

## CU game helped save Solich

Given that it's awfully tough to be caught dead in this state without an opinion on the Husker football team, I wonder what most fans are thinking about good ol' Frank Solich right about now.



John Gaskins

I wonder, but that doesn't mean I care. See, like *most*, but not *all*, of you born and bred Cornheads, I don't *really* know a damn thing about NU football, because, you see, I've never been on the team (thank God for you).

Granted, I've been following NU since the week before I came out of my mother's womb, when Jim Pillen recovered Billy Sims' fumble on the three-yard-line that gave Tom Osborne his first win over Barry Switzer in six tries. But I can't tell you diddly squat about strapping on a helmet, strapping on a jock, towel-snapping, or being flattened to the ground like a pancake by a 300-pound mammoth in pads coming at me like a dump truck out of Iowa.

But, like everyone else, I have an opinion on things. And I find it a very interesting time to have an opinion on how Frank Solich has performed so far as a coach.

My rating? About fair to partly cloudy. We all know about his 21-5 start and No. 1 spot in the polls. Certainly the man is no program destroyer.

But like it or not, he is still flying on Tom Osborne's borrowed wings and blockbuster recruits. The pipeline system is still operating smoothly. He had a genius defensive coordinator. I could go on.

But you can't argue with 12-1. You can't argue with a Big 12 Championship. You can't argue with consensus preseason No. 1, no matter if Solich or Gerry DiNardo is your ring leader.

So I would assume *most logical* people are happy. Just not quite doing the Frank Solich tribal dance quite yet.

Which brings up a point: How would we be rating Solich had he gotten a couple of bad breaks and NU ended up, say 10-2, or 9-3 last season?

Probably not calling for his head, but probably a little skeptical, like people were of Osborne before he finally beat Switzer. And Solich would have received a lot more blame for losing than the praise he receives now for winning. See 1998.

That's college football. That's the fickleness of the media and fans - especially in this state.

The dreaded "H" game - the hypothetical game - is meaningless to coaches and players. What happened, happened. But the game is fun and can make you think.

Let's travel back in time to Boulder, Colo., the day after Thanksgiving, 1999. Nebraska-Colorado. If you recall, NU had the game in hand, up 27-3 late in the third quarter.

Solich, or should we say Nebraska, put their feet up on the coffee table and fell asleep on the couch. When they woke up, it was 27-27 and Dan Alexander fumbled, giving way to a mean Colorado attack at a victory.

On the last play of regulation, CU kicker Jeremy Aldrich let a straight-away, 37-yard field goal my cocker spaniel could have made sail just inches wide left.

Overtime. NU prevails. Big 12 Championship. Fiesta Bowl. 12-1. No. 1 preseason ranking. We like this Solich guy.

What happens if it is made like it should have been? No Big 12. Hello, Holiday Bowl II. Billy Warbucks Byrne's wallet growls out of starvation.

I know, that's purely hypothetical, but talking with players and media this week, it's a strong point: This game, and sports in general, is fickle. We know the cliché - the ball can bounce both ways.

After all, no Matt Davison catch, no Miracle in Missouri, no 1997 National Championship. No tipped two-point pass against Miami, 1983 National Championship.

Thousands of examples can be given. The point is that when you watch, follow, live and die by every play this season and judge Frank Solich, remember that sometimes the outcome has very



Josh Wolfe/DN

Nebraska Head Coach Frank Solich speaks to the assembled press at this year's Nebraska Football Media Day, tape recorders catching his every word.

BY JOHN GASKINS

We've seen the routine for three years now. Frank Solich, sitting in front of a microphone, or huddled by reporters, or on the set of his TV show. Rigid. Stiff. Bland. Plain. Devoid of all things remotely amusing.

We've read it and heard it all before: certainly this and tremendously that, sometimes pleased, sometimes disappointed, never too high or low.

All of it is said in a tone of voice comparable to Ben Stein reading an obituary list.

