

Mystical game one to remember

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — There was the sky, a muddy palette of gray, looming clouds that mugged up the air and threatened rain all day. But it held off. Even God, it seems, wanted to see this.

There was the grass. Green. Long. Thick. Slow. There was the usher, in a yellow cap and tie, alone, except for his fellow ushers, in the shrine to college football, Notre Dame Stadium. Nothing but field, fans and sky, and an occasional glimpse of Touchdown Jesus.

There was the scene, the pockets of green, then red, then green dotted about the stadium, holding tickets worth \$500 to some, more to others. There was the student body, whirling hands in the air, around and around, accompanied with the chant of monks.

There was the line, 14 to the favorite and top-ranked Nebraska, a spread that many Cornhusker players suspected might grow much bigger once kickoff started.

There was NU I-back Dan Alexander, who admitted afterward he had expected a comfortable seat in the second half of this game against Notre Dame, a seat on the sideline watching reserves mop up the remnants of the Fighting Irish defense. It never happened. Not by a long shot.

There was the opening Husker offensive play, a 36-yard laser from quarterback Eric Crouch to wingback Bobby Newcombe. There was the stalled drive and the subsequent stalled drives inside ND territory, as the running lanes Nebraska was so sure would open so easily barely broke daylight.

There was the breakthrough, finally, when NU reintroduced the information to Huskers fans. Correll Buckhalter for eight. Judd Davies for eight. Then Crouch, like a furious white bull, busting tackles for 62 yards and a score. There was the Big Red sigh of relief. The rout was underway.

There was the Notre Dame answer — 82 yards, 11 plays, all rushes, around the Blackshirts, through them, up their own end of the field, then down NU's. There was the Irish quarterback, Arnaz Battle, faking Husker rush end Demoine Adams into next week with the key 19-yard gain. There was the tying score.

There was the Nebraska answer to the Notre Dame answer. An eight-minute, 20-second plow, just like they used to make them in Lincoln, a mix of finesse option and straight-ahead smashmouth, with a key third-down completion. There was fourth and goal, the Crouch sneak, the 14-7 half-time lead.

There was talk of the inevitable. The NU onslaught in the second half. The half-time adjustments. The takeover.

There was the first Husker score of the second half. And the last. Blink and you missed it — a four-play, 59-yard dash capped off by Alexander's 28-yard run, gimping his way with stinging cramps. There was the Husker lead at 14, 21-7. There was the inevitable, hanging in the air like the humidity.

There was Julius Jones. No Rocket Ismail, but a Notre Dame rocket nonetheless, catching the ensuing kickoff at the goal line and zooming through the parted red sea of the Husker kickoff team, on a dead sprint to the goal line, NU's Taylor Gehman in futile chase.

There was the wrong thing at the wrong time — Crouch's pass popping out of Davies' hands and into ND defensive back Shane Walton. There was the Irish conglomerate of hands, dancing and whirling and pointing, all while they screamed, again and again, "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

There was the student body, the whirling hands, moving to the chant. There was "Kill! Kill!"

There was Battle, the poorest passer this side of Mickey Joseph, dancing and scanning and missing open receiver after open receiver. There was the ND offense, with every chance in the world, as NU's attack shifted into its late-game neutral mode, an all-too-familiar scene for the Huskers in close games.

There was Joey Getherall, surely the smallest player on the field, grabbing a punt at his 17 and finding a parted red sea of his own to rocket through, his own green carpet to the end zone. There was Nebraska reserve I-back Dahrran Diedrick, waiting for the five o'clock train as Getherall floated by him untouched. There was the inevitable all the way out of South Bend. In its place: the quite, quite possible.

There was the trademark screen pass that Husker Coach Frank Solich always calls in the fourth quarters, the play that never works, never even gets completed. It epitomizes what Alexander later termed NU's offensive "lull." More like the morgue.

There was the fourth down and one at the Nebraska 30. There was ND Coach Bob Davie, calling the roll right, trying to wake the Texas echoes of 1996. There was one receiver open, then another and another. There was Battle, missing them all. There was tight end Jabari Holloway standing alone, on the other side of the field, his green carpet ride leaving the station.

There was the Davie decision — the right decision — to run out the clock at the end of regulation and send the game into overtime.

There was the field level view. Crazy. There was the NBC sports cameraman screaming at fans to "Run! Move! Get Outta There!" There was the student body, the whirling hands, moving to the chant. There was "Kill! Kill!" There was the ND cheerleader, waving her pompoms at a wall of photographers separating her from the fans. There was the stadium, all 80,232 within it, rising to its collective feet, rumbling with noise, from both red and green and boiling together. The echoes were wide awake.

There was the first drive of the extra quarter, what should have been an Irish touchdown. There was fullback Tom Lipiński standing alone, in the end zone, simply waiting for Battle to see him.

Battle had to see him! The hands stopped whirling and pointed. Screams, then shrieks. An implausibly long amount of time passed. It stood still, even.

And Battle missed him. The last miss. The most costly one of all. Battle ran and spun and juke and faked and lunged. It was a worthy effort. ND kicked its field goal and took a 24-21 lead. But had Notre Dame a Crouch to lead it, Saturday would have been a much different day.

There was Crouch, though, in red and white, needing to hit a third-down pass on NU's possession and finding Tracey Wistrom. There was the wait to see if Wistrom had stretched far enough for a first down. The cheerleaders said no. The replays said maybe. The referees said yes.

And there was, finally, Crouch again, on an option left, the 129th play of the game, ending it with a dash to the short corner of the end zone. He stood and looked at the crowd, took the ball and spun it like a top and then was mobbed.

There was the crowd, silent. The hands, down. Then up again, as Notre Dame, tired and proud, raised its helmets. There was Nebraska, ecstatic. Relieved.

There was Solich afterward, and his quote: "I think this game lived up to the expectations of the fans, the media, and the people involved."

There was unanimous agreement.

There was Nebraska 27, Notre Dame 24. There was a game to be



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