich had similar thoughts.

"There are great defensive teams out there and many knowledgeable coaches that won't allow you to do that," he said. "It's always going to be a battle."

"I like our chances in a lot of those battles, however."



WIDE RECEIVERS Matt Davison, Bobby Newcombe and tight end Tracey Wistrom together rank as one of the best catching units in Big Red history. The trio combined to catch 64 passes in 1,108 yard season.

# A different triple option

Talented NU trio a dangerous wide receiver corps — after it blocks

Newcombe had two punt returns for touchdowns last season, while Davison should finish his career as the second leading Cornhusker receiver in history after catching 29 passes last season. Wistrom topped nearly every pre-season magazine list as one of the top returning tight ends in the nation after averaging 26.8 yards per reception during the 1999 season.

BY JAMIE SUHR

Catching passes for the Nebraska football team is like being Allen Iverson's teammate during a two-on-two pickup basketball game — you never see the ball.

But despite playing in a run-oriented offense, the Cornhuskers' best playmakers can be found catching the ball.

Wingback Bobby Newcombe, split end Matt Davison and tight end Tracey Wistrom rank as one of the best pass-catching receiving corps in Big Red history, said Ron Brown, NU receivers coach.

"They're very special, no question about it," Brown said. "In a running offense, these guys don't always get the great statistics, but they're big-time players."

The trio combined to catch 64 passes for 1,108 yards last season. Davison led the way with 29 receptions.

"I didn't come here expecting to catch 10 passes a game," Davison said. "Wistrom, Newcombe and myself, we're here to make plays."

No college football fan can forget Davison's diving catchoff of a Shevin Wiggins-kicked ball for a touchdown against Missouri, keeping NU's hopes alive for a national championship.

Even with the lack of passes thrown in Davison's direction, the senior needs just three catches to break Guy Ingles' record of 74 receptions by a split end.

Without true deep speed, Davison must rely on sharp route running and sure hands. Combined with his football intelligence, Brown called Davison the team's bread-and-butter receiver.

"He's been in a lot of clutch situations, and he responds to the pressure well," Brown said.

No player may better understand pressure than Bobby Newcombe. Faced with expectations of becoming the "next Tommie Frazier," Newcombe battled injuries and a quarterback controversy with Eric Crouch before becoming a full-time wingback last season.

Now, Newcombe gives the Huskers a threat at the position that NU coaches haven't seen since Irving Fryar left campus in 1983.

With a year under his belt, Newcombe can completely focus on learning the nuances of wingback, a position Brown said the senior has adapted to well.

Brown said Newcombe improved a great deal in his route-running and his blocking.

"He's going to improve a lot," Brown said. "He came in as a quarterback, but he's played a lot of wingback. A lot of it is just fine tuning."

With Newcombe's speed and ability to make defenders miss, the coaches are looking at a variety of ways to get him the football, Brown said.

"There's a lot of things he can do whether it is a screen, a reverse, plays down the field or short stuff. He's a very versatile athlete," Brown said.

But Newcombe might make his biggest impact as a punt returner. During his career, he has averaged 19.2 yards per return and scored two touchdowns.

"I don't make big plays," Newcombe said. "The people around me make big plays."

While Wistrom doesn't have Newcombe's speed or Davison's

"In a running offense, these guys don't always get the great statistics, but they're big-time players."

Ron Brown  
receivers coach

earned All-Big 12 honors after averaging an impressive 26.8 yards per catch. The junior is also NU's all-time leader in career yards per catch at 28.5 yards a grab.

Wistrom quickly became Crouch's favorite downfield target after he caught a 70-yard touchdown pass in a 45-0 win over California.

"He's a big target and a terrific athlete," Crouch said. "He has great instincts for playing football. That's what sets him apart."

After playing at 215 pounds last season, Wistrom spent most of his off-season bulking up to improve his run blocking. After all, he'll get plenty of chances for a team that averaged 265.9 rushing yards per game last season.

"I need to become more of an explosive blocker and someone Coach Brown can rely on in any situation," Wistrom said.

And in most cases, the situation will be for Newcombe, Davison and Wistrom to run block, which doesn't bother the trio.

"We understand our role and just try to stay within ourselves with the limited opportunities we get," Davison said.