

# 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 BALLAD OF AN UNSUNG HERO

**LINCOLN NE-**If you are a devout Husker fan, get out your tape of the 1972 National Championship game with Alabama. Fast forward to the last play of the first quarter and you'll find Johnny Rodgers galloping down the field for a 77 yard Nebraska touchdown. Watch carefully as the wall forms and three Husker defensive linemen take out seven Alabama players and spring Johnny for another of his famous "put 'em in the aisles" runs.

But today isn't Johnny's day. It belongs to one of those three linemen. His number was 55 and his name is Bill Janssen. Bill didn't get to finish that game because he sprained an ankle in the second quarter.

Janssen came to Nebraska from Red River High School in Grand Forks, North Dakota. His father was in the US Air Force. Bill was a 6'4", 215 pound giant and learned his football skills in Texas on another Air Force assignment.

"When I moved to North Dakota, I was on the sports interest sidelines," Janssen recalled. "Hockey was the big sport and I didn't know anything about it."

No problem.

Nebraska took notice of a very talented football player in hockeyland. A visit from Husker coaches Carl Selmer and Monte Kiffin, plus a little arm twisting from Bill's older brother Carl, who played football for the Air Force Academy, made the decision easy. Bill became a Husker.

One of his early memories of Nebraska Football was at a freshman meeting with Coach Bob Devaney.

"Coach Devaney walked into the field house dressing room and started asking us a bunch of questions," Bill said.

"How many of you guys played on teams where you won more games than you lost?" Devaney asked.

"Maybe a third of the guys raised their arms. Then Devaney wanted to know how many guys played on teams where they lost more games than they won. Again, about a third of the hands went up. Then he asked, how many of us had a high school coach who told us it was too bad we lost because we played so well? All of the hands went up."

"Well that's bullshit," Devaney told us. "Your coach didn't tell you the truth. Football is a game of mistakes. When you make fewer mistakes than the other guy, you win. We eliminate mistakes at Nebraska. That's why we win at Nebraska."

But there was a time or two when Nebraska didn't win. "You learn even more from those days," Janssen said. "I remember that very long bus and plane ride home from California when UCLA, under the arm of Mark Harmon, beat us 20-17 in 1972. Their fullback, McAlestar, blew right over the top of me on a play when they needed some big yardage to stay in it. Doug Dumler and I were the captains when our 31 game winning streak came to an end. That wasn't fun."

His best memory is the second national championship game against Alabama. "My best performance was that first quarter punt return against Alabama. I am very proud of what we did on that play. Kiffin told us that it could be available for us and sure enough, when we got it set up and Johnny turned on the juice, it was. I think it broke Alabama's back. We were 13-0 and had another National Championship. That was a fun ride home."

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Janssen was drafted in the eighth round of the by Pittsburgh but pro football just wasn't as fun as college football for him.

"Football takes a toll on you and it was taking a toll on me," Bill said. "It was time for me to move on."

His toughest assignment came about the same time. He and his wife were expecting twins. The twin daughters, Monica and Heather were born three months premature. Heather only survived for a day.

"I was only 24 and dealing with that," he said as a softness takes over his eyes. It's clear that his daughter Heather took a large part of her dad's heart to another special place. "I committed myself to being the best dad I could be

If you met Bill on the street, you probably wouldn't know about his football playing days. "I don't lead with that," he says. "I even thought long and hard about whether I should wear this," he said as he makes note of the large gold ring on his right hand with the big red stone and a diamond in the center. It's a 1971 National Championship ring.

"It's big and some would say, a bit gaudy, but when you consider the broken bones and the bruises, I guess I have earned the right to wear it. I guess I will always be proud that I was one Nebraska's unsung heroes."

Indeed you are a hero, Mr. Janssen. Indeed you are.