

Life could be a lot worse for NU fans

So, you're a die-hard Big Red fan for life, donning your bleeding-scarlet shirts and underwear every Saturday, eating your Husker potato chips and maybe pounding down some brews - perhaps Red Dog - with all your buddies.



John Gaskins

You remember all the memorable games, plays, scores and the dewpoint during the '92 Middle Tennessee State game. You consider it a personal and state tragedy when NU loses.

Been there, done that. I know how you feel. And now you're pissed, pissed at this damn defense.

The 55th-ranked defense in the nation? Allowing 492 yards against Missouri - the No. 66 offense in the country? Letting Iowa State - Iowa Frickin' State - stay in a game for three quarters?

Doesn't matter that the team is No. 1. Doesn't matter it hasn't lost yet. Doesn't matter it has a Heisman-quality quarterback leading the nation's fifth-best offense that averages nearly 500 yards and six touchdowns a game.

You're wondering what happened to the Blackshirts. To the Browns. To Charlie McBride. To making quarterbacks squeal like a pig. To domination. To 60-point blowouts. Boy, domination was fun to watch.

It makes you want to puke up your Runzas, send Craig Bohl nasty hate mail and pray to Grant Wistrom for mercy.

That and Oklahoma, Kansas State and, in four days, a dangerous Texas Tech team are waiting to take the Huskers to the woodshed in their own back yards.

I have two words for you. Chill out.

It ain't that bad. Thanks to the glory years of the mid-'90s, nothing short of the big enchilada seems to be accepted. And when not attained, something is wrong.

Things could be worse, like the way they were with this program 10 years ago.

Nebraska would stroll on down the primrose path against hideous opponents, climbing the polls all fall long, but then came the Oklahoma game, or the Colorado game, or both. And after that, the bowl game - usually against Florida State or Miami.

Pain. Lots of pain.

I'm sure it's still somewhat vivid in your mind. You screamed at your television set when Colorado, Oklahoma or a Florida team would knife through the slower-than-molasses Husker secondary like butter and dance into the end zone with ease.

That got you raging pissed.

That was back when everyone wanted that McBride guy's head. Tom Osborne was neither a genius nor a deity - he was a behind-the-times has-been who never won the big one. And considering the Democrats were kicking butt in Nebraska back then (with two senators and a governor), Oz wouldn't have been a shoe-in for Congressional office.

Not with that defense.

Chances are, those days are a blur, thanks mostly to a 1995 championship team that plowed through everyone and made us think that should be the standard of Nebraska football.

Well, it shouldn't be. Thanks to parity in scholarships and new-age, Matt Foley-like, slickster motivational coaches, more teams give NU a run for its money, which makes 1999's 12-1 record seem so incredible.

Granted, it was frustrating to see the Blackshirts get burned. And, if NU would play No. 8 OU or No. 2 KSU today, it probably would lose.

But let's take a look at our calendars, people. The Oklahoma game is Oct. 28 - 17 days from now. The Kansas State game is Nov. 11 - a month from now. Not today. There's time to heal.

And Texas Tech? Please. Expect a repeat of Iowa State. Those underachieving, veteran defensive linemen and backs played more like veterans. Those inexperienced outside linebackers and left rush ends are becoming experienced.

NU should slow the run - despite Ricky Williams - and make Tech pass. It might not give the Red Raiders an early death, but expect the same Chinese water torture treatment it gave the Cyclones.

Please see DEFENSE on 9

Tech looks to cement reputation with win

BY JOHN GASKINS

Time for the best 5-1 team people don't know much about to come out of its shell.

Texas Tech - buried in the headlines and unranked because of a relatively weak schedule - has kept itself mum so far despite sporting the nation's second-best defense and a wide-open, gun-slugging offense.

But come Saturday, the cat will be out of the bag and exposed on national television when top-ranked Nebraska invades Lubbock, Texas, for the first time in six years. The Huskers and Raiders will square off at 6 p.m. before a Fox Sports Net national audience.

For Tech, it's a chance to show to the nation whether

first-year Coach Mike Leach's system is for real and provide NU a roadblock on the way to Norman, Okla., and Manhattan, Kan.

