

NU ends season on high note by routing Wildcats

BY JOHN GASKINS

SAN ANTONIO — For the second straight year, it wasn't where they wanted to be.

But the Nebraska Cornhuskers (10-2) again made the most out of their bowl game, crushing 8-4 Northwestern 66-17. The 66 points the NU offense scored were the most in college football bowl game history.

Until losses to eventual national champion Oklahoma and Kansas State, NU, many experts and the Big Red faithful expected the Huskers to be playing for the national title at the Orange Bowl. If not Miami, it would surely be New Orleans or Phoenix for a Bowl Championship Series game.

Instead, NU played in little-desired San Antonio. But, despite a bruised ego, they played to remember the Alamo.

"The season was kind of a letdown with the losses," said junior quarterback Eric Crouch, who accounted for 181 of NU's Alamo Bowl-record 636 total yards. "(But) we had a lot of emotion going into this game to show to the country, to ourselves or our state, that we're one of the best teams in the nation."

It sounded eerily familiar to NU post-game remarks after last year's 31-21 win over Tennessee, a victory which caused coaches and sportswriters alike to make NU a preseason favorite to win it all this season.

And for the second straight season, the Huskers took out their frustrations not only finishing the season where they felt they should be finishing by punishing their flabbergasted opponents with the same brand of football that won them three national titles in four years from 1994-97.

Any questions about how seriously Nebraska would take Northwestern in the second-rate, non-New Year's Day bowl were answered in blatantly convincing fashion.

As expected, it was a high scoring affair between the nation's third- and sixth-best offenses. Just a lot more lopsided than expected. Although the Husker defense did give up 383 yards, including 149 to Wildcat back Damien Anderson, it was the Huskers' offense that made mincemeat of a Northwestern defense ranked 89th in the country coming into the game.

The national rushing champ Huskers pounded out 476 yards on the ground. The attack was keyed by Offensive MVP Dan Alexander, who had the game of his life, rushing for 240 yards and two touchdowns on 20 car-



Scott McClurg/DN

Husker rush end Kyle Vanden Bosch hits Northwestern's Zak Kustok as the quarterback releases the ball in the first half of the Alamo Bowl in San Antonio, TX.

ries with a bulldozing, yards-after-contact style.

The senior I-back didn't wait long to start his career day. After the Wildcats were forced to punt on the game's opening possession, Alexander used runs of 18, 7 and 15 yards to put NU up 7-0. The 51-yard drive took just five plays.

Alexander broke the previous Alamo Bowl rushing record on his ninth carry of the game, which came on the second play of the second quarter. The often-criticized Alexander couldn't have found a better way to end his career.

"I wanted to finish up with a great game, and I'm very proud," the running back said. "It wasn't so much me. Any running back in the nation could have ran through the holes our offensive line made. I give a lot of credit to them. They made me look good."

Alexander wasn't the only graduating Husker who shone in his final game.

Defensive MVP Kyle Vanden Bosch recorded five solo tackles, three for a loss, and had a career-best five quarterback hurries and a quarterback sack.

Seniors Bobby Newcombe, Matt Davison and Carlos Polk and junior Dominic Raiola leaving for the NFL, all made lasting impressions in their farewell performances.

"I think you saw a group of seniors out there that just made one big play after another," said third-year NU Coach Frank Solich, who improved to 31-7 overall and 2-1 in bowl games. "It's an outstanding group. You look at their leadership. They're going to be missed, of course."

"It all came together tonight in terms of their play and how

Nebraska	66
Northwestern	17

they brought this team along."

The coronation of the Husker didn't begin full throttle until the second quarter.

With Nebraska quickly up 7-0, Northwestern answered with a field goal and an early second quarter touchdown pass from quarterback Zak Kustok (15-35 for 143 yards) to Teddy Johnson for a 10-7 lead.

It was the only lead the Wildcats would hold, and they wouldn't hold it for long. Senior Joe Walker returned the ensuing kickoff 33 yards, and Crouch followed with a blazing 50-yard touchdown run on the next play that put the Huskers ahead 14-10. The junior quarterback finished with 90 yards on 15 carries and two touchdowns on the ground and 91 yards (on only 5 of 13 passing) and two more scores through the air.

Nebraska's next drive just over a minute later took three plays — Alexander runs of 33, 13 and two yards, to put the Huskers up 11.

By this juncture, it was fairly clear that the Northwestern defense was no match for the Husker O.

"I think when we were up 21-10, things were starting to show that if we wanted to score, we were going to score," senior guard Russ Hochstein said. "The chatter on the field really quieted down at that point. Whenever that happens, it's a sure sign that things are going your way, and now it's time to put the nails in the coffin."

