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PUSH, BUT SHOVED

NO. 16 WISCONSIN 41,
NEBRASKA 24

Huskers keep punching,
but once again Badgers
are 'just better'

By SAM MCKEOWN
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

MADISON, Wis. — They met at midfield, right on the red W, just before halftime. Wisconsin's 41-24 win over Nebraska wasn't decided the moment Badger running back Garrett Groshek collided with Husker safety Antonio Reed, but the game was clearly defined.

Reed crouched down a bit, like a loaded spring and put his whole upper body into Groshek for a blow-up shot. Reed landed his shot and spun around, as if to admire his work. Only Groshek hadn't gone down. He staggered for a half second and kept running for several more yards — 24 in all. Reed's big swing was a missed tackle, and when No. 16 UW finished that drive with a touchdown and 20-3 halftime lead, all the offensive fireworks in the second half — and there were plenty — merely adorned the bold truth of this one-sided Big Ten West series.

For the sixth-straight game and the fifth-straight year, Wisconsin is still

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RYAN SODERLIN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Nebraska's Cam Taylor breaks up a pass intended for Kendrick Pryor in the third quarter. At top, JD Spielman is pushed out of bounds by Rachad Wildgoose. Spielman had nine catches for 209 yards and a touchdown.

MORE INSIDE

Adrian Martinez continues to show improvement. **15C**

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*We know what to expect:
an improving offense
and a boatload of mistakes*



Tom Shatel

COLUMNIST

MADISON, Wis. — Let's get weird. Nebraska is 0-5 — Scott Frost is 0-5 — and the season is officially nuts.

It's surreal now, watching it unfold week by week, having ESPN's Kirk Herbstreit refer to Nebraska football as the "Titanic." This first Frost season wasn't supposed to be easy, but it wasn't supposed to be this hard.

The best way to keep your sanity, and perspective, is to look ahead, not behind. Camp Randall and the Big House, two pieces of heavy lifting, are in the rear-view mirror.

What's left for this 2018 Nebraska team?

Seven games — three tough roadies and four at home, including a non-conference game with Bethune-Cookman that looks "winnable." Well, it's at home, anyway.

We're past the point of predictions now, but in a 41-24 loss to Wisconsin on Saturday night, Nebraska showed us exactly what to expect.

The Huskers are going to play

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Shatel: NU penalties characteristic for recent Frost teams

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some spectacular offense.

And they're going to have to overcome some spectacular mistakes.

One step forward. One or two steps back. This is their lot in 2018. There are seven games left and no reason to believe it will be any different.

The Huskers gave us the formula on Saturday night in a 17-point loss that beat the 18-point spread by one. Wisconsin, a good but not great bunch, won in workmanlike fashion, taking advantage of NU's countless gaffes and sloppy football.

Nebraska won't see many teams as good as Wisconsin the rest of the way. But nothing will be easy for this team, because of its exasperating habit of getting in its own way.

Won't Frost and his staff turn that around? The numbers don't bear that out.

Nebraska had 10 penalties against Wisconsin. That gives the Huskers a total of 52 penalties through five games.

Yes, they're going at a 10.4 clip. But before we put that on former coach Mike Riley's tab, know that last year, Riley's Huskers had 75 penalties in 12 games. Or 6.3 per game.

What about UCF under Frost? The Golden Knights went 13-0 and were the darlings of college football last year.

But in that 13-0 season, the Knights had 109 penalties. Or 8.4 per game. The year before, UCF had 91 penalties.

I looked up a couple of other penalty totals, based on Frost's desire to combine Chip Kelly's Oregon offense with Tom Osborne's Nebraska consistency and physical play.

TOM'S TAKES

1. This was probably the least emotional of the four losses by Nebraska at Camp Randall since joining the Big Ten. I know some folks who hoped NU could keep the game close, but what did that mean? The Huskers beat the 18-point spread, 41-24. There were so many penalties that got in the way of Nebraska making it a lot closer against a good but not great Badger team. So there was hope, frustration and another loss, a fifth in a row for Scott Frost. Another full Husker day.

2. Nebraska's offense seems to evolve every week. Saturday night it looked like the plan was to have Adrian Martinez make plays from the pocket or scramble and make a play with his feet or throwing the ball up for a receiver to make a play. Running back Maurice Washington spent some time lined up wide as a receiver. Frost clearly did not trust his running game in this one, and it will be interesting to see how that goes forward. I'm not sure this is the offense Central Florida used to go 13-0, but Frost lacks a lot of parts. Looks like he's going to put it in the hands of the playmakers. It was good for 24 here, and take away a couple of penalties, it could have been more.

3. I almost forgot this was a trophy game. Two Wisconsin lugs carried the Freedom Trophy off the field, and they were sort of lost in the crowd of Badgers as they walked to the locker room. Not a lot of fanfare, and that's OK. I'm not even sure why Wisconsin brings the thing to the field anyway. Until Nebraska can prove it can beat these guys, just leave it in the case. Or wherever they keep it.

game now, with Devine Ozigbo and Maurice Washington the guys now. Frost didn't appear to have much confidence in that run game against big Wisconsin.

