

## A little help from above?

Inside the Nebraska compound, just minutes before NU plays Tennessee in the 1998 Orange Bowl:

God: Samuel McKewon  
Tom?  
Tom: Tom?  
God?

God: Been awhile ...  
Tom: Year or so. We missed each other at the Big 12 championship down in St. Louis last year.

God: Famine stuff in Africa held me up. Couldn't fit inflicting James Brown with typhoid on the docket. Sorry.

Tom: So I figure you owe me.

God: Who do you think had your back with that kicked ball in Missouri this season? Brigham Young?

Tom: Well, I figure you owe me a little more.

God: You wanna be good to go tonight?

Good Lord. There's a lot of God running around in sports, which mirrors society fairly well, pro-God or anti-God. And sports is most certainly pro big man upstairs.

It's the counterculture rejects, see, and college sports is full of them, as is professional athletics. Both are run by (mostly) male coaches horrified by the actions of the 1960s - its revolutions and loosed behavior. They were startled by the era's lack of obedience.

If sports is a metaphor for war, and Vietnam was rejected by those congregated, liberated masses, then sports turned in the opposite direction, embracing the troops and ma in the kitchen (or in the stands). The establishment, Christianity, Nixon, all the rest. You know, God's guys.

The residual effect shows up clearly today. You hear God muttered more than ever out of players' mouths. Many athletes do as they see, and if preaching the Lord's name in praise or accepting Jesus as the savior falls in line with acceptable behavior, expect a mass fall right in line.

It's a catchphrase game, this thanking God. Maybe, bamboozled by coaches who push it, they believe it helps victory, or cleansing or whatever. Sports is about fitting in with the team, to alleviate the pressure of fitting in anyway, and if Joe Quarterback is at the middle of the field praying, well, why not?

And since coaches have become successful speakers, their inquiries about the word of God fall on listening ears, especially if it provides a means to deal with problems or even solve them. Did you fumble? God's will. Ray Lewis puts himself in a nasty position and gets thrown in jail? Just God's plan to put him through as much as Lewis could handle, no more, then redeem him, just like Jesus, or so said Lewis days before a Super Bowl victory.

Men are especially susceptible because they represent the establishment. Notice closely how few women athletes waste the time to offer their thanks. It's kept for a private time, as it should be.

Plus, women aren't the establishment and neither are their coaches (After all, they had to believe women's athletics could work). There's no need to hold onto a God that hadn't gone anywhere to begin with. No need to spread His word, have His will be done. Just what, after all, does that have to do with winning?

You could guess my answer to that question. Religious figures - priests, rabbis, pastors and Witnesses of Jehovah - will tell you the same thing. With something so frivolous, God, assuming you believe in him, could care less. There is no "plan" for any athlete in the course of a game.

God grants no second chances in sports. Everybody knows that.

It's karma.

# Spring puts defense in spotlight

With a lot of new faces protecting its net, NU has gone 1-1 in its spring season.

BY BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

In its spring soccer season, Nebraska has played to an even record and allowed nine goals in two games.

Looking closer at the situation reveals that it isn't as bad as it sounds.

Hitting the panic button doesn't seem necessary considering that Nebraska's 5-0 loss came to the Atlanta Beat, a professional team with some of the world's top players.

Factor in that the Cornhuskers have underwent almost a total facelift on defense - one that includes the loss of graduated four-time All-Big 12 defender-midfielder Jenny Benson and a change of face at goalkeeper - and the situation takes on a new dimension.

Despite the new look, Nebraska still picked up a 5-4 win against Clemson, last year's 5th-ranked team.

The nine goals? Nebraska Coach John Walker isn't too worried.

"It takes time," Walker said.

"This spring kind of reminds me of '98, when two of our three defenders were new, and we had a new goalie. The situation this year is identical to then."

Walker has reason to have optimism. That 1998 team went 17-4-1, and the new goalie that year, Karina LeBlanc, ended up losing only six games in her three-year reign as starter.

Now, Walker turns the ship over to an unproven junior-to-be, Leah Lamale.

It's easy to imagine how excited Lamale is to show her skills after sitting for two years.