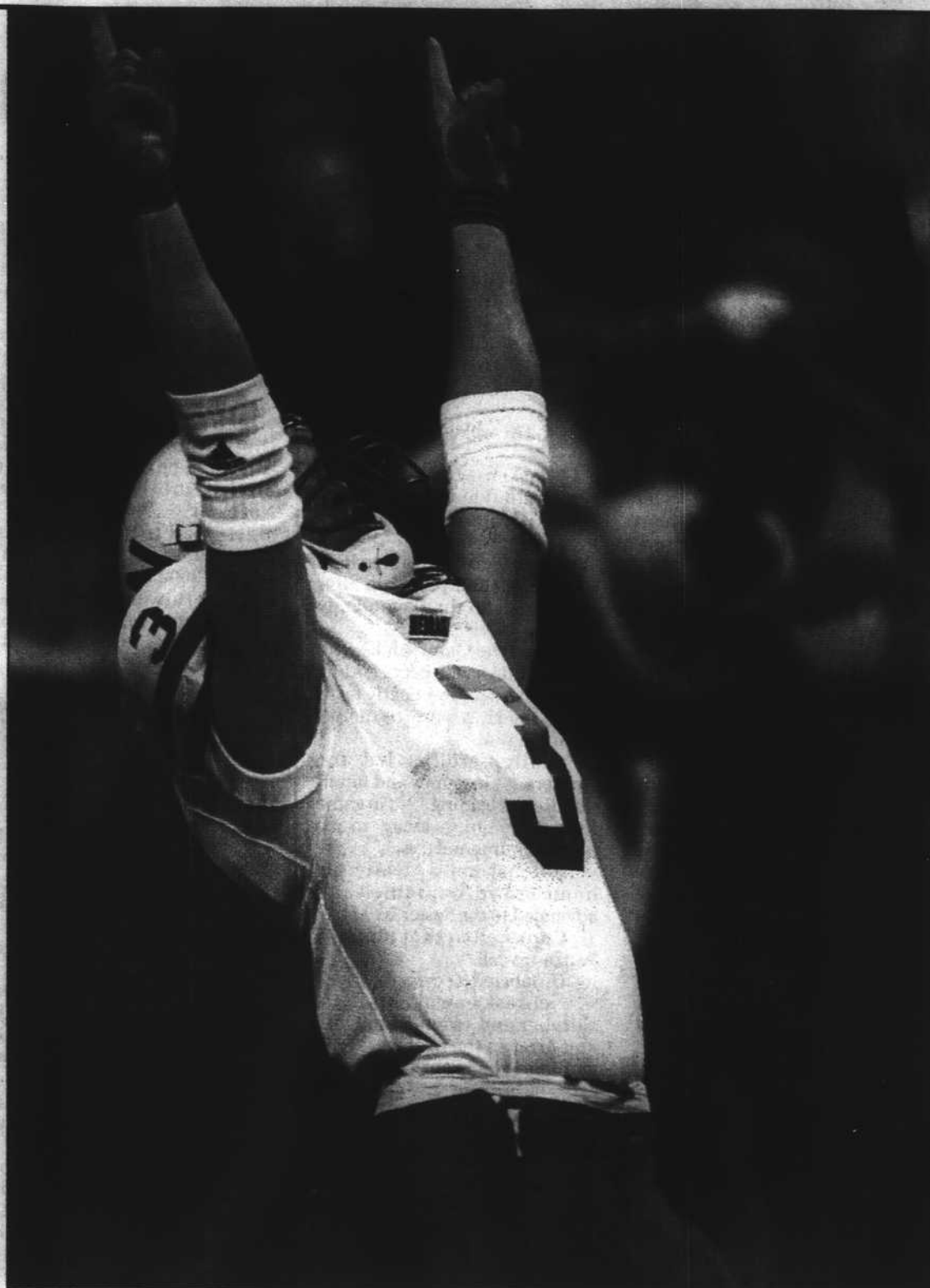
The last nail in the Wildcats' coffin was Newcombe.

The former Husker quarterback turned sometimes effective wingback, whose career was full of highs and lows, finished on a peak. His Alamo Bowl record 33-yard punt return to the eight-yard-line midway through the second quarter set up NU's fourth touchdown.

Then, right before halftime and right after Anderson raced 69 yards for a touchdown, Newcombe caught a short pass from Crouch and ran for a 58-yard touchdown that gave Nebraska a 38-17 halftime lead and effectively ended any hope of a Wildcat comeback.

"It was real important psychologically for us to match their score, to keep our momentum," Newcombe said of his score. "For us to come back and answer their big play with one of our own before the half was over was tremendous."

