



By Eric Olson
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LINCOLN (AP)—A 33-0 Holiday Bowl rout of Arizona was Nebraska's sixth win in seven games and provided further evidence that coach Bo Pelini has positioned the Cornhuskers to be major players on the national scene again.

"If we continue down the road we're on right now, we're going to be a force to be reckoned with," Pelini said.

Pelini has gone 9-4 and 10-4 in his first two seasons after taking over a broken program that was accustomed to measuring success in conference and national championships.

Had it not been for one second being put back on the clock in the Big 12 championship game, allowing Texas to kick the game-winning field goal, the Huskers would have won their first league title since 1999.

Nebraska rebounded from that disappointment to turn in the most dominating performance of the bowl season, throttling Arizona on Wednesday night in San Diego.

The 20th-ranked Huskers allowed 109 total yards, a school bowl record and the fewest yards allowed since they held Baylor to 84 yards in 2000.

Their offense broke out of a long funk to roll up 396 total yards, with scores on seven of the first eight possessions.

By defeating the No. 22 Wildcats, Nebraska won three games against Top 25 opponents for the first time since 1999. Missouri and Oklahoma also were ranked when Nebraska beat them.

Pelini is optimistic about the future.

Center Jacob Hickman is the only offensive starter who won't be back in 2010. Nine players who made five or more starts on defense will return.

The biggest gap to fill will be that of Associated Press national player of the year Ndamukong Suh (en-DOM-uh-ken Soo), who finished fourth in Heisman Trophy voting and could be the first player taken in the NFL draft.

"I don't know all the history, but I find it hard to believe there's a more dominant defensive football player who's ever played at Nebraska," Pelini said.

Linebacker Phillip Dillard and safeties Larry Asante and Matt O'Hanlon also are leaving, but Pelini said he believes the Huskers could end up having an even better defense next season.

"Ultimately, we have some big pieces of the puzzle coming back," Pelini said. "We're going to be a little bit deeper. As well as we've played, we haven't been real deep. We have more guys in the program, more guys coming up who have an idea what we're doing defensively. I feel real good about the future and where we're going to be next year."

Jared Crick, an All-Big 12 first-team defensive tackle who was overshadowed playing alongside Suh, will be the focal point up front. He'll probably be joined by Baker Steinkuhler, son of Husker

great and 1983 Outland Trophy winner Dean Steinkuhler. Cameron Meredith is set to replace Barry Turner at one of the end spots.

Eric Martin, a special teams standout, should be ready to play a prominent role at linebacker, and there should be little or no drop-off at safety with P.J. Smith, Eric Hagg and Courtney Osborne in the mix. Hagg spent most of this season at nickel back.

Before the Holiday Bowl, Nebraska was on track to have its least productive offense since 1968. The Huskers still averaged only 323 yards a game, 127 under its 2008 average.

Zac Lee, who will have surgery next week to repair a torn tendon in his right (throwing) arm, started all but two games. He'll be pushed in the spring by Cody Green and possibly Taylor Martinez after having a 14-to-10 touchdowns-to-interceptions ratio.

Pelini and offensive coordinator Shawn Watson adopted a play-it-safe philosophy at midseason, asking Lee to manage the game and keep the Huskers out of bad plays. The ho-hum offense went through a four-game stretch in which it produced a total of four touchdowns. The Huskers were able to get away with the strategy, for the most part, because their defense had emerged as one of the nation's best.

The Huskers got creative against Arizona, unveiling the wildcat formation for the first time, with Rex Burkhead taking direct snaps on many of his 17 carries and running for a team-leading 89 yards. Lee carried a game-high 18 times for 65 yards, and receiver Niles Paul went 20 yards on a reverse.

Lee threw for 173 yards, including a 74-yard touchdown to Paul, and wasn't intercepted.

"As an offense, this is a good way to finish the year," Lee said. "It's been as much an up-and-down year as possible. We got a little bit of redemption. We got some things ironed out, and hopefully we can use this as a springboard to next season."

Pelini will be expecting greater consistency from an offensive line that at times failed to generate much push.

"I want to be a physical football team, and I want to be able to run," he said. "Believe me, I understand the need to throw the ball. Everybody has to be able to throw. But we're going to be committed to and be able to run the football on people when we want to. To me, that's the key of a good football team."

The Huskers' schedule is not overly daunting. Their toughest nonconference game is at Washington, and they play Texas and Missouri at home. They have to travel to Oklahoma State, but Oklahoma and Texas Tech are not in their rotation of Big 12 South opponents.

"Where we are right now, we can beat anyone in the United States," Pelini said. "That's how far we've come."

Pelini earns extra \$250,000

The Nebraska football team's appearances in the Big 12 championship game and the Holiday Bowl mean an extra quarter-million dollars for coach Bo Pelini.

Pelini's contract calls for him to receive an extra \$150,000 for taking his team to the conference title game and \$100,000 for going to a bowl.

The \$250,000 in performance bonuses increases his 2009 pay to more than \$2 million. His base salary is \$1.85 million under his contract, which runs through the 2013 season.