

Osborne ready to enter political life

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In 1962, when he began work on his master's degree in educational psychology, Osborne became a graduate assistant for Football Coach Bob Devaney at the University of Nebraska.

After receiving his Ph.D., he struggled to decide whether to join the academic world full time or coach. Eventually, he realized he couldn't give up football. He continued working under Devaney, eventually becoming the team's offensive coordinator.

When he retired after the 1972 season, Devaney hand-picked Osborne as his successor. Osborne knew it would be difficult to replace the jovial, outgoing Irishman who won two national championships for the Cornhuskers, but he now had achieved his goal of coaching Division I football.

The next 25 years brought success, but also bitter disappointments. Until the 1994 season, when Osborne's team beat Miami 24-17 in the Orange Bowl, he had to answer questions about why he had never won a national championship. In his last five seasons, he compiled a 60-3 record and added two more titles.

Perhaps the most poignant — some say the most telling — moment of Osborne's career came in the 1984 Orange Bowl, when No. 1-ranked, 12-0 Nebraska played 10-1 Miami for the national championship.

In a hostile Orange Bowl, the Huskers quickly fell behind by 17 points. But, after Nebraska rallied to cut Miami's lead to 31-30, Osborne had the option of kicking the extra point to tie the game, almost certainly ensuring his first national championship.

Osborne has said he never considered doing that. He went for a two-point conversion and the win.

But a Miami defender tipped away Turner Gill's pass, and another Nebraska season ended in disappointment.

"The way we played the game, coming back from a 17-point deficit and going for the win at the end instead of kicking the point and assuring a national championship, had a deep effect on people," Osborne wrote in his 1999 book "Faith in the Game." "They attached a spiritual significance to the failed two-point play that transcended the actual events of the game. They felt we played a game that honored God."

In 1995, Nebraska enjoyed one of its most successful campaigns. The Huskers stormed through the regular season undefeated and crushed No. 2 Florida 62-24 in the Fiesta Bowl. But off-the-field incidents that year cast a pall on the championship.

The Lawrence Phillips incident was perhaps the most controversial episode in Osborne's career. After Phillips was arrested, Osborne suspended him indefinitely. But after Phillips sat out for six games, Osborne reinstated him for the last few games, drawing fierce criticism.

During Osborne's last few years, several other players also fell afoul of the law.

Christian Peter, now with the New York Giants, pleaded no contest to third-degree sexual assault charges. A University of Nebraska-Lincoln student also charged him with raping her twice. She brought her charges nearly two years after the alleged incidents, and prosecutors did not pursue the case.

Tyrone Williams, charged with smashing the window of a car at a stoplight and firing two shots into it, pleaded no contest to unlawful discharge of a firearm and third-degree assault.

Riley Washington was acquitted of attempted murder. As with the others, Osborne stood by Phillips, saying the facts should emerge before he made a decision. He would not kick Phillips off the team just for public relations purposes, he said. UNL decided not to throw Phillips out of school, and Osborne reinstated him for the Iowa State game.

The string of incidents, and Osborne's decision to back his players, led some to question whether there was a disconnect between Osborne's emphasis on morality and what many perceived as his tolerance for violent behavior.

Although he stood by his handling of the Phillips matter, in "Faith in the Game" he questioned whether it did any good, considering Phillips' continuing pattern of misconduct since he left UNL.

Mary Beck, a UNL animal sciences professor and co-chair-

woman of the faculty women's caucus, said she never questioned Osborne's motives for his decisions, but she said they sent a "bad message."

"The message was that there weren't consequences for that kind of behavior," she said. "It said that football players were exempt from the consequences."

Former players and members of his coaching staff say Osborne's career and character make him well-suited for politics.

"Coaching is a lot like politics," Solich said. "It involves dealing with people and issues, and over a long career, he was able to do that extremely well."

Solich said the most important lesson he learned from Osborne was to maintain an even keel — never getting too high or too low.

Steve Taylor, the starting quarterback at Nebraska from 1986-88, said he admired Osborne's honesty, integrity and directness.

"There wouldn't be a better person to look at as a role model," he said. "He taught me that success is a journey, and there's more to life than winning."

