

One step from the Rose Bowl

By Mark Purcell

Most good prewar majors, even the dynasties, worked on a three-year recruiting rhythm where you had the same core players from sophomore year on, and therefore expected the big seasonal payoff their senior year together. Even with Knute Rockne, who was expected to win every year, you can put your finger on Notre Dame 1924 (the Four Horsemen), 1927 and 1930 as senior-oriented backfields.

Nebraska, under Coach Dana X. Bible, was no exception, with a 1931-33 George Sauer-Bernie Masterson backfield that in 1933 was projected, correctly, as a payoff year at Nebraska. Bible and everyone-else in the state had their eye on the big prize of prewar college football, a Rose Bowl invitation to Pasadena.

The Big Six, now the Big Eight, at the time was a slightly second-level conference which Nebraska totally dominated, missing only two conference

titles (1930,1934) during Bible's tenure. It was the outside-conference games that were expected to get Nebraska its Bowl bid. Look at the 1933 schedule Bible arranged. (Prewar schedules were only booked a year or so in advance.) Texas was coming off an exciting year 1932; Iowa had good prospects which jelled into a first division finish in 1933; Pitt, a perennial power under Jock Sutherland, was the 1932 season Rose Bowl invitee; and the closer with Oregon State would expose Bible and his team to the Coast media and coaches.

1933 Nebraska used the Warner double-wing formation, with two big ball-handling backs at the fullback and quarter-back slots, and ran a spinner offense with two fast half-backs. Bible's tailback, George Sauer, would in 1933 become consensus All-American and was a future regular NFL running back with the Packers. Sauer was a good runner, an acceptable passer, he blocked, tackled and pass defended; and with a great kicking leg for punting. The double-wing formation required Sauer, as the fullback (tailback), to play up front on defense as linebacker, because the halfbacks were, by role-definition, light quick players who belonged back as pass defenders. Sauer missed two games his junior year of 1932, and was to miss one game in 1933 because of the two-way punishment he endured.

For the opener Texas brought in a star player and explosive outside runner, Bohn Hilliard, who in 1932 had one of the greatest sophomore seasons in the history of the SWC. Hilliard suffered a leg injury in this game which destroyed his season artistically, and insured Nebraska's 26-0 victory. Texas finished with 83 yards of team offense and this forecast the defensive problems Bible's Nebraska line and backs gave most of their stronger foes. This was followed by a 20-0 win over Iowa State.

Next on the schedule was Kansas State, with perhaps the best coach in the conference in Bo McMillan, and an offense normally built around two good runners, Ralph Graham and Doug Russell. But Nebraska shut down the K-State rushing and forced them into a passing offense, mostly Morgan pitching to Graham. Kansas State made more of a competitive game than Nebraska was by now accustomed to, and the Huskers only managed a safety and one TD by Sauer for the 9-0 win. This was the decisive conference win for Nebraska against their major league rival of the early 1930's.

The following week brought Oklahoma, which had perhaps the next best player in the conference after Sauer in their passer-punter Bob Dunlap. He did some great punting against Nebraska, intercepted a pass, recovered a fumble, and made a 1-yard TD run, but he could never really get anything serious going from scrimmage. Oklahoma was held to 65 yards of total offense and Nebraska had a 16-7 win. Hapless Missouri was next brushed aside by a 26-0 count, followed by a 12-0 win over Kansas.

With six straight wins, Nebraska prepared for Sutherland's Pitt Panthers and their smashing single wing. Nebraska went down to a 6-0 defeat when, on a fourth quarter, fourth down pass, Leon Shedlosky hit Mike Nicksick for the TD. But the beating, as usual when you played a Sutherland team, was more one-sided than the score indicated. For the first time all year Nebraska lost control of the line of scrimmage as Pitt ran up 349 yards of total team offense, 298 of it rushing. The three "star" Nebraska backs only managed 13 yards apiece as part of their total offense of only 125

yards. There's an account in comedian Joe E. Brown's autobiography of how Bible had the famous movie clown and jock fan come into the locker room after the Pitt game and give the downcast boss, their Pasadena hopes wrecked, a kind of celebrity's condolence pep-talk.

