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Manhattan prepares for Big Red

No. 2 Kansas State can make a serious statement to the rest of the Big 12 against No. 11 Nebraska

By Doug Tucker
Associated Press

MANHATTAN, Kan. — On opening day of the football season, a headline in Kansas State's school newspaper proclaimed, "70 Days Until the Nebraska Game."

The next Saturday, the headline read, "63 Days Until the Nebraska Game."

Week by week, day by day, this town and this school have been sitting atop a rumbling Vesuvius of emotion, waiting for the biggest game in Kansas States football history and hoping to put the finishing touches on one of the great turnarounds in all of college football.

Now, as Saturday's kickoff between the surging Wildcats and a Nebraska program that's beaten them 29 straight years draws near, the anticipation thickens by the hour.

"Basically, this place is getting ready to go bonkers," said Ned Seaton, news editor of the Manhattan Mercury.

Ranked No. 2 in The Associated Press media poll and co-No. 1 in the coaches' poll, the once-woeful Wildcats (9-0) are looking far beyond simple vengeance over No. 11 Nebraska (8-2).

This school that hasn't won a football title of any kind since 1934 and was first among all major programs to reach 500 losses is taking aim at nothing short of — dare they breathe these words? — a national championship.

"There's an excitement approaching euphoria all over town," said Ann Christian, a realtor who credits the resurgence of the football program with helping keep real estate values on the rise.

Another entrepreneur doing a thriving business is Bob Leetch.

"Just try," said the owner of a popular downtown tavern, "to have a conversation this week that's not about football."

Seemingly every business from the Bob Evans restaurant to Wildcat Used Furniture displays "Go Cats" signs outside and football memorabilia inside.

The patented Powercat logo, that modernistic profile of a feline that coach Bill Snyder himself helped design, seems pasted to about half the mailboxes and almost every automobile bumper in town.

At one house on Laramie Street, the likeness of a Nebraska football player hangs from a noose.

"It's not a real Nebraska football player," Seaton said. "Under the circumstances, we thought we'd better check. Aside from the flood in 1993, I'm not sure there's ever been a bigger event in Manhattan."

"There's an excitement approaching euphoria all over town."

Ann Christian
Manhattan resident

In normal times, Manhattan is a typical Midwestern college town, nestled amid the scenic Flint Hills about 2 1/2 hours west of Kansas City and good-naturedly billed as "The Little Apple."

But these are times that hardly anybody associated with Kansas State ever thought they'd live to see.

For decades the losingest football program in the NCAA's upper division, Kansas State has experienced a turn of fortune in Snyder's 10 seasons that almost defies belief.

This is a school that between 1954 and 1991 had more NCAA probationations (three) than winning seasons (two). They've played 82 games against Nebraska and won 10.

On the eve of homecoming in years past, students would take a paint brush to the highway marker outside town, and below Interstate 70 write, "Kansas State 0."

Reporters in all press boxes are routinely warned not to cheer.

More than once, those covering "the Mildcats" were asked not to chuckle.

"I remember one game when it was tied 0-0 in the fourth quarter and we had a field goal blocked," said Tracie Dittmore, a 1980 Kansas State grad. "Somebody got on the public address microphone and threatened to kick everybody out if they didn't stop laughing."

They're not laughing now.

In the four years before 1989, when Kansas State president Jon Wefald approved the hiring of Iowa coach Hayden Fry's little-known offensive coordinator, the Wildcats were a combined 3-40. Administrators at many rival schools wanted them kicked out of the Big Eight.

But they've won 76 games in nine-plus seasons under Snyder, a bookish, soft-spoken workaholic who may one day be judged a football genius. In the 28 seasons before Snyder, they won 74.

They've got a run-pass quarterback named Michael Bishop who's 44-1 as a starter at junior college and Kansas State, with his only loss since high school being to Nebraska. They've got a ferocious, quick-hitting unit that's first in Division I-A in scoring defense and second in total defense and rushing defense.

And now before a sold-out home crowd they've got a shot at the only conference rival they've yet to beat during this grand and improbable revival.

Ask a room full of Oklahomans or Alabamians what was the biggest game in their history and you'd likely get a room full of different answers. But K-Staters know the biggest game since they took up football 103 years ago kicks off at 2:30 p.m. Saturday in KSU Stadium.

A victory would silence critics of their supposedly soft schedule. Then win the next week at Missouri and beat either Texas or Texas A&M in the Big 12 title game, and the Mildcats people used to laugh at could be on their way to play for the national championship in the Fiesta Bowl.

Hartley

Continued from Page 28
right now."

That drive first manifested itself at Los Alamitos High School, where Hartley put up better numbers than his teammate, Stanley Guyness, but received less-than-equal attention from recruiters.

That slight, along with being the less-heralded receiving recruit to LaCorey Collins in Oregon's freshman class of 1995, has helped motivate Hartley even further, Bellotti said.

"I think there's no question," Bellotti says. "Tony has always been compared to someone else. In high school he was compared to Stan Guyness, and I think a lot of recruiters felt that Stanley Guyness was the better player. But Tony just had better num-

bers, made more plays, and I think that motivated him.

"Tony has done a great job, and it's no surprise to anyone in our program that he is putting up the numbers he has. He's made plays ever since he was a freshman."

Hence, The Playmaker.

It should be noted, too, that the other holder of that nickname, Irvin, has played nine games this season as well. Irvin has three more receptions but 225 less yards.

And, perhaps even more tellingly, Irvin has just one touchdown, six fewer than Hartley.

So who is The Playmaker now?

Hartley File

NAME: Tony Hartley
HEIGHT: 6-0
WEIGHT: 190
YEAR IN SCHOOL: Junior

HONORS: Set Oregon record with 242 receiving yards against Washington last week ... also had nine catches and two touchdowns against Huskies ... leads Ducks with 41 receptions for 858 yards and seven touchdowns this season ... has grabbed 97 passes for 16 touchdowns in collegiate career ... named second-team all-America by USA Today as a senior defensive back at Los Alamitos High School

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