"I think this is a big game for us, win or lose, to show people we can play," said sophomore Quarterback Kliff Kingsbury, who operates Leach's pass-happy system.

"Coach Leach brought in the attitude to not set the limits on this program and is trying to take it to the next level with Nebraska and Texas and the big names in the (Big 12) conference, and players are starting to buy into it."

Leach came to Lubbock via the offensive coordinator spot at Oklahoma, where last year he helped then-first-year Coach Bob Stoops turn around the pro-

gram and make a star out of Quarterback Josh Heupel.

It's no different with the Raiders, where Kingsbury is the latest Leach product to blossom. Tech - the 10th-best passing offense in the nation and second in the Big 12 behind OU - throws the ball on 76 percent of its plays, an average of 50 times per game.

"I think there's already proof that the nation is wrong about passing offenses not having as much success as running offenses," Leach said. "Passing offenses have won for years and years. Our passing game is getting better all the time."

Despite averaging 303 passing yards per game in wins over New Mexico, Utah State, North Texas, Louisiana-Lafayette and

Baylor, and a 33-15 loss to Texas A&M, the Raiders are 63rd in the nation in scoring with just 24 points per game.

Kingsbury said it has been a matter of growing pains.

"I wouldn't say it was confusing," Kingsbury said. "We weren't playing with a lot of confidence out there. Everybody was not on the same page at all times, so that really hurt us, but we're starting to come together, and things are starting to click."

With running less than a fourth of Tech's attack, things are somewhat sketchy for senior Running Back Ricky Williams, who before a season-ending knee injury in the 1999 season opener was a Heisman Trophy hopeful.

Williams averages just 14 carries for 48 yards per game but

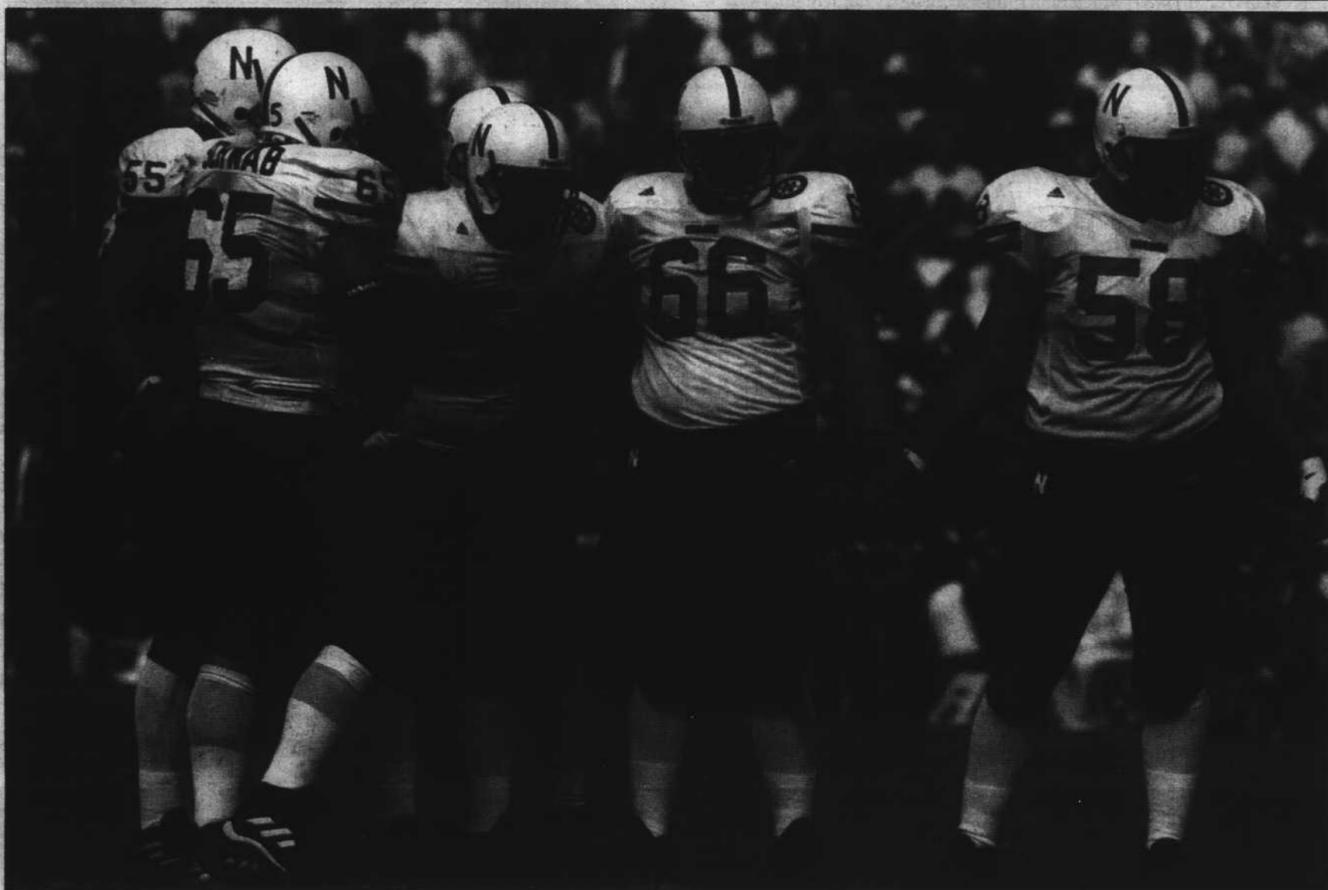
has caught 28 passes for 112 yards.

