

1971 National Champions — 13-0

Nebraska's 1971 season came down to a single game at Owen Field in Norman, Okla., on Thanksgiving Day. At least, that's how it is most often remembered. The No. 1 Cornhuskers played No. 2 Oklahoma in what still is regularly regarded as college football's "Game of the Century."

1971 National Champions (13-0)

Head Coach: Bob Devaney
Captains: Jerry Tagge and Jim Anderson

Date	Opponent	Result
S 11	Oregon	W, 34-7
S 18	Minnesota	W, 35-7
S 25	Texas A&M	W, 34-7
O 2	Utah State	W, 42-6
O 9	at Missouri	W, 36-0
O 16	Kansas	W, 55-0
O 23	at Oklahoma State	W, 41-13
O 30	Colorado	W, 31-7
N 6	Iowa State	W, 37-0
N 13	at Kansas State	W, 44-17
N 25	at Oklahoma	W, 35-31
D 4	at Hawaii	W, 45-3
J 1	Orange Bowl Alabama	W, 38-6

The teams were undefeated and untied, and they included 17 of 22 first-team All-Big Eight players. Nebraska had the nation's top-ranked defense. Oklahoma had its most productive offense.

The cover of Sports Illustrated (Nov. 22, 1971) published the week of the game included photographs of Nebraska linebacker Bob Terrio and Oklahoma running back Greg Pruitt, nose-to-nose, beneath the headline: "Irresistible Oklahoma Meets Immovable Nebraska."

The game was equal to its buildup. Johnny Rodgers opened the scoring less than four minutes into the first quarter with a 72-yard punt return, and Rich Sanger finished it by kicking an extra point

Besides Glover, Jacobson and Harper, the other first-team all-conference defenders were Terrio, Jim Anderson, Bill Kosch and Joe Blahak. Anderson, Kosch and Blahak played in the secondary.

Anderson and Tagge, one of five Cornhuskers on the All-Big Eight first-team offense, were the captains. Both were from West High School in Green Bay, Wis., as was starting monster back Dave Mason, a junior who had sat out the 1970 season as a medical redshirt.

The other first-team offensive players were Rodgers, Kinney, Carl Johnson and Dick Rupert.

The Cornhusker defense was opportunistic as well as immovable, contributing to a school-record plus-26 turnovers. Nebraska recovered 20 opponent fumbles and intercepted 27 passes.

Nebraska was No. 2 in the Associated Press preseason rankings but moved to No. 1 after opening with a 34-7 victory against Oregon at Memorial Stadium. Bobby Moore, now known as Ahmad Rashad, scored the Ducks' lone touchdown with just over three minutes remaining in the game.

Only three opponents scored more than one touchdown against the Cornhuskers. Oklahoma State and Kansas State each managed two touchdowns, and Oklahoma, of course, scored four. The only time all season that Nebraska even trailed during a game was against the Sooners.

The Cornhuskers opened conference play with back-to-back shutouts against Missouri (36-0) and Kansas (55-0), during a stretch in which they posted 12 consecutive scoreless quarters.

In addition to everything else, the Cornhuskers almost always had good field position because of the punt and kickoff returns of Rodgers, a key to their success, according to Tom Osborne, an assistant who designed and coordinated the offense.

"As great as that team was, take Johnny Rodgers out of there on kickoff and punt returns, and it probably wouldn't have gone 13-0," Osborne said.

Nebraska extended its winning streak to 23 games and its unbeaten streak to 32 games in 1971. Repeating as national champions "wasn't automatic," Rodgers said.

But going into the season, "we were pretty doggone confident."

with 1:38 remaining, following a dramatic, 74-yard drive capped by Jeff Kinney's two-yard run.

Rodgers' punt return is among the most memorable moments of the game. But he also made a key play to keep the winning touchdown drive alive, improvising on a pass route to get open on third-and-eight, then making a diving catch of a Jerry Tagge pass for a 12-yard gain and a first down.

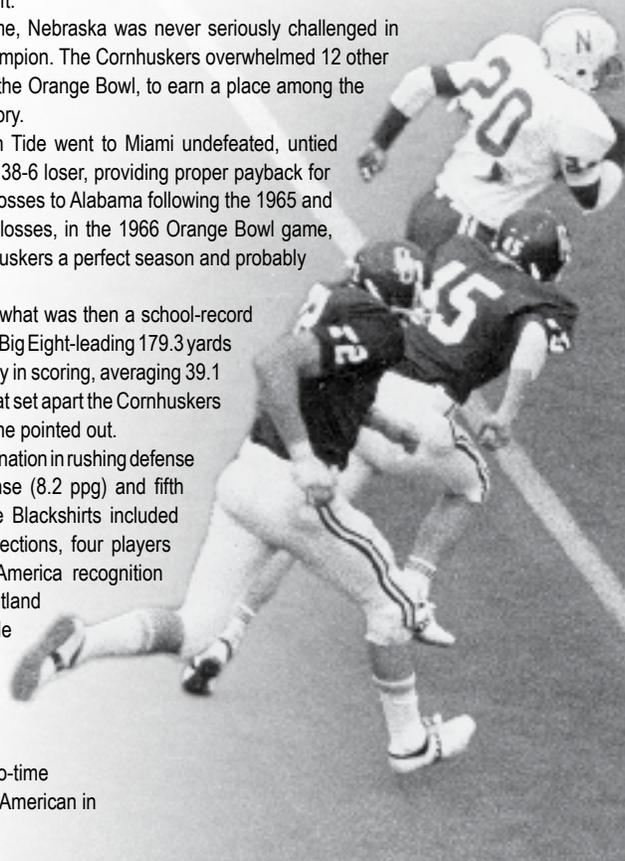
Cornhusker middle guard Rich Glover, who made 22 tackles that afternoon, put the finishing touches on Nebraska's 35-31 victory, deflecting a Jack Mildren fourth-down pass with barely a minute left.

Except for the Oklahoma game, Nebraska was never seriously challenged in its quest to repeat as national champion. The Cornhuskers overwhelmed 12 other opponents, including Alabama in the Orange Bowl, to earn a place among the best teams in college football history.

Coach Bear Bryant's Crimson Tide went to Miami undefeated, untied and ranked No. 2. The Tide left a 38-6 loser, providing proper payback for Nebraska's 39-28 and 34-7 bowl losses to Alabama following the 1965 and 1966 seasons. The first of those losses, in the 1966 Orange Bowl game, cost Coach Bob Devaney's Cornhuskers a perfect season and probably a national championship.

Although Nebraska averaged what was then a school-record 437.7 yards on offense, including a Big Eight-leading 179.3 yards passing, and ranked third nationally in scoring, averaging 39.1 points per game, it was defense that set apart the Cornhuskers — as the Sports Illustrated headline pointed out.

Nebraska ranked second in the nation in rushing defense (85.9 ypg), third in scoring defense (8.2 ppg) and fifth in total defense (202.9 ypg). The Blackshirts included seven first-team All-Big Eight selections, four players who would earn consensus All-America recognition during their careers and two Outland Trophy winners: Glover and tackle Larry Jacobson. Glover would win both the Outland and Lombardi awards in 1972. They were joined in the starting lineup by junior end Willie Harper, like Glover, a two-time All-American. John Dutton, an All-American in 1973, was a sophomore backup.



Wingback Johnny Rodgers was a key to the Huskers' national title run in 1971. Rodgers made a name for himself as a junior in 1971, before winning the Heisman Trophy in 1972.