

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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THE SMALL TOWN GUY

LINCOLN NE-Mark Blazek is a small town guy. He never wanted to leave small town Nebraska and that was only one college he ever wanted to attend. He had the big dream of so many young boys and the courage of just those few who have made the Nebraska walk-on program legendary in college football.

"I had a chance to go to college on a full-ride scholarship playing basketball," the 35 year old Valparaiso lawyer turned banker recalled. "I had just enough money to go to Nebraska for one year. There was no other financial help around for me so I had a year to get it done. I could have gone to one of the academies but I didn't want to leave Nebraska for that long."

Get it done was exactly what this defensive safety prospect from Raymond Central High School did. He enrolled at Nebraska, walked-on and in no time at all, he made the 4th.string.

"You have to have a little luck to succeed," he said and luck came from a most unlikely source. It would be the year of the ticket scandal at Nebraska resulting in NCAA sanctions. Players who didn't follow the rules about handing out student athlete tickets to the satisfaction of the NCAA had to step aside. Blazek went from 4th string to 2nd string in the blink of a questioning NCAA eye.

His first year money was also running out so he needed to make some decisions. "I heard about the Nebraska National Guard program and how they would pay for college if you signed up." The recruiter came out to visit Mark and his parents and signed him up. "My dad was out of work at the time so he signed him up, too. We took the test together and were sworn in together."

Blazek's National Guard detour found him roaming around a Ft. Knox training battlefield in a tank. That's not bad training when you consider the size of oncoming offensive college linemen. The following fall, he traded his Nebraska National Guard tank helmet for a white one with a red stripe and a red N on the sides. His first game was against the pesky South Carolina team who brought the fight to Nebraska in a home and away series.

"Early on, the coaches were looking at me as a corner but I knew I wasn't fast enough," he noted. Blazek was one of the last guys with average speed and a big heart to play in the secondary. To win the big ones, the Nebraska coaches knew they would need more speed at those positions. But for now, the coaches picked a competitive small town kid with lots of personal drive.

"We went out to play UCLA for my senior season opener," he recounted, "and by the end of the first quarter, they were up something like 28 to 0." That game was not one of the best memories in Husker Football history. But, there was a bright spot.

"Troy Aikman was UCLA's quarterback," Blazek said. "I picked off one of his passes and got hit by one of our guys, Charles Fryer. I was just worried about hanging onto the ball until Fryer started pulling me up. 'Get up and run, get up!' Fryer hollered at me." Blazek did just that and returned the interception for a 75 yard touchdown. It may still be Aikman's longest interception for a touchdown.

Aikman's revenge came a little later in the game. UCLA had Nebraska backed up to the three yard line and ran an option Blazek's way. All that stood between Aikman and the goal line was a pulling 300 lb. guard who set his sights on Balzek. The result was much worse than another UCLA touchdown. Blazek suffered a torn hamstring muscle.

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"No one knew how to treat that injury," Blazek said. "I could jump OK but I had lots of pain on any forward motion." Blazek spent the remainder of his football career doing what many of the players really wanted to do all of the time. "I couldn't practice. The trainers had me rest all week and just play on Saturday. That's what a lot of the guys wanted to do anyway. They would come out in sweats and I was dressed. Coach Osborne sent those guys back to put on pads and told me to put on sweats and take it easy. It really was funny."

Blazek went on to some post season honors including Academic All-American and Honorable Mention Big 8 and was also selected to play in the Japan Bowl. "We were at a press event and were all wearing our school jerseys. Aikman was there and I went up to introduce myself," Blazek explained. "He knew who I was when he saw my jersey."

Blazek did have some thoughts about playing pro football. His wife Kim is related to former Husker Brett Clark who went on to play for the Washington Redskins. "Brett told me I could play pro but I was ready to move on," Blazek said.

Blazek graduated from Nebraska's Law School, worked for a Lincoln firm and went back home to Valparaiso and took a position as a Senior Vice President of a local bank. He still serves in the Nebraska National Guard and works closely developing leadership qualities for the Nebraska Bankers Association.

Does he have any words of wisdom for young want-to-be Huskers? "You must develop discipline and a good work ethic," he said. "The most athletic players don't always play. You have to be there at the right time and work hard. If you do, you will get your chance at Nebraska."

The young boys of Valparaiso don't have to look far to find a real Nebraska hero. They have a former Nebraska safety who now stands guard with the Nebraska National Guard. Major Mark Blazek has given all he can to play and stay in Nebraska. Not only does he love Nebraska; he honors Nebraska with his dedication. That's a very remarkable record for a small town guy.