The whole gun-slugging offense thing has left a laser-speed defense ranked second in the country in total defense and first in pass-efficiency defense in the shadows.

That may be a good thing because Tech - which surrenders just under 10 points per game - has not faced an offense nearly as explosive as NU's, nor a quarterback like Heisman-hopeful Eric Crouch.

"It's going to be a new challenge for us," junior linebacker Kevin Curtis said.

"You can't simulate Eric Crouch with any quarterback in the country. He's a great athlete and playmaker. He's the guy they go to, and he always comes through."



Mike Warren/DN

All five Husker offensive linemen average nine pancakes per game. That dominance is helping the Nebraska offense to lead the nation in rushing this season.

Offensive-line bond equals NU success

BY DAVID DIEHL

For any well-oiled machine to work, the parts must function in unison. It is no different for the machine that is Nebraska's offensive line.

Currently that offensive line paves the road for the nation's No. 1 rushing offense and the fifth-best total offense in the nation.

A major piece of the Cornhuskers' success on the offensive line this season has been the cohesiveness and camaraderie of the unit that makes the Husker offense roll.

Sixth-year senior tackle Jason Schwab said the relationships between the linemen were the tightest he'd seen while at NU.

"We're all friends," Schwab said. "Two, three, four guys down the line, we're all a tight-knit group and it helps us on the field tremendously."

Senior tackle Russ Hochstein attributes the bond to the time the linemen have spent together at NU.

"All the guys up front have grown up together the last few years," said Hochstein, who is in his fifth year in the Nebraska program.

Four of the starting five up front - Hochstein, Schwab, tackle Dave Volk and center Dominic Raiola - have been in the

Nebraska program since at least 1997. Schwab and Hochstein have been at NU since 1995 and '96.

Playing with the same group of linemen has been a major, intangible component of that production, Hochstein said.

"We all started young," the senior and All-Big 12 pick said. "I think we were kind of thrown in to a situation where we had to grow up fast as far as game experience goes."

"Taking snaps with the same group day-in and day-out for years translates into continuity and familiarity on the playing field," Schwab and Hochstein said. The ultimate result is success.

So far, that's been evident on paper and to Nebraska's coaches.

"When you add it all up, I think they've done excellent so far," Coach Frank Solich said. "We feel very good about how they've held up and what they've accomplished."

Offensive Line Coach Milt Tenopir said he's been impressed with the work of his line.

"We've had five fairly productive games so far," Tenopir said, "and it all starts up front, no question about it."

Several offensive linemen live together, work out and lift with each other during the

winter and summer months. But between workouts and practices, the group finds time to enjoy themselves. That leisure time usually consists of one activity, Hochstein said.

"We eat," the Hartington native said bluntly. "I tell you that, we eat."

About once a week, the line will get together and head to a local eatery and chow down.

