



BIG RED BATTLES

Former wearers of scarlet and crimson cherish NU-OU rivalry

It was probably one of the sweetest off-the-field victories for Nebraska's football program and its coach, Tom Osborne. The fact Osborne had finally one-upped Switzer and Oklahoma surely wasn't lost on anyone in the Nebraska program on the joyous day when Osborne's telephone rang with the good news.

Word came to Osborne from then-Nebraska Defensive Coordinator Lance Van Zandt that a Texas prep star quarterback named Turner Gill was going to sign a letter of intent with the Cornhuskers and not the Sooners.

Perhaps this option-magician Gill would ease the minds of Husker fans who were growing restless with Osborne's unsuccessful 1-8 record against the Sooners.

Osborne and Van Zandt weren't about to take a chance on losing Gill to some late Switzer sweet-talking.

They had good reason to worry. Switzer had taken a speedy road trip to Gill's house with Oklahoma Baseball Coach Enos Semore, who was interested in Gill the baseball player.

"They were at my house all afternoon and all night," Gill said of OU's coaches. "They just wanted one more chance to talk."

To keep OU's coach from getting too close to Gill, Van Zandt hid out with Gill at a friend's house that day while Sooner coaches waited patiently for the star prep quarterback to return home.

Meanwhile, Osborne was on his way via private plane to greet his new quarterback savior, not knowing that Switzer was in town.

"We picked up Coach Osborne and didn't tell him that the Oklahoma coaches were waiting at my house," Gill said. "We drove him back so he could visit my parents. We had him at the door, and he saw the coaches there. He looked at me and said, 'What's going on?'"

"I said 'Everything's fine, Coach,' but you can all imagine Coach Osborne's little stare," Gill said.

It's the Osborne stare, the same determined look that focused across the field from Switzer on cold November days.

Everyone had the stare when NU and OU got together. If you didn't have the determined, passionate, kick-your-butt attitude, you might as well not take the field.

"Nothing else in your life mattered in Nebraska week," said Brian Bosworth, two-time Butkus award-winning linebacker for the Sooners and 1986

graduate. "When you were taking the field in that game, you were now a part of history. The fear of losing that game far outweighed anything else around you."

This was Nebraska-Oklahoma.

The respect "It was nothing nasty," Gill said of the day Osborne and Switzer stared at each other in his kitchen. "It was cordial between both parties. They just happened to be in the same house together."

Regardless of the tenacity on the field, the NU and OU match-up has always been about respect, according to those involved in the programs.

"Oklahoma and Texas players couldn't stand each other. If they got together in a bar, there'd be a fight," Bosworth said. "Meanwhile, Oklahoma and Nebraska players would probably sit down, share a few brewskies with each other and talk about the game."

There was no need to trash talk. Both teams knew what was at stake.

"There was never any jawing," 1978 Nebraska middle guard Jim Pillen said. "It was just flat intensity by both programs, knowing it would take their best shot to win."

Bob Barry, long-time voice of the Sooners, called it the "hottest rivalry in college football."

"This is not Florida State-Miami trash talking. This is not Terrell Owens' spiking the ball on a team's 50-yard line," Jack Milden, 1971 Oklahoma quarterback, said. "It's about a respect, a genuine and honest feeling between two schools. There's a commonality, and I think we both admire what each other has done."

Sooner magic

Sometimes Nebraska didn't as much admire the Sooners' talent as they did marvel at OU's late game luck.

"I remember distinctly my sophomore year, 1976. They stole that game from us with a flea-licker on the last drive. We had dominated all day long. It was Switzer magic," Pillen said of OU's 20-17 win that year.

Stealing wins wasn't new to Oklahoma. Throughout the state, Oklahomans called those comebacks "Sooner Magic."

"Sooner Magic" was never more prevalent than in a 1986 game in Lincoln in which Nebraska seemed to have sealed a win 17-10 with 4:10 remaining.

Sooner quarterback Jamelle Hollieway passed OU down the field from its six-yard line, tying the game with a touchdown strike to tight end Keith Jackson.