Darin Erstad, a punter and place-kicker on the 1994 national championship team, was the No. 1 pick in the 1996 amateur baseball draft. Now a two-time All-Star for the Anaheim Angels, he led the major leagues in hits this year.

Playing football at Nebraska helped prepare him for the major leagues, Erstad said, because he got used to the large crowds and media attention. But mostly, he said, he learned from Osborne's attitude and approach to the game.

"I have such great respect for Tom Osborne and the way he carries himself."

An ag economy depression

As Osborne coasts to victory in November, an ominous shadow looms in the background.

The United States is in the midst of the longest economic expansion in its history. But for three years, as commodity prices have fallen precipitously, the 3rd District's agricultural economy has withered.

For Reynolds, Osborne's Democratic opponent, the district's embrace of Osborne is a dangerous gamble.

Osborne frequently discusses the district's struggling agricultural economy. In fact, he said it was one reason he ran for Congress in the 3rd District instead of seeking Nebraska's open Senate seat.

As he mentions on the campaign trail, 75 percent of Nebraska's counties — most of them in the 3rd District — rank among the poorest 25 percent of counties in the nation.

"Agriculture is critical to the nation, and yet it's largely ignored," he said. "It's like the offensive line; you don't notice it until it isn't there."

Osborne disputes his critics' allegations he knows little about agriculture. He spent some time on a dairy farm while growing up, and he still owns three pieces of farmland in the 3rd District.

After kicking off his campaign in January, he divided the district into eight regions and attended regular agricultural policy meetings in each. He said he learned much about farm policy from listening to constituents and knowledgeable campaign advisers.

Although the district is struggling, it has several advantages, he said. The district has one of the largest underground water supplies in the country, and hard-working descendants of pioneers occupy its land, he said.

He supports federal crop revenue insurance to protect farmers from low prices. He said he believed more can be done to promote ethanol and biomass fuels, especially now that the country was experiencing high gas prices because of its reliance on foreign petroleum sources.

He also wants to stem the outflow of the district's best and brightest young people by expanding high-speed Internet access and broadband technologies to create more high-technology jobs.

Osborne knows the ag community is full of divisions, but he believes more can be done to build a united agricultural front for more effective lobbying in Washington.

"I don't look at the glass as being totally empty," he said.

A political behemoth



Tom Osborne is the Republican candidate for Congress in the 3rd Congressional District.

Husker Harvest Days is one of the country's largest agricultural exhibitions. During the three-day show, farmers and ranchers come from all around the state and country test new equipment, learn about new seed technologies and discuss new ways to market their products.

After arriving, Osborne moves from tent to tent, complying with a deluge of autograph requests. Amid tractor displays, irrigation demonstrations and Nebraska Cattlemen exhibits, the requests keep coming — young, old, every age in between. He patiently signs every hat, football and piece of paper.

At one point, John J. Hodges of rural Julian flags down Osborne. He tells him about the changes he has seen throughout his lifetime, when Julian went from a "thriving rural town to a town with just one elevator."

"You have proven over the years that you can be a nice guy and still win," Hodges says.

Judging by Osborne's first showing on an election ballot, many 3rd District voters share that sentiment.

He won the May primary, capturing 71 percent of the vote to defeat two GOP opponents. His win in November is expected to be even more lopsided.

Some observers, including UNL political science professor Robert Sittig and Nebraska Democratic Party chairwoman Anne Boyle, are puzzled as to why Osborne did not seek a higher office.

"It seems to me like he has the accomplishments and the attributes that would make any office in the state feasible for him," Sittig said. "I'm sure there is more than one Republican leader who wishes he was running for the Senate."

As one member of a large freshman class in the House of Representatives, Osborne will find it difficult to make an impact for a few years, Sittig said — especially if Republicans lose control of the House.

Boyle said she could not understand why Osborne did not run for the Senate, "given that he's so well-liked." As it is, she understands the hopelessness of trying to defeat him in the 3rd District.

"Obviously, he's lived in Nebraska for all his life," she said. "He's at least as much in touch with the issues as anyone else, maybe more so. I think Tom Osborne is a decent man, and he's well-intentioned."

Despite his huge lead in the polls, Osborne works as hard on the campaign trail as he did while coaching. He campaigns six days a week, sometimes seven, and expects to log more than 50,000 miles on his white Ford Expedition by the time it's all over.