We know the drill, and it gets tiring. It's not that Solich is evasive or chilly, a la Bill Snyder. It's not that he has nothing to say, either.

It's just that, well, Frank Solich is ... Frank Solich.

"Frank is not exactly the type of coach that's going to fill up a reporter's notebook or be the first quote in a story," Kansas City Star sports writer Blair Kirkhoff said.

"He's not a good 'ol boy like Bobby Bowden and he doesn't do card tricks like Lou Holtz. He answers questions very thoroughly. We're not expecting him to let his hair down or get down and get funky anytime soon."

Get down and get funky? No, not Frank Solich. But certainly the man can't *really* be who he is in front of the microphones and cameras. Can he?

Dig a little deeper, though, beyond the spotlight, and Solich is neither the talking stiff most of us see nor the closet table-top dancer we wonder he might be. He's Frank Solich.

"With Coach Solich, what you see is what you get," kicker Josh Brown said. "He doesn't pretend to be anything else."

Still, going beyond that spotlight is worth a shot, isn't it?

So, Matt Davison, one of the more outspoken and laugh-triggering members of the NU football family, is enlisted in the hope he will provide an unashamedly witty way to spin his coach's lack of spice.

But it doesn't happen.

Davison, despite understanding the angle of approach, goes the opposite way. He says Solich, outside of practice and games, is just one of the guys. He lets his guard down more frequently than most of us would imagine.

Frank Solich? Guard down? Right on cue, Solich strides down the hallway.

He smiles jovially. He laughs. He jokes around. Seems as if he just left a blowout fraternity party from his college days at UNL in the mid-1960s, back when he was a bulldog All-American fullback for media-

friendly party-man Bob Devaney.

Frank Solich? Smiling jovially? Laughing? Joking around?

Yep. That's Frank Solich. Believe it.

"I think he's got a little bit of a crazy side," Davison said. "He's got a side that maybe none of us see."

"Every once in a while, he shows flashes of what he'd be like to hang out with on a fishing trip. So, maybe years down the road, I can go on some kind of vacation with him and see what he's like, because I think there's a side to him that would get along with my other side."

So, Davison hasn't actually seen the side, but is intrigued.

Frank Solich? Intriguing?

It's time to talk to Frank, to find out about this "other" side.

But an NU sports information official makes it clear that Solich doesn't want to talk. He's busy. Besides, the coach already told the official that "he's too boring for 15 minutes" of talking about himself.

On the surface, it is a valid argument.

Solich, much more the Osborne vanilla flavor than the Rocky Road Devaney, set the tone for his public persona, or lack thereof, the very second he was introduced to the world as Osborne's successor. It was Dec. 10, 1997, at the same press con-

sult, plain red tie, plain parted hair style and plain face with an occasional plain smile.

And, like his predecessor, Solich spoke in plain words. No blockbuster quotes, no barn-burning jokes, just straightforward statements reporters could have penciled into the post-conference transcript before he even opened his mouth.

And that's the way he likes it. "When I took this thing over, the last thing I felt I wanted to do was be flamboyant," Solich said.

Three years since, little has changed. Case in point: early August's Big 12 Media Day 2000 in Kansas City, Mo.

Solich wore another plain suit and was the only one of 12 coaches, including the morbidly placid Snyder, who cracked nary a joke, story or dabble of anything that raised eyebrows, even though his team was picked No. 1.

About the only thing that could provoke a chuckle from regular Husker beat writers was Solich's rampant use of the words "certainly" and "tremendous."

In a nail-biter of a race, "tremendous" eked out the win in a legendary late-conference, tremendously-dominated paragraph. But both words came away winners, each having been said more than 15 times.

"I don't try to come up with any clever terms or big words or funny jokes or spend time giving something that is entertaining," Solich said. "I don't prepare or work tremendously hard on

dealing with the media. My time is spent on football.

"In the long run, it serves you better to be direct and just answer the questions."

