

Bo's First Game Launches New Era in NU History

By Randy York

Tonight a new era begins in Nebraska's storied football history, and since hybrids are the current rage among efficiency-minded Americans, it seems only fitting that the Huskers' new head coach is a bit of a hybrid himself.

Ask longtime Nebraska sportswriters and sportscasters about Bo Pelini, and they will tell you what coach he reminds them of most. Some say Bob Devaney because of his straightforward, inspirational approach. Others say Tom Osborne because of his emphasis on discipline and innovation. Still others believe Bo is a hybrid of Nebraska's two most successful coaches in history.

Osborne had a prototype in mind when he began the search late last year for a new head coach. The Hall of Fame football coach turned Congressman turned athletic director was ready to hand over the program's keys to:

- 1) A coach with the ability to stop the most explosive offenses in the country
- 2) A coach with the leadership skills to instill confidence and get players to play hard and
- 3) A coach with a keen understanding of Nebraska's unique place in the college football world

Pelini's resume screamed loudly in all three areas, and the match was made quickly and efficiently. "Bo is a good fit," Osborne said. "He gets players to play with tenacity and emotion, and they appreciate that."

A native of Youngstown, Ohio, Pelini has shown the same kind of hard edge mastered by Devaney, a native of Saginaw, Mich. Devaney built his coaching staff on relationships, trust and extreme loyalty and recruited athletes who fit into that system.

Pelini has put together a staff on the same principles, hiring three former Husker players and six full-time assistant coaches with previous experience at Nebraska. Five coached together at Nebraska in 2003. Three members of the Husker staff, including Bo, graduated from Youngstown's Cardinal Mooney High School.

Pelini's philosophies reflect Osborne's priorities. They both make character a clear-cut focus, so their teams can be as competitive and as consistent as possible. They also both relish their roles as teachers, communicators and motivators.

Like Osborne, Pelini fully embraces Nebraska's fabled walk-on program. He's eliminated any perception of a "caste system" and reinvigorated the strength and conditioning program. He's also incorporated a system that gets more players ready to play on Saturdays.

In addition, Pelini, a former Ohio State captain and academic All-Big Ten selection at safety, has made academic achievement an equally important part of a culture designed to maximize talent – on and off the field. His background meshes nicely with a Nebraska tradition that has produced a nation-leading 263 CoSIDA Academic All-Americans.

As the overall leader, Pelini sets the tone for a value system designed to recruit highly coachable players who want to contribute in any way they can because they know everyone is treated equally.

At his first-ever National Letter-of-Intent signing press conference as a head coach last February, Pelini did not elaborate on any specific player, choosing instead to address what his first recruiting class represented as a group. Pelini also has instituted a former Osborne policy that makes first-year players off limits to the media until they have actually played in a game.

This summer, Pelini made sure his photo did not grace the cover of the 2008 Nebraska football media guide, preferring the underlying message conveyed by an iconic, embossed, white letter 'N' against a red-muted backdrop that included 16 former Husker players who have had their jerseys retired and seven returning senior starters.

Pelini and Osborne both embrace tradition. Both have a great work ethic. Both believe in physical football and wearing down opponents and both are inherently motivated with innovative schemes. Even though Pelini is consumed with defensive schemes and Osborne with offensive schemes, both love to experiment with X's and O's on the opposite side of the ball from where their individual expertise lies.

As chess players, their favorite word would be checkmate. As football coaches, their favorite word is unity, which explains why Pelini has reinstated the Unity Council that Osborne launched, where players assist with the decision-making process on disciplinary issues.

Nebraska's first-year head coach probably knows that Bob Devaney's first Husker team beat South Dakota, 53-0, before 23,953 in his Memorial Stadium debut 46 years ago. He's also probably aware that Tom Osborne's first team beat UCLA, 40-13, before 74,966 in his Memorial Stadium debut 35 years ago.

With Devaney's first team, Nebraska emerged from an East Stadium entrance for the first time. With Osborne's first team, the Huskers emerged from a South Stadium entrance for the first time.

Pelini's first team won't be the first to enter from the North Stadium locker room, but it will be the first to walk out underneath the stadium to something very special awaiting the players' grand entrance via the Tunnel Walk. For the first time on game day, they will see the engraved names of 2,013 former varsity lettermen who have gone before them.

Perhaps they will think what Damon Benning thought the first time he laid eyes on the Lettermen's Wall during the first quarter of the 2008 Spring Game.

When you look at all those names, "There is no in-state player, no out-of-state player, no walk-on player and no scholarship player," said Benning, a Nebraska h-back from 1993-96 and Most Valuable Player in the Huskers' 1996 Orange Bowl win over Virginia Tech.

"We were all equals when we got here, and we all came here for the same reason – to contribute to something bigger than all of us. At Nebraska, all lettermen are the same. We're hundreds of guys who paid the price to be part of one of the greatest traditions in all of college football. And the greatest honor any of us ever achieved was being able to say: 'I played for Nebraska.'"



Bo Pelini and Tom Osborne, shown here at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for NU's new lettermen's wall, have embraced Nebraska's past while moving the program forward.