As with other aspects of his campaign, his hard work is a by-product of his football career. Many times when Nebraska prepared to face a weak opponent, people asked Osborne why the team bothered to practice. But he knows the team didn't win every game it was supposed to win.

He said campaigning was more than just a matter of winning the race. When he goes to Washington, he said, he wants to have established a solid working relationship with each part of the massive district, which begins at the state's western border, extends east to about 40 miles west of Lincoln and is bigger than Iowa.

Osborne's hard work on the campaign trail also proves the legendary coach is not just cashing in on his name, said Bruce Rieker, Osborne's campaign manager.

"When it's all over, I'll have been satisfied that we gave it a good effort," Osborne said.

To ensure he won't be beholden to special interests or large donors, Osborne refuses donations from political action committees or individual contribu-

with his family. And he told Frank Solich, a 19-year assistant coach under Osborne, that he would hand him the reins of the Husker program.

Although he misses coaching, he said he did not regret the decision. Though some people have suggested he ran for Congress to fill a need for competition, he said he didn't perceive it that way.

As a congressman, Osborne said he hoped to raise the 3rd

District's profile. He said he would do so not only through his work in Washington, but also through his efforts within the district. He plans to spend Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays in Washington, then return to the 3rd District the other four days of the week.

"There's a lot that I can do right here in the district," he said.

As a conservative, Osborne shares the basic beliefs of his district. But he doesn't always march lock-step with those beliefs, as when he opposes the death penalty and avoids red meat.

Osborne did not attend this year's Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, and he has said he wants to avoid some of the bitter partisanship of today's campaigns. But during his appearance with Republican candidate Don Stenberg in Lincoln, Osborne explained that his affiliation with the Republican Party was an easy choice.

"Don is a friend of mine, and (Democratic Senate candidate) Ben Nelson is a friend. The only place we part company is ideology, and that's so important," he said. "One of the things that bothers me is that so often people are making decisions on who they're going to vote for based on sound bites. They're not really examining the issues."

"The reason I'm standing here today is that I'm a conservative in the way I approach things."

The same approach

After arriving in Greeley, Osborne stops to talk to Greeley High School's No. 1-ranked, Class

D-1 eight-man football team. It's a hot late-summer afternoon, and the players are tired and sweaty from drills. When Osborne arrives, they eagerly gather around.

"I'm sure you all hate to stop what you're doing to hear an old broken-down coach like me," Osborne says.

After the coaches and a few of the players laugh, he tells the team to continue working hard. He reminds them talent alone won't bring success; the team must work together to build chemistry.

On the sidelines, Osborne was unflappable, barely cracking a smile when his team won the national championship. But beneath the surface of his mild-mannered, serious exterior is a reservoir of dry humor.

Standing next to Osborne at a recent campaign event, Stenberg disputed the results of a recent copyrighted Omaha World-Herald poll. It showed he trailed Nelson by 20 percentage points. In the same poll, Osborne led Reynolds by 60 points.

Osborne listened as Stenberg finished, then strolled to the mike.

"Don, you worried me there when you said the World-Herald poll wasn't accurate."

Entering Husker Harvest Days, Osborne rode in a Ford Expedition across the dusty roads of the enormous show grounds. The vehicle had to go slow to avoid all the people.

"We'd better not hit anyone," Osborne said. "We could lose a lot of votes in a hurry."

Osborne is deeply rooted in his religious beliefs, but when asked what he considers his greatest strengths and weaknesses, he is reluctant to engage in that kind of introspection.

"I'll leave that up to you," he said. "It's so hard for someone to evaluate himself like that."

Nebraskans have evaluated Osborne for more than 30 years, and now the voters in the 3rd District are prepared to send him to Washington. It remains to be seen how he will perform in Congress — whether he will grow tired of the bickering, whether his political inexperience will show or whether, as he hopes, he will bring new attention to the district in which he grew up and which he believes has been largely ignored.

But Nebraskans can be certain his approach to politics will closely mirror his approach to football.

"A couple of things I learned from my former life is not to pay attention to point spreads and polls," he said. "You do what you have to do every day and go out there and work. As far as I'm concerned, my race is dead-even in terms of my approach."

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