So Solich, and his players, defend his "tell it like it is" manner.

But that's just the football family. Surely sports pundits, state-and-nationwide, get sick of hearing the same old song and dance.

Wrong. Most sports writers and broadcasters accept it.

"Frank has coached in an era where there's general hesitancy toward the media," said Jim Rose, a long-time Nebraska sports broadcaster and talk-show host.

"People are writing and talking about everything you say, and as a result, these guys are very generic in news conferences."

"I don't think he's bland. When Osborne got the job, he was bland, and he always was media shy. I know (Solich), and he's got a great personality, one of warmth and sincerity that comes out at different times."

But the Solich media, players and coaches don't just like him simply for saying things they already know. There's more to it. It's called openness. Trust. Care. And it's something invisible in Solich until he looks you straight in the eye.

"Compared to any other college coach in the country, by far he is the most accessible," Kirkhoff said.

"If he walked into the back of a room filled with reporters and had to make his way up to the podium, he wouldn't mind stopping and chatting with them a bit. He understands their job and wants to help them with it."

Simply put, "he's one of the nicest, greatest guys you could deal with in college football today," Rose said.

Frank Solich? One of the nicest, greatest guys? To a

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# frankly speaking

## Behind the public image lies the same Solich

story by John Gaskins

# Missouri hopes airing it out leads to Big 12 success

Coach Larry Smith junks-ground attack to emulate aerial offenses like K-State

BY DAVID DIEHL

Call them conformists. Accuse them of being followers. Go as far as to call them sheep. Just don't call them boring.

Entering the 2000 season, Missouri has adopted a similar, pass-happy offense to the aerial attacks already employed by the likes of Oklahoma, Texas Tech and Kansas State.

The new Tigers offense will feature radical passing sets with things like five wide receivers and a sandlot football type flair.

Such unconventional offenses are emerging in the Big 12, and across the nation, and are

becoming more, well, conventional.

"(Coach) Larry Smith has accepted it," said Associate Coach Rickey Hunley at the Big 12 media days, sitting in for Smith who was recovering from blood clots. "He's accepted it just like he learned to accept e-mail, computers and losing the type-writer."

"It's the future." Missouri is looking for a change this year after an anemic offense was outscored by an average of 13 points per game in route to a 4-7 season a year ago.

Tight end Dwayne Blakely, an honorable mention All-Big 12 pick last year as a sophomore, said he and his teammates had some bigger responsibilities to carry this fall.

"The offense has a lot of

weight on its shoulders," Blakely said. "There were some games last year we didn't even score. I mean, that's the whole goal, to score."

Last year's offense was balanced, but neither rushing nor passing was satisfactory. Mizzou ranked eighth in the Big 12 and No. 79 nationally with a 337 yard-per-game average.

This year, Blakely said that figure should be about 60/40 on the passing side.

"The good thing about this offense is you can't key on any one guy," Blakely said. "We've got five wide receivers and numerous tight ends - sets where anybody can get the ball at any time."

"It not only gives me, but everybody, the chance to make big plays." Defensive end, and All-

America candidate Justin Smith said the offense was beginning to make the defense do double-takes in practices.

"After spring ball and seeing all the sets they threw at us and all the screens they threw, it was different. Not all of it worked, but some did, and that's a real difference from last year."

"We've got some good players and if our offense is clicking this year it'll be one of the top in the North Division."

If so, that offense could in turn help out the defense, too, Blakely said.

"This is what has been thrown at them by other teams," he said. "It'll help them stop other teams that pass a lot. It's not only going to help us score points, but also help our defense prepare, too."

## BIG XII PREVIEW

- Preseason Rank: 6th (North)
- 1999: 4-7 (1-7 Big XII, 6th in the North)
- Offensive Starters Returning: 7
- Defensive Starters Returning: 7
- Prognosis: Snappy new offense won't keep Mizzou from hanging out in the cellar.

Delan Lonowski/DN