The Sooners got the ball back after shutting out

"Oklahoma and Nebraska has so much more meaning than just a game. It builds character. You're sticking 18, 19-year old kids out there in front of 85,000 people and you're out there making memories. It's a lot like being on a battlefield in a war."

Brian Bosworth

Former Oklahoma linebacker

NU on three plays and drove for a 31-yard Tim Lashar field goal to win the game.

It was magical all right. "Sooner magic with a little bit of luck," Switzer said after the game.

Perhaps, it wasn't as much magic for Switzer's Sooners as it was divine intervention.

Before the 1976 NU game, Switzer took his team in huddle for a traditional pre-game prayer. Only, this prayer had a slightly different twist at the end.

Those present said it ended something like this: "Dear God, just please don't let the best team win today."

Husker revenge

And finally, in 1978, it happened. Nebraska won 17-14, when Billy Sims fumbled the ball inside the five-yard line as time was expiring. Pillen recovered.

Sooner Magic no more.

"We had to win," Pillen said of that year's Nebraska-Oklahoma game. "We had a few games that had slipped away that we should have won. They were starting to get a swagger and creating doubt in our minds."

Nobody was more relieved than Osborne, who had finally beaten OU for the first time as a head coach.

"It was a huge win for Tom," said Don Bryant, former Nebraska Sports Information director. "It kind of got that monkey off his back."

And then, the monkey climbed back on.

Only it was Bosworth who always got the last laugh, winning all three games he played against the Huskers. He lived for the attention, and he loved those November games with NU "when you put yourself on the line."

"There is no other game that matches Oklahoma-Nebraska in tenacity, physicalness, and the implications that were there," Bosworth said. "And I remember that crowd in Lincoln was so frickin' loud, you had to put your hands over your earholes in between plays."

Bosworth said his Sooners simply knew how to beat Nebraska.

"You had to keep them in third and long because they weren't good on those downs," he said. "If they got you third and short, they had you."

The Boz wouldn't trade those November classic duels for anything.

"Oklahoma and Nebraska has so much more

meaning than just a game.

Nebraska won from 1981 to 1983, concluding a perfect regular season in 1983 with a 28-21 win.

"It was always an intense football game where you just go out there and knock each other around," Gill said. "You always want to play against the best, because it brings out the best in you, and that is what those types of games brought out."

'The Boz'

And there were those certain players who pushed the envelope, making bold predictions that intensified the rivalry.

NU linebacker Broderick Thomas guaranteed a victory in 1987. Oklahoma scoffed at Thomas' quotes and ran over NU in a 17-7 Sooner win.

But a linebacker by the name of Bosworth from Oklahoma could grab the headlines as well as any player in this series.

Bosworth was the guy Nebraska fans loved to hate. The Boz was the headband wearing freak show to the 76,000 fans who crammed Memorial Stadium to see the Sooners come to town.

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"Oklahoma and Nebraska has so much more



Stoops takes stumbling OU to doorstep of No. 1 in 2 years

BY JOHN GASKINS

The 1983 University of Iowa football team photo is one of the most impressive gatherings of the modern college football coaching era.

Coach Hayden Fry stands with his assistants, a unit that took Iowa from the basement of Big Ten football to the penthouse.

Scan that row, and you'll find a few coaches who took Fry's lead and turned around sagging programs of their own.

On the far left stands Bill Snyder, who spearheaded the greatest turnaround in college football history at Kansas State.

Near the middle is Fry's successor, Kirk Ferentz. Farther down the line and standing next to each other are current Iowa State rebuilders Dan McCarney and the messiah of Madison, Wis., Barry Alvarez.

On the far right stands the baby of the staff—23-year-old graduate assistant Bob Stoops, one year removed from his honorable mention All-American senior season as a Hawkeye defensive back.

Stoops quickly grabbed the attention and respect of his veteran co-leaders.

"From the moment he joined the staff, we could all tell he had head coach written all over him," McCarney said.

"He just has all the tools to lead a program—his winning attitude, his ability to be a great communicator to his players, his enthusiasm, you could always see that in him."

