



Troy Watchorn, an NU senior who might receive a sixth year of eligibility from the NCAA, conditions under the watch of Bryan Bailey. Bailey's program helps former Huskers get in shape for the NFL scouting combine, which takes place Saturday in Indianapolis, and the upcoming NFL Draft.

NFL combine lets Huskers showcase talent

NFL from page 10

You're giving coaches a first-hand look at what you got ... It's stressful." Other players seem to be running full of confidence.

"I got the best hands," said defensive back Joe Walker as he one-handed a pass.

"You should," Bailey jokes back at Walker. "You are a diamond in the rough."

Perhaps, but a player like Walker needs some breaks. The safety hasn't garnered enough NFL attention to be invited to the combine this weekend.

Dan Alexander is an invitee. And the big running back seems to know exactly what NFL teams are looking for from him.

"They want to see me catch the ball," said Alexander, who has often

been criticized for having bad hands. "If I can show I can catch, I'll be all right. I am not worried with the speed and strength part of it."

Other Huskers who will be at the combine this weekend include wing-back Bobby Newcombe, linebacker Carlos Polk, defensive end Kyle Vanden Bosch, running back Correll Buckhalter and center Dominic Raiola, the only nonsenior in the group.

Buckhalter's stock seems to be rising after an impressive post-season performance. Raiola's stock has been high since he announced he would leave school one year early for the draft.

"Dominic is one of the best linemen I've ever seen here," Bailey said. "He has the God-given ability plus he just loves the game."

Hochstein said it would still be

interesting to see how many times Raiola's pass-blocking skills were questioned this weekend.

"I went to a couple of All-Star games, and there's this perception that Nebraska guys can't pass protect," Hochstein said. "But look and see all the guys from here that are successful in the NFL now."

Those NFL success stories are the ones that put a smile on Bailey's face. But he said he really likes the personal relationships with the players more than anything.

"What makes me happy is when guys like Ahman Green come by like he did the other day and they appreciate what you did," Bailey said. "They all know that I care about them. They're like my kids to me."

And sometimes Bailey has to treat them like his kids.

"Time to get going, Buck," he

yells at Buckhalter, who takes his time tying his shoes before his workout.

"Sometimes I have to get on them," Bailey said. "They know they're really good. I got to get them going."

But the NFL is a whole new world — sometimes a cruel world.

"After you start three years of college ball, you get to thinking you're pretty good," Hochstein said. "But then you get to this point, and it's a humbling experience."

Whether the results end up good or bad for Bailey's boys, he still enjoys the preparation ride they took.

"We have great athletes with a great opportunity," Bailey said. "Some will make it, and some won't, but if we did our best, we'll be happy we put up our best effort at the end of the road."

Buckhalter opens eyes of prospective teams

BUCKHALTER from page 10

Buckhalter and several other former Huskers have been training since January.

"Me, Dan (Alexander), Russ (Hochstein), Dominic (Raiola) and Dan Hadenfeldt all leave Thursday morning (for the combine). I feel that I've had great preparation, and I'm ready for it."

In fact, Buckhalter admits he has already drawn interests from some NFL clubs. He has been recently contacted by the

Dallas Cowboys and the Philadelphia Eagles and is already represented by an agent. However, Buckhalter expects to receive more attention following this weekend's combine and expresses no interest in which team ultimately drafts him.

"It's no preference to me," he said. "It depends on whose system I fit in. I'm just gonna give 110 percent and go with my dream."

Suddenly, that dream is a whole lot closer.

Husker men can't overlook Texas Tech en route to Kansas

TECH from page 10

Bradford said.

"We say all right, this team has this type of record so they aren't going to be that tough," he said. "But when we get out on the floor, that team plays like they want it, and they catch you with your pants down."

Nebraska Coach Barry Collier, who has been critical of his team's mental preparation all season long, said Texas Tech would be no easy task.

"We are real focused on leaving behind the previous play, much less the previous game," Collier said. "We just have to reiterate our focus on the task at hand and appeal to the lessons we have learned along the way — that we also forgot after we learned them and had to relearn them."

Hopefully for NU, Ffriend and Bradford won't have to relearn anything from their performances in Saturday's 87-82 overtime win at Colorado.

The two combined for 42 points and 20 rebounds but will be tested by Tech's front line of

Andy Ellis and Cliff Owens.

Ellis is Tech's leading scorer at 14.9 points per game, while Owens pulls down a team-high 7.1 rebounds per game. But Collier said an inexperienced backcourt, which includes freshman Mikey Marshall and junior Jamal Brown, along with rebounding woes, has hurt the Red Raiders in close games.

Close games have also been Nebraska's arch nemesis this season. The Huskers have had 12 of their 25 games this season decided by five points or less, posting a 6-6 mark in those games.

The near misses will make Collier and his team ponder what-ifs after the season is over. But for now, the Huskers are focused on making the best out of the situation at hand.

"We're still on track right now," Bradford said. "We just have to finish strong, and we will try to make it to the NCAA, but if that don't happen, the NIT is always there. But you don't ever look at the secondary first."

"We are trying to fulfill the dream first."

Don Nelson returns to Mavs

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DALLAS — Leave it to Don Nelson to turn his return from beating cancer into a laughing matter.

Seeking levity on what could have been an emotional night, the Dallas Mavericks' coach celebrated the end of his 52-day absence to treat prostate cancer by wearing a red foam ball on his nose and ending his pseudo-feud with Shaquille O'Neal.

Nelson, looking tan and about 10 pounds lighter, was beaming as he walked into Reunion Arena for his pregame introduction Tuesday night for the Mavs' game against the Los Angeles Lakers. He received a standing ovation as the public-address announcer said, "Welcome back Nellie."

