

Gameday:

Improved Sooners evidence of parity

NORMAN, Okla. — As drunken Sooners fans drove down the streets proclaiming their all-time greatness as the best team known to the world, one thing was evident from the outcome of Oklahoma's win over Nebraska.

Unlike NU's loss at Texas last year, the best team did win. But an offensive revolution did not occur. Bob Stoops did not reach Barry Switzer status. He probably never will, even though the man is a god in the state right now.

Stoops won't because parity reared its ugly head again on Saturday.

It struck the NFL a while ago and, due to many factors, has ate away at the college game as well.

It is evident in the Pac-10, Big-10 and every conference out there. Big-time programs are getting beat every week and numbered are the days of undefeated national champions as lower-tier teams find their way to the top.

The ultimate proof of parity in college football: South Carolina.

This season, only three teams remain in the ranks of the unbeaten after Nebraska and Clemson lost Saturday and Virginia Tech squeaked away for the last time with Michael Vick going down. Texas Christian might go undefeated, but when you back out of a game with the Huskers and then don't play anybody, you won't get Orange Bowl bids.

So that leaves the Sooners as the only team with a legitimate shot of finishing the season without a dent in their armor. But how will OU deal with a suddenly resurgent Texas A&M team? How will the Sooners prepare for Nebraska should they face them again in the Big 12 championship game, knowing what happened to Texas last year?

After watching OU dismantle the Huskers, I have a hard time saying that A&M has a chance or that NU would put up a better fight the second time around in Kansas City.

NU's display Saturday was uninspiring and just another example this season of other teams closing the gap with the Huskers.

Eric Crouch had a Heisman-like first two drives and then watched his hopes of winning the award go down the drain with every incomplete pass he threw. Crouch and NU were unable to rush for 200 yards against the Sooners. OU might have scored 50 if Stoops hadn't called off the dogs.

As for Nebraska's offensive game plan, there didn't seem to be one as NU panicked when OU hung a 24-spot on it. Most expected Frank Solich to empty his bag of tricks, but he left Norman with his bag still half full. Maybe the tricks just didn't work. Maybe there are no tricks. We'll never know.

Teams like OU, with the right mixture of senior leadership and chemistry, are rare these days. Bob Stoops said his offense is the best he has ever seen. He says Josh Heupel is not good because of the system because he is the system. So what does that say for the Sooners next season when Heupel is trying to make it in the pros?

It leaves them with a trip to Lincoln to face Crouch again under a first-year quarterback. Add in that the heart of OU's defense, linebackers Rocky Calmus and Torrance Marshall, will be gone, and there are the Sooners staring down the barrel of a blemished season with the rest of the country.

Those signs proclaiming, "Stoops for President" will merely read, "Stoops for city council." The man is a great coach, but even he cannot escape the curse of parity.

And folks, it is here to stay — even for Nebraska.

"We got off to a good start, but we knew they had the potential to come back and score very quickly."

- NU Coach Frank Solich



Scott McClurg/DN

"We've more than proven who we are."

- OU Coach Bob Stoops

Cast aside ...

Punt block, interception doom NU as OU passing game, defense click

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND

NORMAN, Okla. — In the week leading up to its matchup with No. 1-ranked Nebraska, Oklahoma had to endure cloudy skies and rain — ending a three-month drought almost as unbearable as the winless streak OU had going against its rival from the north.

On Saturday afternoon, the No. 3-ranked Sooners ended their decade-long drought against No. 1 Nebraska, benefiting from the torrential downpour of Josh Heupel passes that propelled OU to a 31-14 win and later led to a crowd of 75,989 raining down on NU's parade with its favorite fruit — oranges.

OU's sellout crowd pelted Owen Field for much of the second half with the fruit, signifying the Sooners return to national prominence and possible trip to the national title game at the

Orange Bowl.

"I was hoping we weren't going to get hit by one," said OU quarterback Josh Heupel, who passed for 300 yards, the most ever by a Sooner against NU.

Early on, it looked as if many in Soonerland would be having home-made juice for weeks to come.

