

Excerpts from

***Forever Red:
Confessions of a Cornhusker Football Fan***

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Nebraska 28, Oklahoma 24 – November 26, 1982

While we know Husker football isn't a religion, at times the lines can get a little blurry, which probably explains why those "On the Eighth Day God Created the Cornhuskers" bumper stickers were so popular back in the '80s.

It might not be a faith in the official sense of the word, but being a Husker fan can lead you to question your own now and then. In 1982 I had to wonder what kind of god would allow us to get hosed by the referees at Penn State when it was obvious to every sentient being in the Milky Way that Mike McCloskey was out of bounds when he caught that last-second pass from Todd Blackledge to beat the Huskers....

Still, there was plenty to get excited about after Thanksgiving, when Oklahoma returned to Lincoln to play the Cornhuskers for the Big 8 title....While everyone agreed Nebraska had the better team, (Marcus) Dupree's mere presence negated any advantage the Huskers held.

Like I had two years earlier, I watched the game on TV with my mom. By now, however, she had taken to lying down for short naps ("snaps," she called them) whenever a game took a turn for the worse and she just couldn't bear to watch. For good long stretches, it was just me in the living room, lying on our orange-and-black shag carpet, hands on my chin, hoping the next play would finally be the one to get us on track.

That never entirely happened. The Cornhuskers started well, grabbing a fumble near midfield and punching it in a few plays later on a Gill scramble. But by early in the second quarter, The Sooners had ridden Dupree's punishing runs to a 10-7 lead.

I could feel that familiar panic setting in, so I got up and did what any right-minded Cornhusker fan would do. I climbed the stairs to my room, got down on my knees, and prayed. More accurately, I begged God to give the Cornhuskers a hand. I started bargaining: If He'd help the Blackshirts get a handle on Dupree, I'd stop fishing the quarters out of Dad's change dish so I could play video games at the bar downtown. If He would help Turner Gill hit open receivers and maybe even pitch the ball on the option, I'd tear up the *Playboy* some friends and I had found at the public bathroom at the park. If He could just...

"What are you doing?"

Mom was standing in the doorway. She had heard me bolt upstairs. When she asked again, I attempted in vain to convince her I was invoking the powers of the Almighty to deal with something important, like world hunger or the civil war in Upper Volta. She looked unconvinced.

"Hmmm," she said, hands on her hips. "I see. Well, what about that little boy in Oklahoma who's

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praying right now for *his* team to win?”

Well, what about him? It wasn't my fault he chose to cheer for the Legion of Doom. However, realizing how stupid I must have looked appealing to the heavens for a Cornhusker victory, I figured silence was the best course of action. My mother motioned me toward her and said something about how God didn't have a rooting interest in football games. Shrugging, I followed her back to the living room.

No sooner did we settle back in front of the TV than Gill pivoted and flared a pass in the flat toward another flesh-and-bone mortal, Irving Fryar. The ball was low, though, and it skipped to Fryar on one bounce. No whistles blew. Fryar, still standing behind the line of scrimmage, wound up and flung a 37-yard strike to tight end Mitch Krenk. The Bounceroosky, as it would become known, gave the team the boost I was hoping for—moments later Doug Wilkening scored the first of his two second-quarter touchdowns, and Nebraska bolted into the lead.

Florida State 18, Nebraska 16 – January 1, 1994

In the Midwest, the Huskers were still the biggest dog on the porch, and a victory over them was a *cause célèbre*—even if it wasn't that way anywhere else. Nationally, NU was seriously short on street cred. All the Big 8 titles in the world couldn't mask the perception Nebraska was nothing more than a regional bully. The Huskers had lost six straight bowl games, and lost them badly...

I was sad realizing this would be the final game I'd witness as a student at the university and knowing it would probably end in another crushing loss.

What didn't occur to me was that while Bowden's megastars had been preparing for the Orange Bowl for about five weeks, Nebraska had been getting ready for this game for about five years. Shortly after FSU blasted the Huskers 41–17 in the 1990 Fiesta Bowl, Tom Osborne and his assistants shifted their recruiting focus toward speed and agility instead of size and power. The transformation was slow and subtle—not every blue-chipper wanted to leave Brandenton, Florida, to stare at piles of dirty snow in Lincoln—but it was taking shape. Where Danny Noonan once lumbered, Trev Alberts now prowled. Defensive backs became linebackers and attacked with abandon in Charlie McBride's new 4–3 scheme. The offense, while still run-oriented, had become more than the one-dimensional leviathan it was assumed to be. While the national media genuflected to FSU and I clung to desperate, drunken wishes, Dr. Tom was setting his trap.

The trap was sprung with six minutes left in the first half. Florida State was ahead 3–0, and while Nebraska was still in the game, it was tenuous at best. The Noles' velociraptors on defense made it damn near impossible to run wide, and their eight-man fronts clogged the inside. So Osborne ordered Tommie Frazier to the air. First, the sophomore lofted a toss to No. 33, Clester Johnson, over the middle for 25 yards to the Florida State 34. On the next play, lightning struck. Tommie took the snap, stutter-stepped to his right as if to run an option, slipped back a step, and launched another one toward Clester. This time, two Seminoles crunched Johnson as the ball arrived, and it fluttered end-over-end into the Miami night sky.

