

# Blakeman, Saalfeld Still Excelling on the Football Field

By Randy York

A three-year letterman who spent his Nebraska football career as a backup quarterback and a walk-on center who became a first-team CoSIDA Academic All-American are still excelling on the football field, even though one's playing career ended nearly three decades ago and the other's ended two decades ago.

Clete Blakeman and Kelly Saalfeld found the perfect way to stay involved in the game, influence players, build life skills, earn extra money, make lifelong friends and memories and give something back to the game they love most. On weekends, they put on white pants, pull black-and-white jerseys over their heads, wrap whistles around their necks, slip into their cleats, pull on their caps and prepare themselves mentally to officiate some of the biggest college and pro football games in America.

Blakeman, the ex-quarterback and Omaha attorney, was the referee in Oklahoma's win over Missouri in last December's Big 12 Championship Game in San Antonio. He also worked the 2005 Big 12 title game and was an alternate referee for the 2008 BCS national championship game before he was hired earlier this year by the National Football League. He started his rookie year in the NFL this fall as a field judge.

Saalfeld, who works in sales for UPS in Omaha, anchored Nebraska's offensive line when the Huskers upset top-ranked Oklahoma in 1978. He took the backroads route to his Big 12 officiating career and was the head linesman when Missouri defeated Kansas last November in a Kansas City game that had national championship implications.

"That game at Arrowhead Stadium was a neat experience because the two teams were effectively No. 1 and 2 at that moment in time," Saalfeld recalled. "The environment was electric, and it was especially easy for me to stay within my policy of treating each game as if it's the most important game I will ever work."

Nearly 30 years earlier, Saalfeld played in his most important game ever – Nebraska's 17-14 upset of OU in Memorial Stadium. "It tops my memory as a player," he said. "Practices leading up to that game were more intense than ever. The excitement was incredible, and the celebration was as fantastic as you can imagine."

## Cotton, the Player, Showed His Coaching Potential

The game was a precursor for Barney Cotton's coaching career. Nebraska's offensive line coach played guard next to Saalfeld. "That game was Barney's coming out party as an offensive coordinator because we changed our scheme to block their All-Americans – (NG Reggie) Kinlaw, (LB George) Cumbly and (LB Daryl) Hunt," Saalfeld said.

The adjustments worked, but the offensive line scores nosedived. "Unfortunately, we received about 44 zeros for not following our correct blocking schemes," Saalfeld said.

Two former Huskers whose paths crossed as Big 12 officials kid each other that both are charter members of the Nebraska Holding Club. "I am because, like all offensive linemen, I did my share of holding," Saalfeld said, "and Clete's a member because he was Nebraska's holder on extra point kicks."

Two years ago – in the Music City Bowl in Nashville – the two ex-Huskers finally got to work on the same crew when Blakeman switched from head linesman to referee.

Blakeman's Husker highlight reel begins when he replaced injured quarterback starter Steve Taylor in Nebraska's come-from-behind win over South Carolina in 1987. The next week, Blakeman was named starting quarterback and led the Huskers to a 54-2 win over Kansas at Memorial Stadium. The previous year, he also started against the Jayhawks in a 70-0 blowout in Lawrence.

One of his most memorable moments as a football official was last year's Texas-Texas A&M game in College Station on Thanksgiving weekend. "I flew my parents down with me to the game, so they could experience a home game at A&M," Blakeman said. "It turned out to be my last trip to Kyle Field. I'll always remember saluting my parents from the field right before opening kickoff. It was my way of saying thanks for all the years they had supported my dedication to football. The noise and electricity levels that day were amazing."

Blakeman's father, Glen, and Jerry Neely officiated Nebraska high school football and basketball games together for more than 40 years. "I remember watching them work together from my youngest days. It was great, and they loved every minute of it. I actually think those two spent more time in ref stripes than street clothes," Blakeman said with a smile.

Following in the footsteps of his father and Neely, Blakeman refereed Nebraska high school and NAIA football for 13 years before spending the last seven in the Big 12.

## Both Have Officiated a Non-Conference Game at Memorial Stadium

Quite possibly the "biggest game" Blakeman ever officiated was the 2006 Nicholls State-Nebraska game in Lincoln. "Being a former player, alum, booster club member, and a season ticket-holder at NU made officiating that game truly unique from my other games," he said. "Wow, talk about pressure!"

Saalfeld was the head linesman in Nebraska's 35-12 win over San Jose State last month in Lincoln. He was willing to take the same risk because he understands his responsibility to each player, coach and fan – to give his best concentration and greatest effort every play, every game.

"In officiating, you're only as good as your last call," Saalfeld said.

"Every call you make is big," Blakeman said. "Just ask the coaches!"

The "whole game-day experience" is the best part of being an official. "The adrenaline rush at the opening kickoff is hard to beat. I also truly enjoy the interactions with the coaches, players and team personnel," Blakeman said. "Plus, since joining the NFL, I've had great opportunities to catch up with former Huskers like Gene Huey (Colts), Tom Rathman (Raiders), Josh Brown (Rams) and Chris Kelsay (Bills). To a man, we all like the direction the program is headed. Coach (Tom Osborne) has played a huge role in bringing the pride and support back to Memorial Stadium. It's great to have that feeling back again."

Blakeman says one word helps him balance his family life with his professional demands . . . "Blackberry" – a data-equipped phone that helps him stay on task.

Officiating helps Saalfeld stay in touch. "I've been able to meet officials that I now call friends from all over the country," he said. "They're not just football officials, but judges, attorneys, firemen, policemen and people representing many other vocations. Most importantly, they're men who are upstanding people in their communities."

## Keys to Success: The Ability to Set and Achieve Goals

Both officials said their football experiences taught them how to set goals and achieve them. "Coach Osborne and his staff were so good at pushing a solid work ethic and creating a drive to excel in each player. Those things have carried over to my life today," Blakeman said. "I'm a goal-oriented person. I try to think and act daily on the goals I plan to achieve. Plus, I set new goals all year long . . . not just on New Year's Eve."

The late Clete Fischer, Milt Tenopir and Osborne "gave me a chance first and later taught me what was required to perform to their expectations," Saalfeld said. "So many people think football is a job at the collegiate level, but those coaches kept football fun for me and helped mold almost all of us into men."

Saalfeld still remembers when Rick Hook, current basketball coach at Millard West High School in Omaha, called him one Sunday afternoon and asked if he could assist in officiating a junior varsity football game. Initially, Saalfeld declined because he'd have to pay \$110 to buy his equipment and receive only \$40 for working the game.

"I knew I'd have to work a few more games to get right side up," he said. "I did major in economics. I decided right then and there, I would have to set goals for myself in officiating and see how far I could take it."

He went from high school officiating to NAIA to NCAA Division II. He worked Arena II, Arena Football and NFL Europe. Now 50, Saalfeld is in his sixth year working Big 12 games.

Taking the backroads and byways to his ultimate destination in stripes was no big deal. "Remember," he said, "I was a walk-on. I was willing to do whatever was required."



Kelly Saalfeld



Clete Blakeman