"I've been training for this for two years learning and working with a great player like Karina ...," Lamale said. "It's not nerve wracking (to play). It's exciting."

And it was perhaps frustrating at times, as Lamale found out in her two spring appearances.

"We did a lot of good things," Lamale said, "but we didn't always have early recognition on the defensive side. But that's why spring is so important. It gives us the chance to gel and come together as a team."

And when things seem a little dicey for Lamale, the goalie can always turn to her roommate, Breanna Boyd. Boyd, who will also be a junior in the fall, is the lone

returning defensive starter and realizes she is expected to be a leader for the young defense.

Boyd said the defense should be set by the fall season, and if it does take a few bumps along the way, the Husker offense might make up for a few mistakes.

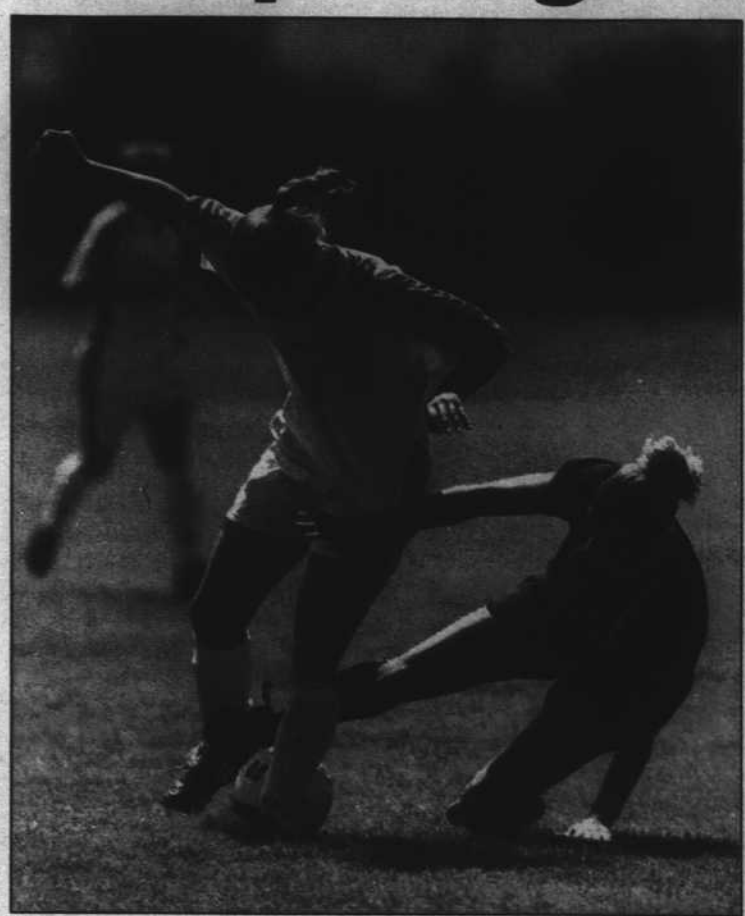
"Things look very promising. It seems as though we are more creative on offense this year," Boyd said. "Offensively, we've done an awesome job."

Against Clemson, Nebraska's sophomore Christine Latham led the Husker assault on the Tigers' net, scoring two goals. The Huskers even landed a goal from freshman forward Marie-Claude Henry.

It seemed all too positive until Henry tore the anterior cruciate ligament in her right knee this week at practice. She had recently recovered from the same injury in her left knee.

It was the only bad news Walker could deliver about his team at this time.

"The players have put a lot of work into the spring. It isn't a glamorous time because there aren't many games, but it gives us a chance to work on individual development," Walker said. "It gives us a more realistic look at who we are."



Nebraska forward Christine Latham has helped NU work to a 1-1 record. The Huskers have three games remaining on their spring slate.



Quarterback Eric Crouch has evolved to be one of the best running quarterbacks in Nebraska history. In just 31 games, the senior has become NU's all-time leading rusher among quarterbacks.

## Crouch has become option No. 1

BY JOHN GASKINS

With Eric Crouch returning and last year's top two running backs gone, one wonders what course the Nebraska bread-and-butter option game will take in 2001.

