

## A Story From The Stands

Stories about former Nebraska Football players and what they learned from the game.

By Kenny Miller

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### CLIMB OUT OF THE BUCKET

**LINCOLN NE-**The big dream almost came true for Tom Banderas when he was a Nebraska freshman. He almost got a National Championship ring but Turner Gill's two-point conversion pass was just a tick off the mark and the rings went to the Miami Hurricanes instead. Unfortunately for "Bando" as he was quickly nicknamed, he and his Husker teammates wouldn't be back in the National Championship game during his career at Nebraska.

The big outside defensive end was a highly recruited Oak Grove, Missouri product. Oklahoma came calling. So did arch rival Texas, home state Missouri, Notre Dame and USC. But Nebraska got him.

"Charlie McBride recruited me," Banderas explained. "I was most impressed with the longevity of the coaching staff." His recruiting trip was pretty impressive, too.

"I was standing on the sidelines during the Oklahoma game and Marcus Dupree came running right at me."

Even though Dupree would not go on to legendary status with OU, the game made a big impression on this young blue chipper. "I had second thoughts about my ability after watching Dupree, but I thought if the Nebraska coaching staff thought I could play at this level, I'd play."

He remembered his first walk into the Nebraska locker room. "I walked in uncertain," he said. "At home I was a big man but in Lincoln, I was just a little fish."

It didn't take the little fish long to learn how to swim. He was moved to offense and in the typical Nebraska style, he did more blocking than receiving. His first touchdown pass was in the 1986 Kansas game, a 25 yard touchdown pass from Clete Blakeman. Steve Taylor had assumed starting QB duties quickly and the whispers of a second "scoring explosion" started to circulate in Lincoln.

Then Florida State came to town. But even the power of the South didn't darken Banderas's day. "I almost scored but Deion Sanders got me," Tom said as he laughed. "Some of my buddies said he ran me down but that's not how it happened. He had the angle on me."

Oklahoma had an angle, too. It was called "Sooner Magic" and ruined several promising Husker seasons.

Banderas had some good early years but his favorite coach, Gene Huey said he needed to be bigger. "I called Huey Nipsey Russell. He wanted me to put on twenty to thirty pounds and play at 260 and still hold a 4.7 speed," Banderas said.

Extra pounds and power were still not enough to stop the Sooners. "We lost 20-17 in the Game of the Century 2." Who could forget that one and the closing second's performance of Oklahoma's Keith Jackson.

Banderas still thinks that was his best game. "I was blocking like an animal and I also grabbed a twenty yard bootleg from Taylor." None the less, Jackson stole the spotlight with that back-breaker, crowd-silencing pass completion in Lincoln.

The 1987 Missouri game was a different matter. "I got Big 8 Offensive Player of the Week after three touchdowns." Not bad when you consider Kellen Winslow and Keith Jackson were also in the weekly hunt.

Tom was more impressed with another athlete. His name was Von Shepherd. "He had more courage than anyone I have ever known," said Banderas. "Injuries kept him from becoming great but he kept trying." He hasn't seen Shepherd since their playing days but thinks of him often. "He just kept fighting and coming back."

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Banderas earned post season honors including All Big 8 Second Team and a trip to the Japan Bowl along with teammate Neil Smith. The Washington Redskins tabbed him but a pro career wasn't to be. "I had a shoulder injury so I told Joe Gibbs couldn't give them 110%. He shook my hand and said he appreciated my honesty and I went home to the family construction business in Kansas City."

Football was over for Banderas. "I felt like a million dollars when I got off the plane in Kansas City," he remembered. But the construction business wasn't for him. "I didn't want the seven to seven job, I wanted something bigger."

He knew he could sell so he went back to Nebraska and used the alumni program to help him discover some options. One of the options was the insurance business. "I knew it was a tough sell and wasn't sure it was the right thing for me."

But then another Oklahoma encounter caused a change in his thinking. One of his bosses was a former OU standout and taught him a couple of secrets: to do the job right; you have to educate people; and if you take care of your customers, they'll take care of you. The advice worked and Banderas has consistently been a top 10 insurance sales producer.

"And don't let things and other people get you down," he suggests. "Sometimes life is like a crab in a bucket. If there is only one crab, he'll probably get out but if there is more than one crab, they keep pulling each other back down into the bucket," he said. "Believe in your ability and climb out of the bucket."

And Bando knows how to climb.