

COTTON BOWL



THE TURNOVER

Huskers' bid for early 14-0 lead foiled by interception and long return that sets up Auburn's first touchdown

THE BOTCHED FAKE

NU tries a fake punt from its own 29 in the second quarter, but a fumbled pitch sets up Tigers to take a 14-7 lead

TIGERS DO JUST ENOUGH

Tied in the third quarter, Auburn mounts a drive for a field goal, then holds off NU the rest of the game

Tricked out

COTTON SLIPS AWAY FROM NU AFTER GAMBLE BACKFIRES



MATT MILLER/THE WORLD-HERALD

Nebraska's failed trick play from punt formation from its own 29-yard line set up Auburn's second touchdown early in the second quarter. The Huskers fumbled, and Auburn's Tristan Davis recovered at the Husker 14-yard line.

■ The Huskers hold Auburn to 178 yards and force two turnovers, but their offense bogs down after two early touchdown drives.

By RICH KAIPUST
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

DALLAS — Bill Callahan said Nebraska just wasn't close enough as time ticked away Monday, and he could have been talking as much about the Huskers' football season as Jordan Congdon's field-goal range.

Roughly 5 yards kept Nebraska from trying a game-tying field goal at the 71st Cotton Bowl Classic. The Huskers went for it instead on fourth and 11, and they lost 17-14 to Auburn before a Cotton Bowl crowd of 66,777.

Roughly a dozen plays separated NU from a special season. But an 0-4 record against Top 10 teams gave the Huskers a 9-5 record to mull through the offseason.

"We're getting there," Callahan believed. "And it won't be long, believe me."

No. 22-ranked Nebraska couldn't get there on New Year's Day, even with a defensive per-

formance that limited No. 10 Auburn to 178 total yards. The Huskers all but handed 14 points to the Tigers — with a turnover and a fake punt that failed — and their offensive issues were so great that they couldn't overcome the charity.

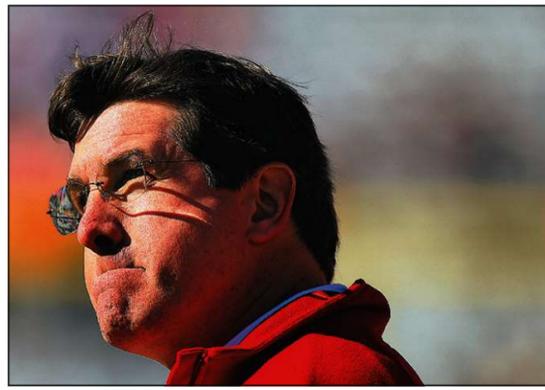
"The fact of the matter is we gave them 14 points," NU offensive lineman Matt Slauson said. "If we wouldn't have done that, it could have been 14-3. But that's just the way it rolls."

All could have been rolled aside if Nebraska had squeezed out one last first down or had a kicker with a little more oomph.

Senior linebacker Stewart Bradley sacked Auburn quarterback Brandon Cox, forced a fumble and recovered it with 5:24 left. That allowed NU to take over at the Tigers' 42, and three runs by I-back Marlon Lucky produced a first down at the 29.

That would be the last time the Huskers moved the chains. And

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REBECCA S. GRATZ/THE WORLD-HERALD

The botched trick play and a first-quarter interception led to 14 Auburn points — on drives totaling 23 yards — and spoiled Husker coach Bill Callahan's bid for victory No. 10 this season.

More Husker coverage inside

NFL NEXT? NU defensive end feels the need for speed. **Page 2CF**

LEE BARFKNECHT: Don't look now, but big things may be in store for 2007 Huskers. **Page 3CF**

MOMENTUM SWING: NU players had confidence in the fake punt that went awry early in the second quarter. **Page 3CF**

KEY PERFORMERS: Andre Jones' stock is on the rise. **Page 4CF**

SECOND HALF: Adjustments give Auburn boost. **Page 5CF**

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Callahan's program missing something

DALLAS — Happy Next Year! The Nebraska football team returns all of its running backs in 2007. All of its receivers. Most of its offensive line. Three line-backers. A big-time corner. It has a big-name quarterback with an NFL arm. And this will be the fourth year in the vaunted "system."

So it should be a big year, right? This will be the year to cash in, the return to the top of the Big 12 heap and national spotlight, right?

Right?

It's hard to say. It's hard to trust Bill Callahan's program. Reasons for optimism abound. But something is missing.

We saw it, yet again, in Monday's Cotton Bowl. Nebraska played with, and at times outplayed, ninth-ranked Auburn. The Huskers, at times, looked

like a top 10-caliber team. Did we mention Auburn won the actual game, 17-14?

This morning, Auburn remains in the top 10. And the Huskers likely will drop out of the rankings.

They're close. But the closer they get, the further away it looks.

If Callahan were a car salesman, he would go hungry. He can't close the big game. His teams can't finish. They are so close. But what matters is they are 9-5 when they easily could have been 11-3 and carting a Big 12 trophy home on the way to the desert.

It's always something. A fumble when they're trying to run out the clock to beat Texas. A fumble that sets up Oklahoma with a 7-0 lead and takes the wind out of their Big 12 title sails. It wasn't

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Tom Shatel