As in, could there be more options than just running the Eric Crouch Show on auto pilot?

On paper, it was business as usual for the high-octane Husker attack last year. In fact, it was vastly improved from the two years before.

The Huskers averaged 41.5 points, 459.9 total yards and 349.3 yards on the ground, all best outputs since the ridiculously experienced and talented national title team of 1997.

And while that kind of production usually pleases most people, the way it was done did not, particularly in the option game.

Unlike when NU's deadly option used to involve dynamic duos like Tommie Frazier and Lawrence Phillips, and Scott Frost and Ahman Green, last year's attack involved Crouch, and, well, Crouch.

Not that that's an awful thing.

The senior from Millard North obviously didn't mind, and he hasn't crumbled when carrying more of the rushing load than NU quarterbacks were accustomed to in the last couple years, especially on the option.

In 1999, Crouch became the first quarterback since Rex Fischer in 1955 to lead NU in rushing. Last year, he was second to I-back Dan Alexander but averaged an impressive 88.3 yards per game.

Crouch, whose 169 rushing attempts last year eclipsed career highs of both Frazier and Frost, became the leading rushing quarterback in NU history last year and is 13th overall on the Huskers' all-time rushing list after just three years. In 1999, he set position records for attempts in a season and a game, a record that had stood since 1952.

"He's what I believe and what most believe is the top running quarterback in the country," Coach Frank Solich said.

While Crouch's keeping has been effective, other option staples, mainly outside running plays with a

Please see **CROUCH** on 9

## Thomas leads depleted corps

BY JASON MERRIHEW

For the past few years, Nebraska has had the luxury of proven go-to receivers when the situation has called for it.

Heading into the spring however, the Cornhusker receiving corps now consists of an inexperienced and untested unit.

Gone are the graduated duo of Matt Davison and Bobby Newcombe. The explosive tandem combined for 40 catches and 638 yards last season.

The Huskers still have All-American junior Tracy Wistrom at tight end, but their top wideout is junior-to-be Wilson Thomas, who brings a grand total of one catch for eight yards in experience but has been a two-year letterman.

All things considered, it begs

### wide receiver/tight end spring breakdown

the question: Considering quarterback Eric Crouch's accuracy problems last year, will NU rely even less on the pass in 2001 than normal?

"No, not necessarily," NU Coach Frank Solich said. "We will try to be a multidimensional team. We think we will have a very good throwing attack."

"I think we have good receivers in our system, and the potential is there to have some speed at that spot, to run very good routes and to make big plays."

Thomas will be presented with the duties of replacing Davison at split end, while junior-

to-be Troy Hassebroek is expected to replace Newcombe at wing-back.

"Wilson Thomas has played a lot, but he will be in a different role," Receivers Coach Ron Brown said. "He will be the go-to guy."

Thomas, who played basketball in the winter, should provide Crouch with a large target. Thomas stands in at 6-foot-5 and 205 pounds, but there's more to his game than that, Brown said.

"He is more than just a tall guy. He has deceptive speed. He has very good leaping ability, and he has very quick movement for such a tall, lanky kid," Brown said. "Wilson has the chance to be an outstanding player."

Like Thomas, Hassebroek has-

Please see **RECEIVERS** on 9

## A tale of two springs: CU loses few in 2001

BY DAVID DIEHL

Finally there's a sense of continuity on Colorado's football team.

Entering spring practice, Coach Gary Barnett lost just six seniors from last year's young but sometimes promising 3-8 squad. Not six starters and a handful of other graduates, or six off the depth chart, it's six from the entire football team. To compare, Nebraska lost four times that many entering its spring sessions.

That has provided Barnett with the tools and optimism heading into 2001 to fuel a turn-

around in the CU program that had its worst season in 16 years. It also must have sparked some ambitious optimism in CU Athletics Director Dick Tharp as he gave Barnett a two-year contract extension in December.

With the better part of his team still intact, Barnett's main task this spring is developing depth, not scrambling to find bodies to fill holes like last year.

"You can spend your time getting better rather than finding out who is going to play for you," said Barnett, who returns 19 of 24 starters. "That's what we're doing

Please see **COLORADO** on 9