Once on the court and surrounded by players and cameras, Nelson pulled the 89-cent, racquetball-sized toy out of his jacket pocket and squeezed it onto his nose so he'd look more like "a clown," which is what O'Neal called him after the Mavericks abusively defended him the last time the Lakers played the Mavericks.

Nelson's gesture wasn't meant to reignite O'Neal's fire. The hatchet had long been buried as O'Neal called Nelson during his recovery and has been saying "I love you, Don Nelson" since hitting town

Monday.

O'Neal was even in on the prank as he came over to Nelson, took the ball off the coach and wore it himself. The pair hugged, then Dallas assistant coach Del Harris, formerly O'Neal's coach in Los Angeles, put on another foam ball.

"I am a bit of a clown," the 60-year-old Nelson said before the stunt.

Nelson, a master prankster and former advocate of the fish tie, was coaching for the first time since Dec. 30. On Jan. 4, his prostate was removed because the early stages of cancer had been detected.

The third-winningest coach in NBA history spent most of his recovery in Maui, where walking on the beaches led to his bronzed skin and the addition of several stray dogs into his household.

His son, Donnie, coached the team in his absence and kept the Mavericks solidly in the chase for their first playoff berth in 11 years. Dallas went 13-8 (.619) under Donnie compared to 20-12 (.625) under his dad.

Nelson admitted he plotted for his return to be against O'Neal and the Lakers.

"I didn't even think about it until a couple of weeks ago, then I kind of circled it," Nelson said. "I wouldn't call it a big splash. I had to come back against somebody. I thought this was a logical one."

NASCAR safety in spotlight

■ Two days after the death of racing legend Dale Earnhardt, NASCAR faces criticism for failing to require safety devices that may have saved him.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Neck braces. Soft walls. Special seat belts.

Such racing equipment is suddenly well known beyond the garage as NASCAR struggles to cope with four deaths in less than nine months, the latest being the sport's greatest star.

NASCAR faced renewed questions Monday about whether it was doing enough to protect its most valuable asset — the drivers — after a devastating blow.

Dale Earnhardt, a seven-time Winston Cup champion, died Sunday from massive head trauma when his black No. 3 Chevrolet slammed head-first into a concrete wall on the final lap of the Daytona 500.

But the governing body of stock-car racing has always moved deliberately with safety improvements, and NASCAR president Mike Helton made it clear such improvements wouldn't be made just because the intimidator was dead.

"We're not going to accelerate, we're not going to slow down," Helton said. "It's a work in progress all the time."

Ken Adams, manager of Hubbard/Downing Inc. in suburban Atlanta, is troubled by NASCAR's stance. The company makes the Head And Neck Support (HANS) device, which was used by only six drivers on Sunday. Earnhardt wasn't among them.

"The most frustrating thing is he died of basilar skull fracture," Adams said. "That's what our device is designed to prevent."

Earnhardt's death in the season-opening race came after one of NASCAR's deadliest years. Adam Petty, Kenny Irwin and truck racer Tony Roper all died from fractures at the base of the skull or similar injuries.

"This is getting absurd," Adams said.

But Dr. Steve Bohannon, an emergency physician at Halifax Medical Center who also works for Daytona International Speedway, said there was no way to know if the HANS would have prevented Earnhardt's death. An autopsy also was inconclusive.

"Even if you restrain the head and neck in this type of injury, with the forces we're talking about, there's still one more element you have to address," he said. "Even if you restrain the body ... the head, the neck, the chest, all those organs internally still move at time of impact."

Even so, orders for the brace from NASCAR teams flooded into the Hubbard/Downing plant Monday morning, Adams said. Adams said the plant was making only three devices a week just a few months ago. The company had 35 orders Sunday after Earnhardt's death.

The CART open-wheel series, which begins March 11, has already mandated the HANS system for oval-track races this year. By next year, the Formula One series is expected to follow suit.

NASCAR, meanwhile, has tested softer walls, which could lessen the G-forces in a high-speed crash. Helton said the technology would not work at high-banked tracks like Daytona.

"We've gone from tracks with no walls to wooden barriers to tire barriers to concrete walls," Helton said. "There may be a substitute for concrete, but we've not been able to find it yet."

Earnhardt himself chastised NASCAR for worrying that soft walls broke apart too easily and required too much time to clean up during races.

"I'd rather they spend 20 minutes cleaning up that mess than cleaning me off the wall," Earnhardt told the Orlando Sentinel last week.

John Melvin, former head of safety at General Motors and now a consultant to NASCAR teams, said there was no foolproof way to make the sport safer. He noted the HANS was designed mainly for head-on impacts. Researchers are working on a device that would protect the head and neck on side impact.

Michael Waltrip, who won the Daytona 500 in a car owned by Earnhardt, will try out HANS on March 11.

"I like the way it stabilizes your head in an incident," he said. "But it's also cumbersome and can make it hard to get out of the car. That's a concern, too."

Earnhardt, who wore an open-faced helmet, never considered wearing a neck brace.

"I really think he would have lived with one," Adams said. "But Dale was always set in his ways. He was a great racer, but he just wasn't open to that option."

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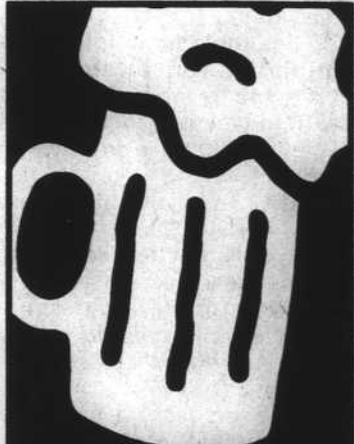
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