Newcombe's highlight reel wasn't finished. With NU holding a comfortable 52-17 lead late



Scott McClurg/DN

Nebraska receiver Matt Davison celebrates after catching a touchdown pass from Bobby Newcombe as the Northwestern mascot looks on.

in the third quarter, Solich went for the jugular and called a much-practiced wingback pass. Crouch pitched to Newcombe, who launched a 69-yard bomb to Davison.

After the play, the trio hugged and celebrated like family after three years filled with plenty of offensive turmoil—once highlighted by a bitter Newcombe vs. Crouch quarterback controversy in early 1999 before Crouch took over as starter and Newcombe moved to wingback.

"Sometimes when you're going through (a career), you think it's going on a good pace and when it's over, you think it went by real fast," Newcombe said. "But when I look back on it, I learned a lot of things. I got an education. The experience factor has made me a much more mature individual. I've grown a

lot."

Davison had a final statement of his own in the post-game press conference. Much the same way he said he felt NU should have been playing Florida State in last year's championship game, Davison spoke his mind about NU's placement in the 2000 Alamo.

"I think I'll speak for everybody on this team when I say that I really felt like we should have been in a BCS game," he said. "Even though we did it to ourselves to be in this game, to have a couple losses, I felt like we were a better team than this."

"Hopefully with a very overpowering win like this one, we leave a legacy behind that we were a great football team, and now everyone can see that."

Said Alexander, whose performance and career personified a team that never quite lived

up to lofty expectations but finished with a flurry: "A lot of people doubted us at the end of the season. This kind of win shows what kind of caliber our program is at.

"It's a program that just doesn't quit. Everybody said 'you guys lost two games,' they expected us to kind of flop over on our backs. We showed that no matter what happens, we're playing for pride. We're playing for Nebraska. We're playing for the legacy that we're going to leave behind. This is a great program, and we want to leave it better than we came."

Considering NU was winning national titles when they came, that's hardly the case. But thanks to the win, the 2000 Cornhuskers left the program in solid shape for more expectations of future titles.

Northwestern unable to back words, physical play with win

■ The Huskers shut down the mouths and high-powered offense of Northwestern.

BY JOHN GASKINS

SAN ANTONIO — It's always good to have the last word, especially in your last game. Especially in a game so full of words.

So forgive Carlos Polk for acting a little sassy after Nebraska's 66-17 domination of Northwestern.

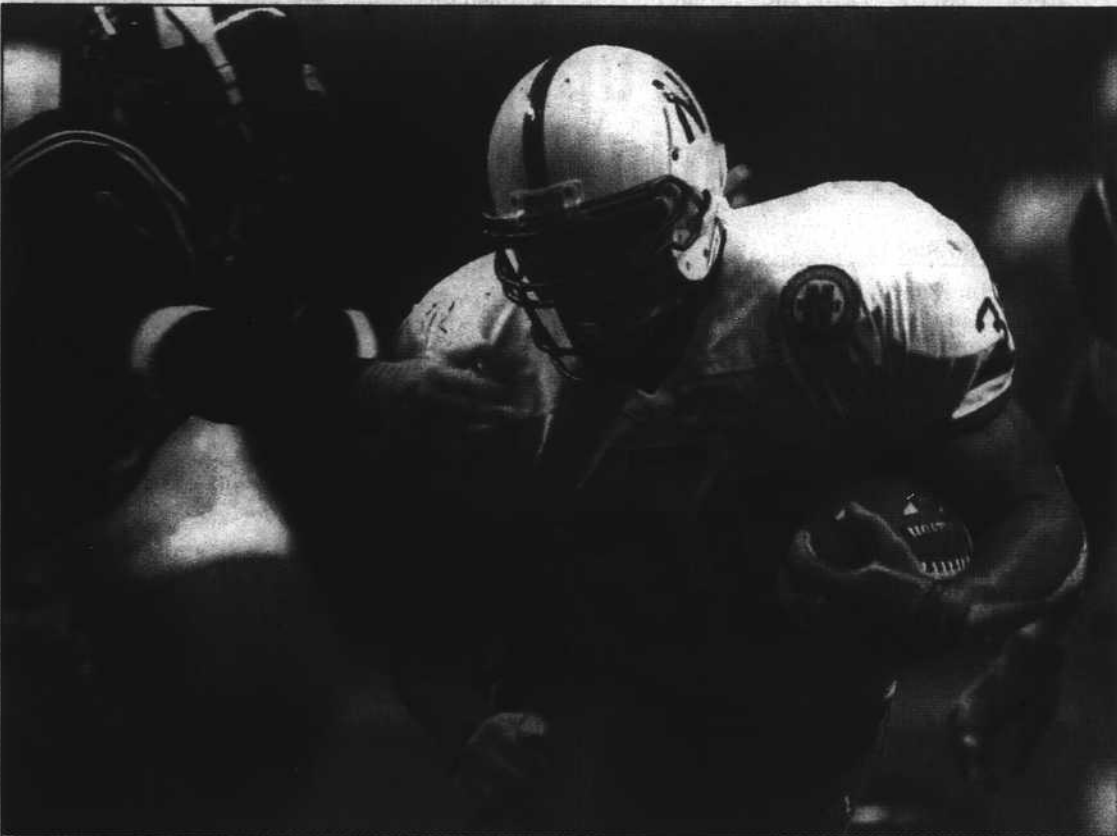
When a reporter asked the senior middle linebacker if the Wildcats played like a high school team, Polk quipped, "No, more like a middle school team."