He chose to attack this one by air, and those moments with Washington lined up wide as a receiver were revelations, and kind of pop-up surprises you figured Frost would bring to the table.

The Blackshirts held their own early, but after Wisconsin scored its first touchdown to make it 13-3 with 6:51 left in the first half, Martinez had NU driving. This looked like it might be fun.

With second-and-five at the Badgers' 31, Martinez hit a 3-yard pass to Spielman. But an illegal block on Jerald Foster pushed it back 10 yards and made it second-and-12.

On third-and-12, Martinez found Spielman again, for 20 yards to the 18. But a hands-to-the-face penalty on Matt Farniok erased it and pushed the ball back to the Nebraska 47.

Frost ended up going for fourth-and-11 at the Wisconsin 37 — as he should have, at 0-4 and late in the first half. The Huskers didn't convert and the Badgers seized the moment, scoring in six plays to make it 20-3.

There were eight other penalties, a block in the back that erased a good kickoff return, and a hold that wiped out penalty yardage on a targeting call against Wisconsin. Just another night at the office.

But that sequence in the second quarter, with Nebraska threatening to close the gap to three at halftime, said a lot about the rest of the season.

The Huskers' offense has a chance to be really good. And it will have to be.

"You just kinda take it like every other game that we lost," Spielman said.

Upbeat and pragmatic as his team fell to 0-5 overall and 0-3 in the Big Ten, Frost found positives in the loss. He liked his team's fight and, during the week of preparation, its togetherness

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Huskers: After loss, Frost points out his boys 'are close'

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the hammer. Nebraska is still the nail.

"It still hurts a lot," said captain and outside linebacker Luke Gifford, a fifth-year senior who never beat the Badgers. "I know this is one I really wanted."

"Right now, they're just better than we are," coach Scott Frost said.

Both teams amassed more than 500 yards on offense, but it was how, and when, they got those yards that underlined the gap between the two programs.

The Badgers (4-1 overall and 2-0 in the Big Ten) racked up 370 yards on the ground. Early probes into Nebraska's defense became forceful strikes by the time Wisconsin running back Jonathan Taylor — improving his Heisman Trophy candidacy — ripped off an 88-yard touchdown with Husker defenders trying, and failing, to wrap him up.

"It was real nice to get out into that open field and stretch my legs a little bit," Taylor said.

NU quarterback Adrian Martinez threw for 384 yards. Martinez threw short and long, bought time, scrambled, took two sacks, risked multiple interceptions, and kept throwing anyway. He led Nebraska to three touchdowns in the second half, repeatedly targeting receiver JD Spielman, who hauled in nine catches for a school-record 209 yards.

"This whole game was the type of game they wanted to be in," Frost said. "They're built for that with their size and physical nature."

Wisconsin won the opening coin toss, took the ball, ground out a game-opening field goal and just kept pounding. Slowly. Surely. Until the dam broke. Like it usually does when it's Wisconsin-Nebraska.

CARRIKER CHRONICLES



Nebraska hall of famer Adam Carriker shares his gut reaction to Nebraska's loss to Wisconsin.

"I never felt like we were just entirely out of the game. I felt like we were always just right there on the edge, within striking distance of making it interesting. You never know what could happen. The team fought, the team never quit, the team never let up. I saw differences this game. I saw

some things that were the same. I saw penalties. There was glimpses of the future and frustrations of the present."

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in the face of two recent starters — Tyjon Lindsey and Greg Bell — suddenly transferring from the program.

NU's defense, Frost said, got stops early and held Wisconsin to two red-zone field goals in the first half. The Husker offense, choosing to attack Wisconsin's inexperienced, banged up secondary, had a "great plan," and, at times, executed it effectively.

But, in front of 80,051 fans at Camp Randall Stadium, Nebraska had to play from ahead, Frost said, to pull off the upset. And it never did.

"The boys are close," Frost said. "They're close. We've just got to make the plays."

Not yet this season. And not for the last five years against Wisconsin.

Martinez answered, floating an across-the-field pass to Spielman for a 38-yard gain that later set up a 12-yard touchdown pass to tight end Jack Stoll, who plucked the ball away from Wisconsin safety D'Cota Dixon. That cut UW's lead to 34-17. Taylor's long run gave Wisconsin a 41-17 lead early in the fourth quarter and slammed the door shut on a longshot Nebraska comeback.

"We just made mistakes that definitely came back to haunt us," Martinez said, referring to misreads of Wisconsin's defense, especially in the sluggish first half. The Badgers don't make a lot of mistakes, Martinez said, and he needed to be "more precise" with his decision-making.

Martinez still cleared 400 yards of total offense for a second straight week.

"Man, is he going to be a special player," Frost said.

Unlike last week, when Frost was emotional and frustrated with his team after a 42-28 loss to Purdue, he made a point to smile and praise his team during the press conference. NU yet again struggled with penalties — 10 for 100 yards — but none of them, Frost said, were "dumb" or selfish. The Huskers once again were awful in both its own third-down conversions (3 of 10) and stopping Wisconsin on third down (6 of 12), but Frost said this loss indicated that Nebraska is not far off from where it wants to be.

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