

# Sports

Wednesday, January 1, 1997 Page 43

Tom Shatel

## NU Answers All Questions

Miami

Some New Year's Resolutions:

I won't say Scott Frost can't win a big game.

I will remember Damon Benning as someone who was an impact player.

I will never again question the Nebraska football program's desire to show up for a game that only a few thousand Virginians and a couple of daiquiri vendors outside Pro Player Stadium seemed to care about.

Never mind that it wasn't the national championship. Never mind that it wasn't even a real Orange Bowl.

This was New Year's Eve, in a strange stadium, a pro stadium. No decaying green metal, no swaying palm trees in the end zone, no Miami Hurricane fans turning the place into their own back alley and looking for Big Red blood. Never mind that it was the "No-Show" bowl, with more empty seats than a CBA game. Never mind that there were more Nebraska fans at a women's soccer game than at this Orange Bowl against Virginia Tech.

### Game to Cherish

Frost will take it. Benning will cherish it. The Huskers needed it.

Nebraska 41, Virginia Tech 21 was the largest margin of victory in an Orange Bowl for Nebraska since the Huskers thumped Notre Dame 40-6 in Bob Devaney's last hurrah on Jan. 1, 1973. It was also one of the largest bowl victories for Coach Tom Osborne, a man who hasn't had many, period. A man who has had a career of New Year's hard luck. A man who hasn't had many bowl nights end up like Saturdays in Ames, Iowa.

But now Osborne has won three bowl games in a row. Wow. Coach Tom is on a serious roll here.

He had to feel good about this one, as satisfied and proud as he did three years ago, in that gutsy 18-16 loss to Florida State or after either of the last two national championship wins. Because Osborne is all about performance. Because, despite the two rings, despite the 10-2 record, there were still questions about his team. Legitimate questions.

### Bottom Line

Did it have the heart to win a game that wasn't for No. 1? Could Frost win a big game? Could Benning, the forgotten I-back, carry the load?

The answers did not come in bright, bold numbers or memorable "SportsCenter" plays. They came in a simple yet most effective bottom line.

Nebraska fell behind 7-0. Nebraska did not fall apart. Virginia Tech, looking to join the "Beating Nebraska Made Our Program" club, wouldn't go away. But the Huskers, with two explosive I-backs injured and a defense fast running out of gas, won the war of resiliency.

Which made the heroes even more appropriate.

Nobody could question Benning's heart or soul. But in a long career marred by injuries and younger, more talented I-backs stepping over him, the question was whether the Omaha Northwest star would ever make an impact. A real impact.

### Others Hurt

Finally, it was the other guys who were hurt. Finally, fate found Benning. It opened the door and begged him to come in. And he stormed through, knocking down the door on a 33-yard run — make that sprint — up the middle for a third-quarter touchdown that was Nebraska's most important play of the night. It doused those halftime hopes of Virginia Tech. It made a statement that Nebraska's offense wasn't going to curl up in a ball, as it had against Arizona State and Colorado.

Benning would even fall five yards short of 100. But his two second-half scores were enough to make him Nebraska's MVP. This is how we will remember Benning: a head of steam going 33 yards toward the goal that nothing, finally, could stop. Better late, than never.

You, too, Mr. Frost.

The beleaguered quarterback from Wood River could easily have been Nebraska's MVP. But it had nothing to do with numbers; Frost was 11-for-22 passing for 136 yards, and rushed for 62 yards. Those are Tommie Frazier-type numbers.

### Bottom Line

And, bottom line, Mr. Frost had a Frazier-type game.

If he doesn't mind, we'll use the comparison again. It worked back in September, in the stop-the-presses

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# Nebraska Offense Rules 41-21



BENNING'S BIG NIGHT: Nebraska I-back Damon Benning sheds Virginia Tech tacklers and runs in for a touchdown during the third quarter. Benning scored on runs of 6 and 33 yards in the period as the Huskers took control of the game.

## Benning Caps Career With MVP Award

BY ERIC OLSON  
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Miami — Damon Benning didn't know it until just the past couple of weeks, but he had been waiting for a game such as Tuesday night's for five years.

Last week, the senior I-back said he wanted to do something special in his final game in a Nebraska football uniform. He made good on his promise, earning the Most Valuable Player Award for the Huskers in the FedEx Orange Bowl after running for 96 yards and two touchdowns in the 41-21 victory over Virginia Tech.

Benning's opportunity came in only his sixth start in 46 career games, a start that was necessitated by injuries to Ah-

man Green and DeAngelo Evans.

"It's the ending I wanted," Benning said. "We skipped a few chapters in between, but the ending was good."

"I've stressed my whole career that whenever my number is called, I want to be ready. I played behind some great backs, and hopefully people will start taking note that I can play the game a little bit."

Benning posted the fourth-highest rushing total of his career. Sixty-nine of his 96 yards and both of his touchdowns came in the decisive third quarter, when the Huskers stretched a 17-14 halftime lead to 31-21.

Benning broke up the middle untouched on for a 33-yard run on a counter-trap play to cap the Huskers' first

series of the second half. On the play before he scored, he ran for 3 yards on a fourth-and-one play.

"To be perfectly honest, when I scored on that 42 counter trap, I was kind of tired," Benning said. "I heard (Scott) Frost call the play in the huddle, and right then and there, I said, 'Dear God, please help me. I need a little strength on this one.'"

"I found a crease and was able to get some energy to hit the hole."

Benning returned a kickoff 23 yards to set up the Huskers at their 39-yard line after Virginia Tech answered with a 12-play, 80-yard touchdown drive that pulled the Hokies within 24-21.