George Sauer, who was highly praised after the game by Pitt for his defensive linebacking, was injured and had to sit out the next week's game with Iowa. Without Sauer, Bible regrouped around his other big back, quarterback Bernie Masterson, who did the team passing, ran over the team TD, and pulled out a squeaky 7-6 win over Iowa. As with Kansas State, Bible's defense controlled two star running backs, Joe Laws and Dick Crayne. For the Thanksgiving (Nov 30) finale with Oregon State, a good defensively oriented team, Bible had Sauer back, but perhaps significantly, George had a total of only 12 rushing and passing plays, though he was effective. OSU's star back, Red Franklin, took an early-game injury which might have gone back to their previous week's rough win in New York over Fordham (9-6), a very physical team. OSU trailed 6-0 after three quarters, but Nebraska took charge in the fourth quarter for an impressive 22-0 win and an 8-1 record for the year.

For the 1933 season Nebraska rushed 227.6 yards per game, and had 546 yards passing on 40 of 109, for a total offense of 288.4 yards per game. The team punted 98 times for a 44.7 yard average, most of this Sauer's, and I have them with 16 defensive interceptions. For the era, the rushing and total offense are good, though not great. The individual rushing totals were: Sauer 148 carries for 555 yards; the halfback Boswell, 98 for 453 yards, Masterson 87 for 302. The key passers were Sauer with 20 completes in 57 attempts for 282 yards and 2 TD's, and Masterson with 15 of 32 and 198 yards. It was mostly a short-pitch pass attack with a lot of backup laterals to Boswell and Masterson. Boswell was the leading receiver with 10 catches for 103 yards, while Sauer did the main scoring with 6 TD's. Sauer and Meier led the team in interceptions with four each.

With a win or tie against Pitt, Nebraska would have looked good enough for that Pasadena invitation, but without it they came into the political complications that often entered in the selection process during prewar years. In the 30's the Rose Bowl Committee's negotiating edge was that it was the only bowl game of any true artistic or box office significance until the end of the decade; the SWC champion, for instance, would have traded Cotton for Roses anytime they were asked.

But the negative side, for the Rose Bowl, was that the two groups of colleges it most wanted in the Bowl (the Ivies and the Big 10) both played hard-to-get, on the proper grounds, still true, that winter practice and a major winter football game fouled up the player's academics. Even more seriously, the Big 10 ban led Notre Dame to refuse potential invites, since ND enforced all the Big 10 conference regulations by rote to encourage their own acceptance into the conference. Still, Michigan almost received a Rose Bowl invite in 1932 before the Committee invited a Pitt team, inferior to Michigan, to play USC in January, 1933.

The Ivies had visited Pasadena in several of the early Rose Bowls. In

1933 Pasadena really wanted an Ivy team, and these schools were probably the first preference for the Rose Bowl throughout the '30's, as late as 1939 Cornell. The best Ivy team, 1933-35 inclusively, was Princeton under Fritz Crisler, and nobody who reads the 1933 football press can fail to believe that Princeton got a feeler bid, which they rejected.

This should have given poor Nebraska, hat in hand, waiting at the stage door, their chance, since they were reasonably as good a team as what Pasadena had left available. Instead, desperate to crack the Ivies, the Rose Bowl people took second best and invited the No 2 Ivy, Lou Little's Columbia Lions (7-1). Princeton had beaten Columbia by three TD's when they met, and all the experts presumed the Jan, 1934 Rose Bowl would be a slaughter, mainly because Columbia had a tremendous size problem lining up against Stanford.

The Rose Bowl people had two justifications for what, pregame, was regarded as a ridiculous choice. Columbia gave the other Ivies a precedent for accepting Bowl bids; they didn't, but if they had the Rose Bowl would have potentially seen Princeton 1935 or one of the Clint Frank Yale teams play. Also, Columbia's New York media base was very important, and in my judgement, the decisive basis for Columbia getting the bid over Nebraska.

The happy ending for the Rose Bowl people was that Columbia, as heavily outyarded as everyone assumed they would be, still managed to pull off the most astonishing upset in Bowl history, 7-0 over Stanford. It was a combination of, bad weather equalizing the two teams; the comparative poise of a basically senior Columbia team against a basically sophomore Stanford team; Columbia having a better coach in Little; and perhaps some truth to Stanford star Bobby Grayson's tearful postgame locker-room statement that he called the wrong plays in close to the Columbia goal line. But the Nebraska players felt just as bad that day as Bobby did.