Seventeen years later, Stoops has leapfrogged all of those elder program-builders and in 18 games has put Oklahoma back near the top faster than they did.

"It's no surprise to me he's taken Oklahoma where he's taken them already," McCarney said.

When Norman's Memorial Stadium comes alive like the Barry Switzer glory days on Saturday, a win over old arch-rival



Oklahoma Coach Bob Stoops has taken the Sooners to the doorstep of the No. 1 ranking in just his second year at the helm.

and top-ranked Nebraska will put this 40-year-old golden boy on top in near-record time.

"I've said all along that we've never had a date we set to be in this position," Stoops said. "The sooner, the better. We've taken the approach to get better each and every week, each month. How have we progressed? Well, we're still not there yet. We need to continue to grow and compete."

It's been quite a growth spurt. After six straight non-winning seasons under three different coaches, OU went 7-5 and played in its first bowl game since 1994 in Stoops' debut season last year and this year has jetted to a 6-0 mark that included mammoth wins over then-No. 11 Texas (63-14) on Oct. 7 and at then-No. 2 Kansas State (41-31) two weeks ago.

The formula for Stoops' quick success is simple and well-documented: tutelage under program-builders in Fry, Snyder and Steve Spurrier at Florida, a four-

star group of assistants—three gobbled up from Snyder and K-State—and a blazing quarterback with a gun-slinging offense.

All Stoops is doing is letting the offense run wild under the system of former Offensive Coordinator Mike Leach—now the coach at Texas Tech—and arm of Josh Heupel, Heisman candidate and breaker of at least 20 school and Big 12 passing records.

Stoops helped Snyder resurrect K-State and lead the nation's best defense there in 1995. From there, he moved on to Florida, where the "Stun-n-Don't Done Defense" helped complement Spurrier's Fun-and-Gun offense to win the 1996 national title.

Naturally, Stoops became a hot commodity when coaching vacancies came up. Iowa approached him after Fry retired in 1998. So did Oklahoma, and for good reason.

Back in Norman, a once-

Please see STOOPS on 11

Unorthodox Heupel drives OU

BY SAMUEL MCKEOWN

He throws a pass at 110 degrees. Then 130. Then his arm drops down to nearly sidearm position as he pumps one across the middle to his tall, lanky receiver in white.

He throws, but that ain't the half of it. He'll flip a pass. He'll jump it. He'll toss it; he'll scootch it. He'll dump it or drift it or lead it or loft it or short-arm it. Just as long as he completes it.

"He has the ability to maneuver around in the pocket and throw on the run," Nebraska Coach Frank Solich said. "You couldn't ask for a better quarterback for his offense."

And on one Saturday afternoon at Kansas State University in Manhattan, there's genuine question as to whether Oklahoma's Josh Heupel could have been any better at what he does than he was in that 41-31 win. The drool-worthy performance—29 of 37 passes completed, 384 yards, two touchdowns, no interceptions—trust the South Dakota Sidewinder into

Heisman Trophy talk, which the senior from Aberdeen, S.D., gently tosses aside.

For now, anyway. A similar performance against No. 1 Nebraska on Saturday—along with a victory not many expect—would likely cement his name firmly among a still-open field of candidates. And the way Heupel will go about his performance Saturday is to duck and dive and dart his passes into the little nooks of Owen Field. An inch here, an inch there. An impromptu dance in pads.

Heupel's media persona doesn't match his on-field improvisational skills. He speaks in platitudes, labeling a not-so-consistent NU defense "great," and boiling the execution of OU's offense to "mastering our assignments." Then, he flatly states he reads no newspapers, watches no television and hears no radio, therefore knowing nothing, not one thing, of his team's popularity, or his.

Heupel also observes the Sooners have improved on their 1999 record "by eliminating



OU quarterback Josh Heupel will lead the top scoring offense in the country against Nebraska on Saturday.

mental mistakes." Boring, but true. Heupel is a coaches' son who is the nerve center of the Oklahoma attack, the major distributor of mental bliss and pain. His career swooned at Weber State

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