Nebraska jumped out to a lightning-quick lead, scoring twice before seven minutes had ticked off the clock. NU's first score came at the 12:02 mark with a 39-yard touchdown pass from Eric Crouch to Matt Davison. Crouch would then score less than four minutes later at the 8:11 mark on a 37-yard run and NU looked to be cruising along for the third straight week.

"I think we just found some areas where we could run some option plays, and we took advantage of that," Crouch said.

But, then came the second quarter and Nebraska's subsequent collapse.

OU stormed back and scored 24 unanswered points to give the Sooners a 10-point lead going into the locker room. Heupel engineered four scoring drives in a row and finished the quarter with 149 yards on seven of 10 passing and one touchdown.

The performance by Heupel and OU's spread offense did not take Nebraska Coach Frank Solich by surprise.

"We got off to a good start, but we knew they had the potential to come back and score very quickly," said Solich, who lost his first game to OU. "So without question, we needed to put more points on the board than what we did."

But Nebraska, after the two early scores, would never see the end zone again.

In the battle of Heisman Trophy candidates, Heupel came out the winner with Crouch and NU's offense stalling time and time again after their early dominance.

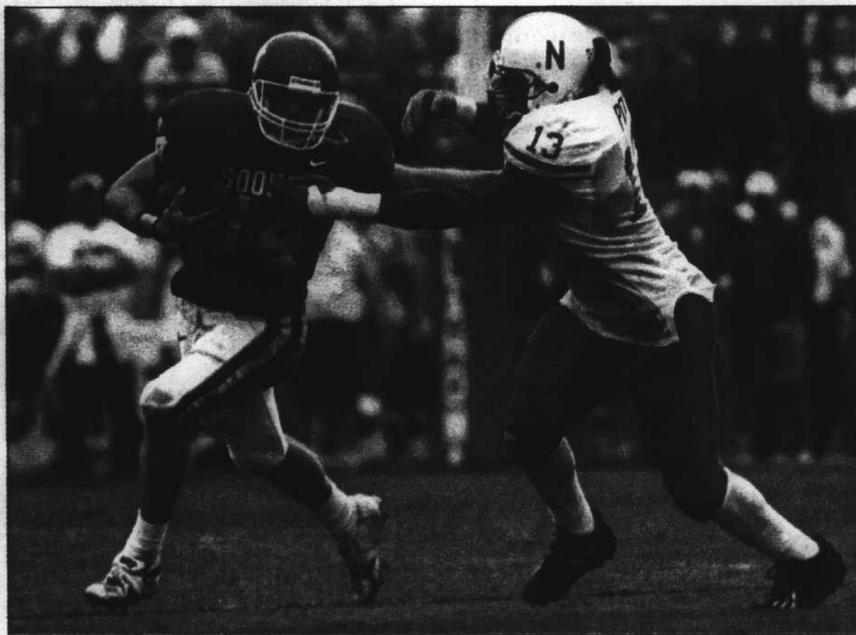
Crouch opened up the game five for five passing for 77 yards and a touchdown in an effort that might have brought back memories of last

National Rankings

Associated Press Football

Rank	School	Record	Points	Prev. Rank
1	Oklahoma	7-0	1,749	3
2	Virginia Tech	8-0	1,633	2
3	Miami	6-1	1,602	4
4	Florida State	8-1	1,539	6
5	Nebraska	7-1	1,425	1
6	Florida	7-1	1,395	8
7	Oregon	7-1	1,378	7
8	Washington	7-1	1,262	9
9	Texas Christian	7-0	1,150	11
10	Clemson	8-1	1,071	5
11	Purdue	7-2	1,017	16
12	Michigan	6-2	925	15
13	S. Mississippi	6-1	897	14
14	Oregon State	7-1	893	18
15	Notre Dame	6-2	674	19

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Mike Warren/DN

TOP OF PAGE: Husker free safety Dion Booker is in disbelief after a 34-yard Sooner pass in Saturday's 31-14 Oklahoma victory.

