

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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A GREAT RUN FROM A WALK-ON

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LINCOLN NE-Clete Pillen always wanted to play football for Nebraska. "I knew it from the age of nine and that didn't change," he said. "I always wanted to play for Nebraska."

It was Coach Cletus Fischer who went to visit the Columbus star.

"I was anxious to hear what he had to say and wanted to know if they thought I was any good," Clete recalled.

"He told me I had a great football name," Clete said as he laughed. "That was it. That was his opening line to me."

Nebraska didn't have a scholarship for Clete but Coach Fisher invited Clete to walk-on if he wanted. That was good enough.

"I remember walking into the locker room on the first day," Pillen said. "I could already spot a couple of guys who looked like they had All-American desire in their eyes. Bob Martin and Tom Ruud were two I noticed right away." Ruud was 6' 4" and 225 pounds and Clete was 6' and 180.

"My biggest fear wasn't getting hit by the big guys or walking around the corner and finding my locker empty which meant I didn't make the cut. My locker was never cleared out so I made it to winter conditioning."

Pillen learned winter conditioning was a lot more than staying in shape. "Winter conditioning is where you start to see the difference," Pillen said. "It is 45 minutes of non-stop running and drills. What really comes out of it is the desire to play at Nebraska,"

According to Pillen, coaches found out a lot about players during winter conditioning. "You could see the work ethic in an individual and their will to win," Pillen said. "This is where mental toughness and that fourth quarter desire to win shows up."

Pillen had that toughness. He was a driven, tough kid but like a lot of people, he had something more than football practice to face.

"I had epilepsy," Pillen said. "Head trainer George Sullivan always had my medicine with him just in case I had an attack."

There was only one time Sullivan thought he might have to use it.

"I was down on the field and Sullivan came running out with my medicine but he didn't have to use it." Pillen said. "I was actually knocked out."

Pillen knew practice was the secret to staying in the starting linebacker job. "If you're not a practice player, you're not going to start at Nebraska," he emphasized. "The pressure never lets up. Every practice was filmed and that's what brought the cream to the top."

Clete's first start came during his junior year against Indiana. Pillen was a strong side linebacker and had to make all of the defensive calls and check calls.

"You only have a split second to make the defensive call after you see the offensive formation and I made every call to the wrong side."

"What are you doing!" Coach Kiffin screamed at me. "Thank God I made all of the tackles anyway."

His greatest effort started on the second play of the first defensive series during the 1975 Nebraska-Oklahoma game. He was hit with a high-low pair of blocks, which hyper-extended his knee. Sullivan helped him off the field and iced and taped his knee. There might be a chance that Pillen could return later in the game Sullivan told him. Clete went back in on the next series and when the clock ran out, Pillen was ABC-TV's

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player of the game for Nebraska. He was credited with being part of 26 tackles. Whoa Nellie he's a tuffin'.

"I figured as long as they didn't get by me and I wouldn't have to chase anybody down," he said. "If I didn't have to run very far, my knee would be fine."

There would be another great game in Clete's career. It was his senior game against Oklahoma State.

"I had 31 tackles." Clete's performance helped him gain All Big 8 and Second Team All-American honors. He averaged 15 tackles per game during his senior year.

But one regret lingers.

"Sooner Magic," he said as he laughed. "We never beat Oklahoma."

If you want to know what it takes to play football for Nebraska, all you have to do is listen to Clete Pillen. "Set your goals high and give 110% and Nebraska will give you a chance to play."

And every once in a while, a tough Nebraska kid with a legendary name comes along and does just that. Not bad for a walk-on.