

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 GO-TO GUY

LINCOLN NE-The new coach at Colorado told the talented blue-chipper from Thornton not to leave his native state and play for Nebraska. "You won't get to play, Bill McCartney told me," said Rod Smith, "but I was going to Nebraska because they kept their word to me."

The talented all-around player who returned twelve punts for touchdowns in high school, packed his stuff into a pickup and a trailer and he and his buddy Marc Munford headed for Lincoln. "The Colorado papers called us turncoats."

This wasn't Smith's first trip to Lincoln. "I attended a football camp at Nebraska when I was a high school junior," he explained. One of his buddies was Doug Fiala, a nephew of Husker linebacker Adrian Fiala. "Adrian came out to watch Doug and noticed me, too. He wanted Doug to come out to Lincoln for the football camp and asked me to come along."

Smith did and put on a show. One of the guys watching was Coach Tom Osborne. "He called me into his office and told me there would be a scholarship for me at Nebraska when I graduated," Smith said.

But his senior year in high school brought disaster instead of more stardom. "I had a knee injury and had to have surgery," he explained. Smith was out for the season but not out of the minds of the Nebraska coaching staff.

Nebraska coaches called often to find out how he was getting along and reassured him that the scholarship was his if he wanted it.

"I took my Colorado visit when the Buffs played Nebraska and went over to the Nebraska side so the doctors and trainers could check out my progress," he said as he laughed. "Even with the injury, Nebraska honored their promise and that was important."

The young Huskers-to-be arrived in mid summer. "Marc and I rented a house without air conditioning and had to sleep on the porch because of the humidity and heat. We couldn't believe it." He couldn't believe the reception he got when he walked into the weight facility the first time either.

"A guy walked up and asked if I was new and needed someone to work out with," Smith explained. "After we worked out, he asked if I wanted to catch some passes so we went out on the field for a while." The guy was Turner Gill and the year was 1983.

McCartney was wrong. Even with the triplets ruling college football, young Smith saw some varsity action as a freshman. He was groomed as a wide receiver but was soon put back for punt returns. He led the nation in punt returns in 1986. During Nebraska's first game under the lights on October 6, 1984 against Oklahoma State, Smith returned a punt for 67 yards and a touchdown. From that point on, Husker fans slid up on their seats when Smith went back for a punt.

His first touchdown pass didn't happen, however. "Coach Osborne gave me this look when we broke the huddle so I knew it was going to be me. The safety bought my fake and the guy covering me fell down," Smith said. "I was all alone and Travis Turner threw a perfect spiral. I watched it come down and started for the endzone and dropped it. I was wide open."

Lesson learned, catch first, run next. He also learned Nebraska coaches could be forgiving. Instead of a seat on the bench, he soon became one of Steve Taylor's top go-to guys.

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Things were looking great and this goal-driven guy was well on his way to reaching his big dream. "I set a goal to play pro football when I was eight years old," he said. There was a good chance his Nebraska performance would allow him to do just that. Then Oklahoma came to town.

"I was back for the opening kickoff and got caught up in the excitement so much that my knee just started to shake," he recalled. The kick sailed over his head for a touchback.

Maybe that shaking knee was an ominous sign. Smith got whacked later in the game. A week later in Boulder, he couldn't walk. He had a broken leg and his Nebraska playing days were over.

That didn't stop Smith from trying pro football through the free agent route. He got to play for the Kansas City Chiefs and the Oakland Raiders. But his days in football were numbered. "After five surgeries, a handful of screw, and a plate in my leg and my explosiveness was gone."

Smith decided to move to the Phoenix area and start a business. "I remember how warm and nice it was there when we played in the Fiesta Bowl against Michigan." He started a company that conducts football camps for young boys.

"We try to teach leadership more than football skills and techniques. We try to give the kids positive reinforcement and get the kids to believe in themselves. That's half the battle," Smith explained. The camp includes four lectures a day that also deal with drug, alcohol, and violence problems.

Apparently his approach works. Smith came back to Lincoln for the 2001 Oklahoma game. You can be sure he smiled when he watched one of his graduates play. "Eric Crouch attended our camp when he was in the eighth grade and Mike Brown attended when he was in the ninth."

"I guess I could have made a lot more money selling cars or something," Smith said, "but there has always been something a little bigger out there for me. I love doing this and helping kids."

That's good news for dads and moms with boys who need a positive focus and a little push to reach their big dreams. They can count on Rod Smith to help. He is still the go-to guy.