Thus ended an Alamo Bowl week full of mudslinging between the two proud Midwestern schools representing the two major Midwestern conferences: the Big 10 and Big 12. Both teams came in running their mouths, ready to back up their talk with action.

Polk and the Huskers backed up any and all talk, and did so convincingly. The ending was a sweet one for Polk, who grew up in Rockford, Illinois, not far from Northwestern and smack dab in the middle of Big 10 country.

Considering NU's win ended a four-year drought for the Big 12 in a bowl game that has pitted teams from the two leagues, combined with pre-game Wildcat rambling about not being afraid of two-touchdown favorite Nebraska, Polk couldn't help but swagger.

"(The 66-17 final score) wasn't a surprise to me because I thought we prepared well," he said.



Scott McClurg/DN

Nebraska I-Back Dan Alexander rushes past a Northwestern defender in the first half of the Alamo Bowl. Alexander broke an Alamo Bowl record with 240 yards rushing.

"Northwestern did some good things on tape, but they didn't play the kind of football they were going to face."

Ranked 89th in total defense coming in, the Wildcats were shoved around early and often by the nation's top rushing offense. NU finished with Alamo Bowl records for rushing yards (476) for a team and individual (Dan Alexander with 240). The 66 points

NU put on the board were the most in college football bowl game history. Thirty-one of those points came in the second quarter alone.

All the points and yardage was a bitter pill to swallow for Northwestern — formerly one of college football's doormats before a mid-'90s resurgence and another mini-resurgence in 2000. The Wildcats came into the game with

one of the nation's most explosive offenses. They were out to prove that Nebraska's name and tradition didn't mean a thing.

For a while, they were right. Northwestern briefly lead 10-7 early in the second quarter. But even in its early success, the Northwestern offense was frazzled by the Blackshirts. Wildcat quarterback Zak Kustok scrambled time and time again from the

"They brought a bunch of cheap shots. That kind of added fuel to the fire for us. I mean, we're used to getting held, but they were throwing punches and grabbing face masks."

Carlos Polk
NU linebacker

NU pass rush, and the Husker defense even managed to contain Doak Walker finalist Damien Anderson for the majority of the game.

After NU retook the lead early in the second quarter, the Blackshirt line terrorized. NU sophomore Jon Clanton recorded the first sack of his career. Kyle Vanden Bosch recorded the final sack of his career. When he wasn't on the ground, Kustok threw eight incomplete passes in nine attempts after his touchdown pass.

Meanwhile, Anderson was held to 21 yards on 11 carries before his 69-yard touchdown cut the Big Red lead to 14. Although Anderson finished with 148 yards, 117 came on two carries. He managed just 31 yards on his other 16 rushes.

Quite simply, at least by 2000 Husker defensive standards, it was a Blackshirt woodshed beating.

"We came to play like we came to play every game — like it's a 15-

round fight," Northwestern's second-year Coach Randy Walker said. "Obviously we didn't make it anywhere near 15 rounds."

According to Polk, the only way the Wildcats were fighting was dirty.

"Personally, I don't like the way they played," he said. "They brought a bunch of cheap shots. That kind of added fuel to the fire for us. I mean, we're used to getting held, but they were throwing punches and grabbing face masks."

"There's just no room for that type of behavior on the football field."

The Wildcats were penalized seven times for 138 yards and seemed, at times, to go at Crouch with malicious intent. A face-mask tackle even brought back comparisons to another Wildcat team — Kansas State.

"This always seems to happen against purple teams ... and they always seem to come with no-calls, obviously," Crouch said. "They're blatant, but you move on. Get a breakaway face mask, maybe. Those will be the next things marketed."

Polk, like Crouch, had reporters laughing in the post-game press conference. Playing sparingly with an injured ankle, Polk's talk, coming after the Huskers' on-field demolition of Northwestern, eased his frustration with the Wildcats.

"I want to apologize to Northwestern because I made some comments I shouldn't have made on the field," Polk said. "I was kind of emotional, but my mom always told me not to lie."