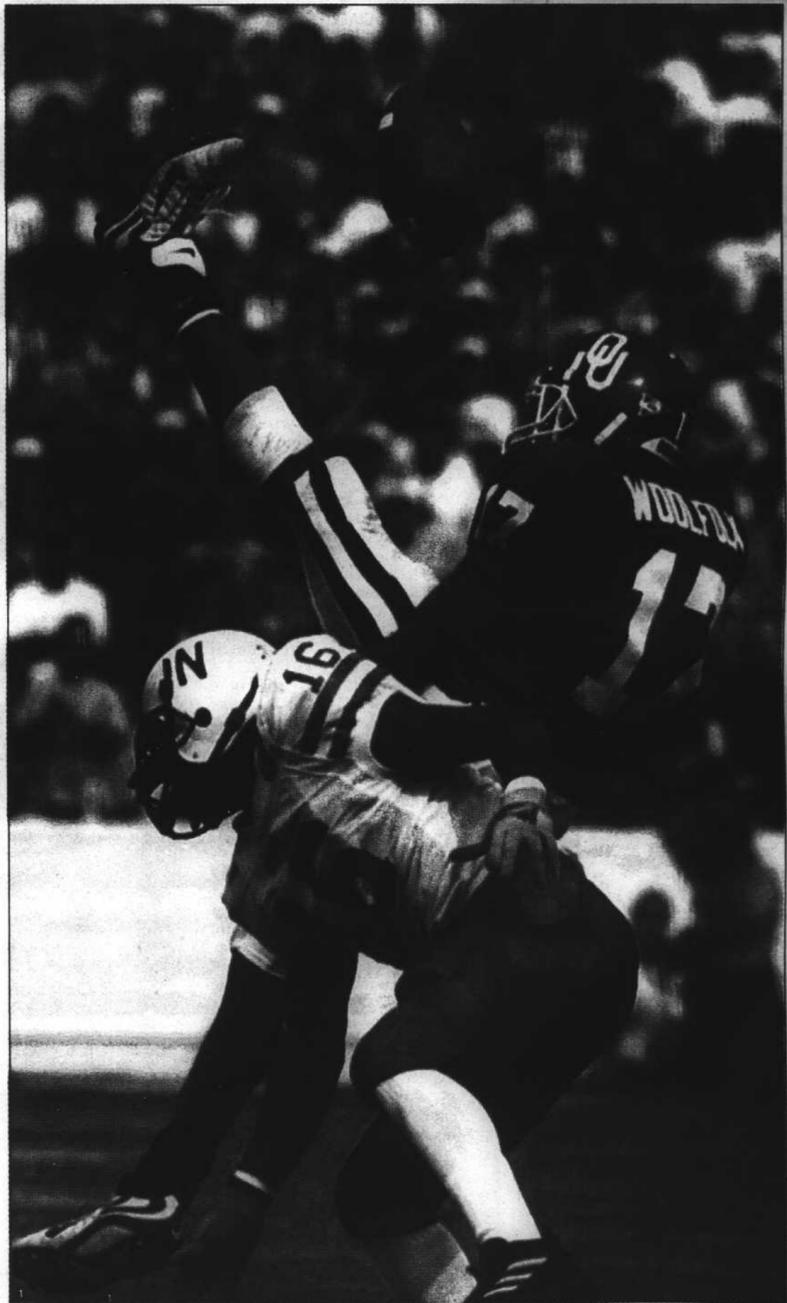
ABOVE: Oklahoma quarterback Josh Heupel gives NU linebacker Carlos Polk a stiff arm and slips away into the open field for a gain of 17 yards to the Nebraska 30-yard line with 5:56 left in the fourth quarter and NU trailing 31-14.

RIGHT: Oklahoma's Josh Norman scrambles to control a blocked Nebraska punt, bringing Oklahoma to the 4-yard line. The black-shirts would hold the drive to a successful OU field goal making the score 14-17.



Scott McClurg/DN

RIGHT: Sooner wide receiver Andre Woolfolk concentrates on the football despite already having been knocked to the ground. Woolfolk made the catch over NU defensive back Erwin Swiny while lying on the ground. The 34 yard catch brought the Sooners to the Nebraska 30-yard line, setting up their second touchdown.



Scott McClurg/DN