"We like to go to buffets and put them out of business," Schwab said.

Both coaches and players agreed they believed living, working and playing together translated into respect for the other linemen on the field, which subsequently leads to success, Hochstein said.

"You understand each other more," Hochstein said. "If a person makes a mistake, you're not coming back to the huddle and letting a guy hear about it. You're doing it in a way that's supportive."

"What goes around comes around. The closer you are, the better that works."

Tenopir agreed, saying having the linemen all on the same page and working together was crucial.

"If you don't have that, you don't have success," Tenopir said.

Hochstein said the bond between the

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Russ Hochstein
senior tackle

linemen went deeper than the starting five. All of the linemen have the same goals and those goals drive them, he said.

"It's the little things that count," Hochstein said. "We all get along with each other and all have a passion to compete and to do our best. We all try to make the best of things and that's what keeps us together."

Tenopir and his players agree there is always a tight connection between offensive linemen. Success is unattainable without it, Tenopir said.

But with a group that has been together for as long as this one, the bond is tighter than in years past.

"This year is extra special," Schwab said. "It's been a lot different, a lot more tight-knit I'd say."

"Part of the best memories I'll take out of this place is playing with these guys."

Cook: Baylor poses threat to NU

Volleyball coach is cautiously optimistic about conference game tonight

BY MATTHEW HANSEN

The Baylor Bears will battle No. 1 Nebraska tonight with just mediocre armor.

A .500 record in the Big 12 and an 0-9 all-time record against the Cornhuskers aren't the kind of numbers potential upsets are made of.

But the Bears have one significant weapon heading into tonight's 7 p.m. contest at the Coliseum, one that has NU Coach John Cook on his toes.

The Bears aren't Iowa State, and they aren't Creighton.

After NU's pasting of the Big 12 doormat Cyclones and the Missouri Valley Conference weakling Bluejays, Baylor looks much more dangerous to Cook than its 10-6 record would indicate.

"We're going to have to raise our mentality this week because Baylor has played some really good volleyball," he said.

Of course, then-ranked Texas A&M also had played its share of good volleyball when it came to the Coliseum on Sept. 30. NU dispatched the Aggies in straight sets.

No matter, Cook said. It will only take a good performance by a Big 12 opponent coupled with a Husker let-down to tarnish NU's perfect 15-0 (7-0 Big 12) record.

"At some point, someone is going to play well against us," Cook said. "Whether that's Wednesday or Saturday, I don't know, but it's going to happen."

And the Bears do have enough firepower to throw a scare into NU. Cook

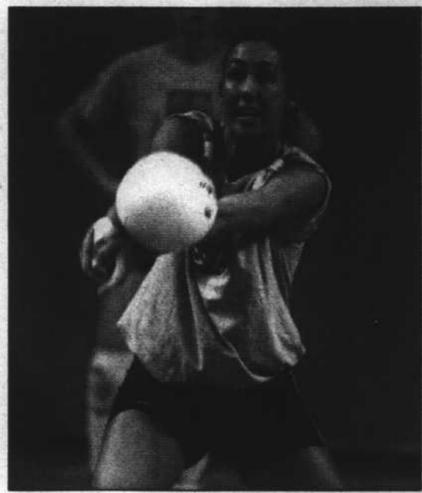
mentioned Stevie Nicholas, a freshman who has a .300 hitting percentage in the Big 12, and Tatiana Keenan, an athletic right-side hitter, as BU players he is impressed with.

But the numbers keep on jumping off the page, threatening Cook's praise of NU's opponent tonight. There are NU's seven straight Big 12 pastings, all by straight sets, opposed with four conference losses by the Bears. There is 17-0 NU facing 10-6 Baylor.

And, as Cook seemed to acknowledge, tonight's match-up was likely another case of the No. 1 Huskers competing only against themselves.

"I want to see our team execute our game plan and play Husker volleyball, not play Iowa State volleyball or whatever," he said.

"That's what we want."



Steven Bender/DN

Nebraska middle blocker Jenny Kropp returns a ball Tuesday during practice at the Nebraska Coliseum. The undefeated Huskers take on Baylor at 7 tonight, at the Coliseum.