Out of nowhere swooped No. 7, Reggie Baul. The sophomore split end caught the deflection in full

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stride, turned upfield before the stunned Seminoles could react, and bolted into the end zone untouched. It was Nebraska's first lead in a bowl game since 1990. As teammates Baul and FSU's defenders trudged off the field with hands on hips, Baul raised both hands, then jogged to the sideline in a sort of dazed disbelief. It was goddamned magnificent.

Nebraska 24, Miami 17 – January 1, 1995

In the fall of 1994, I let myself believe again. With Tommie Frazier seemingly out for the year, the team had rallied around Brook Berringer. After dispatching Colorado on Homecoming, the Cornhuskers clubbed Kansas, defeated Iowa State, and polished off Oklahoma ... to finish the regular season top-ranked.... Just one final hurdle to jump, I thought, and we could plunge head-first into the sweet thereafter.

That feeling lasted until the bowl bids went out, and Nebraska learned it would travel to Miami to play the hometown Hurricanes. The mention of that hideous name melted my season-long excitement into anger. How many times were we going to have to play these bastards in their own backyard? The fury was followed by a sense of downright dread: Three times in the past decade Nebraska had faced the Hurricanes at the Orange Bowl, and three times had returned shocked, empty-handed, and demoralized. Miami, meantime, had won four national titles in that span. And in '94, the Canes possessed what some considered its best defense in school history, and that was really saying something.

I couldn't imagine Nebraska winning. I couldn't even picture what a victory over Miami might look like. I supposed it was achievable, of course, and when Kathy and I came home for Christmas, I gave those who were wildly optimistic their due respect. Sometimes I even joined in, but inside I fortified myself for the probability of defeat. For the first time, I understood the thinking of those people preparing for their second marriages who pushed for prenuptial agreements: For the record, you smile and say how you're sure everything will be just fine, but inside you're saying, I am simply not going to allow myself to get taken again.

Nebraska 62, Florida 24 – January 2, 1996

The average Nebraskan's attitude toward spending ... in general, we're a pretty thrifty bunch. I suppose this is because like most Midwesterners, we're inherently modest, and we're uncomfortable if we stand out from the rest of the pack. There is definite social pressure not to put on airs.... So we save our money for the essentials, things that won't be perceived as frivolous.

This tendency must come from our pioneering ancestors, who had to make do with whatever they had. There were no vinyl-siding salesmen waiting for them when they arrived in Nebraska; hell, there weren't even any trees. So they built homes out of sod, tended to their little corner of the world, and lived very basic, unassuming lives. Then in the late 1800s, football started being played over at State U, and the local dry-goods stores began having a run on red ribbons. Next thing you know, people were driving carriages for miles to see the team play. To this day, whenever our Bugeater gene meets our homesteader gene, the Bugeater gene wins in a rout.

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I figure that between game tickets, travel expenses, subscriptions to various sports media, clothing, and other assorted Huskerphernalia, I've dropped more than fifteen thousand dollars in my adult life to feed my obsession for Cornhusker football. There are a lot of goods, services, and generally life-improving things I could have attained with that kind of scratch—a new roof for my house, for example. However, as pleasant as having my home's interior protected from the elements might be, *a new roof will never help Nebraska get to a good bowl game*. It's that simple. Besides, I've found that packing the holes in my roof with sod is quite effective....

I've put my money where my mouth is, and there's a strong feeling of accomplishment that goes with that (entitlement, too—my dollars also buy my right to be indignant or outraged, and they validate my complaints about play calling and feed my suspicion I could make better personnel decisions than the coaches).

Nebraska 56, Western Illinois 17 – September 4, 2004

Despite the hard-boiled, independent stereotype, the average Nebraska football fan is pretty damn dependent on his team, and so he's willing to put up with just about anything to bask in the glory of the Cornhuskers. The owners of the game have always known this, and have often exploited those feelings to further their own aims. We also know it, but we have no choice. They have the goods, we need them, and we will do anything to get them.

Through it all, though, the game itself somehow continues to endure. And more important, it continues to surprise and astonish. Just when I think I've had it with the canned spectacle, the selling of the event, and the massive packaging and spin from the South Stadium offices, just when I think I'm going to cut the Cornhuskers loose for good, a quarterback from Omaha will catch a touchdown pass off a double reverse, or a walk-on from Wahoo will turn a botched extra-point try into a 2-point conversion, or a hard-nosed kid from Wood River will transform himself from scapegoat to savior. The game's stubborn insistence to deviate from its handlers' scripts is what keeps me fascinated, while its unmatched ability to inspire is what keeps me hopelessly smitten. When the thick-necked fullback bulls in for a score, it's worth a hell of a lot more than six points—it's priceless. It's an anchor to my childhood, to my friends, and to the tiny little town in northeast Nebraska where I grew up. Nothing else can do this, create feelings so magnificent, powerful, and sublime all at the same time.