

LEGENDARY HUSKER RECRUITS: NEIL SMITH

Nebraska 'Found' Louisiana Native

By Randy York

Neil Smith is 43 now, but he remembers a certain January morning nearly 25 years ago like it was yesterday.

A college freshman when he woke up that morning, Smith looked out his dorm room window and was astonished.

"I opened the curtains and saw something I'd never seen before in my life...snow," Smith recalled. "I looked beyond the Harper-Schramm-Smith dorms. Everything was just blanketed in a deep, white snow. The parking lots, the train tracks...everything."

It was a blizzard, Smith thought to himself. That means no classes and no meetings. "I was excited just thinking about going back to sleep, so I did," he said.

A few hours later, there was a rather loud knock on his dorm door.

Smith opened it to see Tom Osborne standing there, and his head coach was not smiling.

"Neil, if you're not going to class and if you're not going to meetings, you're at the wrong university," Smith remembers Osborne saying. "Make sure you make it to my office...today."

Close Encounter of the Last Time

Smith may have shared the freshman team lead in tackles that year with close friend Lawrence Pete, but he found himself at a crossroads just a few months into his career.

"It was my first encounter with Dr. Tom...my first one-on-one meeting with Coach Osborne," Smith said. "He was very stern and yet very clear about what he expected from me. He told me everything he wanted me to do, so I could become a better person, a better student and a better football player – in that exact order."

Smith passed the test. He became a team captain, a first-team All-American and the second player selected in the 1988 NFL Draft – all because he grew up that snowy morning.

Somewhat remarkably, Smith remembers the experience as a positive one, mostly because Osborne was there to help him understand what he'd done wrong and to explain what he needed to do so it didn't happen again.

"I never had a father around when I was growing up," Smith said. "Coach Osborne was the first real father figure I ever had. He described what accountability is and why it mattered. He helped me learn more about life than football, and he showed me how those lessons were connected. It helped me understand that Nebraska had enough trust to give me a scholarship, and now it was up to me to show that I deserved that trust."

Smith did just that, becoming the first player in his high school to "hit it big" and pave a path for others to follow.

Support System Helped Him Grow Up

"I was so fortunate to wind up at Nebraska," Smith said. "I was a pretty good student and a pretty good kid, but I really needed to grow up. Nebraska had a support system that shows you the right things to do, and when you don't do them, they pull you over and make sure you get on the right track."

Smith developed lifetime friendships with Pete, Steve Taylor, McCathorn Clayton, Keith Jones, Broderick Thomas and others.

"We loved going into battle with each other," Smith said. "We all grew up together at Nebraska. It was the turning point of our lives. We knew how lucky we were to be attending a great university and, at the same time, have the greatest fans in college football supporting our every move. We saw dreams come true that we never envisioned for ourselves. Now that we're parents, we know how important it is to encourage instead of criticize and how much love it takes to keep kids off the street long enough to help them change."

Smith took his 7-foot, 1 ½-inch arm span – fully extended from fingertip to fingertip – to the Kansas City Chiefs from 1988-96, to the Denver Broncos from 1997-99 and to the San Diego Chargers in 2000. He played in six Pro Bowls and led the NFL with 15 sacks in 1993. In 13 NFL seasons, Smith had 105 sacks, 12 fumble recoveries, four interceptions and two touchdowns.

And oh, by the way, here's one more important stat: Neil Smith never took a day off from a snowstorm again.



Neil Smith Profile

Name: Neil O'Brien Smith

Age: 43

Residence: Lee's Summit, Mo.

Family: Sons Joshua, 26; Neland, 12; and Kellind, 3; daughters Neshia, 18; and Shayla, 9.

How Nebraska found me: They were looking at the quarterback on my high school team in New Orleans. Jack Pierce (a Nebraska assistant coach at the time) kept seeing me show up on film as a tight end, a linebacker and a defensive tackle. To be honest, I was more interested in playing basketball at a smaller school. At that time, I wasn't really all that serious about football.

Why Nebraska was a good decision: Jack changed my life when he found me, and Dr. Tom (Osborne) changed my life when I got there. He became the father figure I never had. Charlie McBride was another blessing. He pushed me to work hard and become great. I also became a product of Boyd Epley in the weight room. Lawrence Pete and I were fanatics about lifting weights. We were both Lifters of the Year. We'd even lift during commercials while we watched a movie. I gained 40 pounds at Nebraska and because of weights, I still got faster. The pros had to check their clocks when I ran a 4.49 at tryout camp. They couldn't believe my agility, but it all traced back to what we did in strength and conditioning. Nebraska was the perfect place for me. They taught me how to study, how to become a man and how to own up to responsibility.

What I'm doing now: I was a co-founder of the Kansas City Brigade, and we just shut that office down for Arena Football. I owned a restaurant for 13 years and got out of that, too, so I could manage the Derrick Thomas and Neil Smith Third-and-Long Foundation. I do a lot of speaking, mostly for charity. My mom prayed every day that we'd find our way out of the New Orleans ghetto, and we both believe that Nebraska was God's answer to our prayers. When you're blessed like we've been, you understand how important it is to give back.

Most memorable moment as a Husker: We played Michigan and Florida State in Fiesta Bowls my sophomore and senior seasons, but my most memorable moment was beating LSU in the Sugar Bowl as a junior. Everyone was there to greet me. It was homecoming for me . . . a dream come true. You never forget getting the chance to beat LSU in your own backyard.

Philosophy of sports: Do something because you love it, not because you think you should do it. I tell my kids to make their own name. I tell them: 'You're not me, so be you'. I tell them to enjoy the journey and once you start that journey, don't ever quit, no matter what.

Philosophy of life: Believe in your dream and throw everything you have into it. I never thought I'd end up at Nebraska or make the Pro Bowl or play on a team that won two Super Bowls. Nebraska invested in me, so I made sure that they got a good return on their investment.