Benning then carried four times —

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### Charting Damon Benning

I-back Damon Benning capped his Nebraska career with 95 yards against Virginia Tech. His best career one-game totals:

Opp.	Season	Carries	Yds
Pacific, 1995	10	173	
Baylor, 1996	22	135	
Texas Tech, 1993	19	127	
Virginia Tech, 1996	15	95	
Pacific, 1994	10	87	
North Texas, 1993	8	82	
Washington St., 1995	20	63	
Oklahoma St., 1995	8	62	
Colorado St., 1996	13	59	
Kansas, 1996	9	54	

## Finals Set For Metro

The Metro Conference Holiday Basketball Tournament finals Thursday will match familiar faces in the girls' game and teams making rare appearances in the boys' game.

For the second straight season — and the fourth time in eight years — Omaha Marian and Millard South will battle for the girls' title at the Civic Auditorium.

### Metro tournament coverage, Page 50.

At 2:45 p.m. Marian defeated Omaha North 53-48 on Tuesday, while Millard South advanced with a 42-37 win over Omaha Burke.

On the boys' side, Omaha Central will make its first appearance in a Metro holiday final since the Eagles won the 1974-75 title. Central blasted Papillion-LaVista 71-43 Tuesday.

The Eagles' opponent will be Omaha Bryan, which hasn't been to the finals since the 1987-88 season. The Bears earned their berth in the finals with a 68-64 victory over Omaha North.

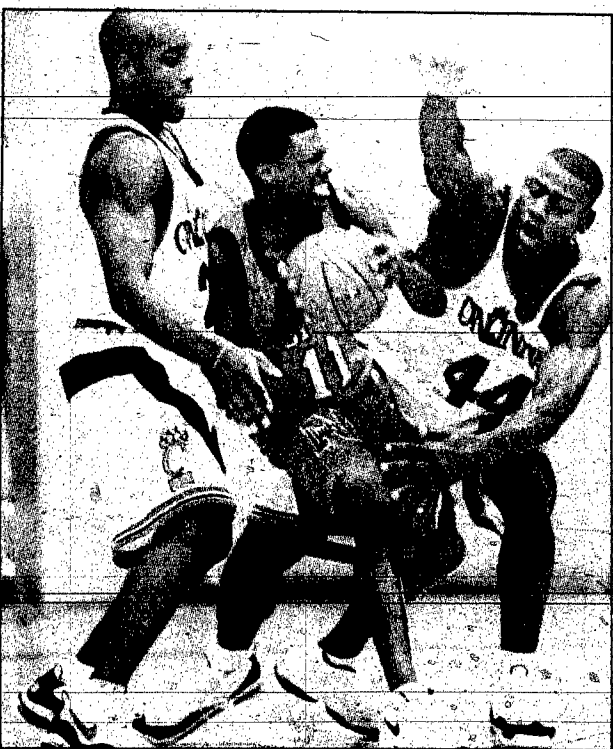
The schedule for Thursday's games:

■ 11:15 a.m.: Omaha North girls vs. Omaha Burke (third place).

■ 1 p.m.: Omaha North boys vs. Papillion-LaVista (third).

■ 2:45 p.m.: Millard South girls vs. Omaha Marian (first).

■ 4:30 p.m.: Omaha Bryan boys vs. Omaha Central (first).



GETTING PHYSICAL: Nebraska's Alvin Mitchell is hounded by Cincinnati's Charles Williams, left, and Rodrick Monroe. Mitchell had a career-high 16 points.

## Lue Injured as NU Falls to Cincinnati

WORLD-HERALD NEWS SERVICE

Bayamon, Puerto Rico — Sixth-ranked Cincinnati hit 30 of 44 free throws to pull away for an 84-73 victory over Nebraska on Tuesday in the semifinals of the Puerto Rico Holiday Classic.

The Bearcats opened leads as large as 14 points in the first half, but Nebraska closed the gap to 9 at halftime after losing point guard Tyrone Lue with a sprained left knee. Lue did not return and finished with 4 points in 16 minutes of play.

"We got our bell rung several times during the game, but we always find a way to fight back," Husker Coach Danny Nee said. "When you lose Lue, it looks like the ship is about to sink, but the guys rallied and did a good job."

Nebraska's lineup was further weakened in the second half when Mikki Moore and Venson Hamilton went to the bench with foul trouble. The two combined to play just six minutes after halftime before fouling out.

"Mikki and Venson basically played half of a game and we need those guys to be in the game," Nee said. "In physical games like this, they have to find a way to stay in there and not get themselves in foul trouble."

### Nebraska box, Page 49.

Reserves Alvin Mitchell, Bernard Garner and Andy Markowski helped the Huskers stay close in the second half. Mitchell had a team-high 16 points, while Garner added 12 and Markowski had a career-high 9.

"I thought our bench did an unbelievable job of keeping us in the game," Nee said. "Alvin Mitchell really stepped up and led the team."

Markowski's jump hook with 12:31 left in the game pulled NU to within 62-55, but the Huskers connected on just one field goal in the next seven minutes as Cincinnati opened up a 15-point lead.

Markowski said Nebraska can build on the performance.

"I was proud of the way we played," Markowski said. "There were several times we could have quit when Cincinnati got us down, but we hung in there until the end of the game."

Lue's injury is expected to keep him out of today's third-place game against Bowling Green, which lost 76-73 to unbeaten Southwest Missouri State in the tournament's other semifinal Tuesday. Game time today for the Huskers is 4 p.m. CST.