

STANLEY MORGAN JR. IN



# SKYBALL

008



**N RETURNING SOON BIG**





# A NEW SCRIPT

With the premiere of spring football around the corner, the coaching staff is putting the finishing touches on its screenplay. It promises action, thrills and plenty of mystery.

By **BRANDON VOGEL**

FADE IN:

EXT. HAWKS CHAMPIONSHIP CENTER - DAY

One hundred-plus hopefuls in red and white stretch on the green turf. It is cold and cloudy; not quite spring, but not winter either. Coaches in sweatshirts walk up and down the rows of players, saying hello again, cracking a joke, offering encouragement. A football season begins anew.

DISSOLVE TO:

The most-hyped session of spring football at Nebraska in recent memory. It has everything.

Quarterback battle? Check.

New director? Defensively, check.

Established stars? A couple of checks.

Budding young talent? Many checks.

Anticipated release? Big check. It's going to be an edge-of-your-seat thrill ride! A blockbuster! The spring game will probably draw a record crowd!

It's all because we don't really know much about the 2017 Nebraska Cornhuskers yet. The roster includes just 13 scholarship seniors, half of whom were what you'd consider full-time starters in 2016. There are big holes to fill at wide receiver and tight end. The offensive line, despite returning four starters, seems primed for an intense competition for playing time. The defense is a totally clean slate thanks to a scheme switch. And, yes, there are the quarterbacks who will have every throw scrutinized until a starter emerges.

Add it all up and you might have the most interesting spring in a while in Nebraska.



TANNER LEE

PATRICK O'BRIEN

TRISTAN GEBBIA

ANDREW BUNCH

YOU DON'T  
GET TO  
STARTING  
QUARTERBACK  
*WITHOUT MAKING*  
A FEW  
IMPRESSIONS.

THE STARTER

**N**

BIG TEN CONFERENCE PRESENTS A NEBRASKA CORNHUSKER FOOTBALL PRODUCTION AS A SQUAD DIRECTED BY DANNY LANGSDORF WITH EXECUTIVE PRODUCER MIKE RILEY PRODUCER TOMMY FRAZIER  
PRODUCER ERIC CROUCH PRODUCER SCOTT FROST PRODUCER TURNER GILL & PRODUCER JERRY TAGGE STARRING JUNIOR TRANSFER TANNER LEE REDSHIRT FRESHMAN PATRICK O'BRIEN  
FRESHMAN TRISTAN GEBBIA & SOPHOMORE ANDREW BUNCH WITH SUPPORTING ACTORS JUNIOR STANLEY MORGAN JR. SENIOR DEMORNAY PIERSON-EL JUNIOR BRYAN REIMERS  
SENIOR GABE RAHN REDSHIRT FRESHMAN JO SPIELMAN FRESHMAN KEYSHAWN JOHNSON JR. & FRESHMAN JAEVON MCQUITTY

**BIG**

**QB** QUARTERBACK

IN STADIUMS FALL 2017



# QUARTERBACKS

## The Reboot

**T**he Music City Bowl was over for barely more than an hour when offensive coordinator Danny Langsdorf started fielding questions about the quarterback battle to come this spring. That was partially due to the position's importance, yes. And partially due to reporters having column inches to fill before March. But don't count out simple novelty. Nebraska hasn't been in this position for a while.

Between 2010 and 2013, Taylor Martinez started 43 of the 44 games in which he played. When Tommy Armstrong Jr. took the torch, he put together a similar streak, starting 44-of-45 games in which he played. In total, Martinez or Armstrong started 87 of the Huskers' 93 games since 2010 and neither was ever really in danger of losing that job once they had won it.

In 2017, Nebraska doesn't have a quarterback on the roster who has played a game for the Huskers. Three of the candidates haven't played an FBS football game yet. That might be an unprecedented level of newness at Nebraska.

Everyone remembers the quarterback battle that Martinez won in 2010, but that was an out-of-nowhere upset. Both Zac Lee and Cody Green had starts under the belt heading into that season, which at least gave prognosticators some purchase for making projections. The better analog for this spring might be 2009. Lee had two pass attempts to his name as the Huskers entered the spring that year. Green was an early-enrollee. The only other quarterback to take snaps in the spring game was a converted linebacker – Latravis Washington.

Or maybe 2017 is most like 2007, when Sam Keller (Arizona State transfer), Beau Davis (career stats: four games, 2-of-9 passing, four interceptions), Joe Ganz (zero games played at that point) and Patrick Witt (early enrollee) battled it out in the spring in ceremony only. Everyone knew the job was Keller's.

Tulane-transfer Tanner Lee shares some similarities with Keller. One, he's the only quarterback on Nebraska's roster with FBS experience, starting 19 games for the Green Wave over two seasons. Two, he has the buzz. Lee earned scout-team MVP honors for the offense in 2016 and executive director of player personnel Billy Devaney did nothing to dampen

the hype by recounting on Nebraska's signing-day show how Lee, outdueled Jared Goff at a passing camp. Goff became the top pick in the 2016 NFL Draft.

Patrick O'Brien should provide the most direct and consistent competition for the job. Last year's 4-star quarterback, O'Brien traveled with the team and prepared for every game in 2016 as the third-string quarterback, but was able to maintain his redshirt. He at least has experience in the system.

True freshman Tristan Gebbia, this year's 4-star quarterback, doesn't have that experience, but his numbers are tough to ignore. A three-year starter, Gebbia threw for 13,109 yards at Calabasas (Calif.) High School, the second-most career yards in state history. Maybe even more eye-popping: Gebbia completed 70 percent of his

### THE CAST

Tanner Lee.....	The Veteran
Patrick O'Brien.....	The Wildcard
Tristan Gebbia.....	The Young Gun
Andrew Bunch.....	The Depth

passes as a senior and threw 61 touchdowns. In a Nebraska offense predicated on completions, Gebbia might be in the race more than anyone expects.

Nebraska also added sophomore walk-on Andrew Bunch, a transfer from Scottsdale (Ariz.) Community College, to the roster in January.

Don't expect a quick conclusion to this story. Langsdorf said following the Music City Bowl that the staff doesn't feel any pressure to name a starter coming out of spring practice. But almost as big a plot line as who plays quarterback is what that player will be asked to do. Mike Riley and Langsdorf had to rewrite their Oregon State script a bit to better feature Armstrong's running ability, but Nebraska's three scholarship quarterbacks are straight from pocket-passer central casting.



JERALD FOSTER

TANNER FARMER

NICK GATES

DAVID KNEVEL

COLE CONRAD

# THE FRONT FIVE



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BIG TEN CONFERENCE PRESENTS A NEBRASKA CORNHUSKER FOOTBALL PRODUCTION A SQUAD DIRECTED BY MIKE CAVANAUGH WITH EXECUTIVE PRODUCER MIKE RILEY  
PRODUCER DAVE RIMINGTON PRODUCER DEAN STEINKUHLER PRODUCER WILL SHIELDS PRODUCER AARON TAYLOR & PRODUCER ZACH WIEGERT STARRING JUNIOR NICK GATES  
JUNIOR TANNER FARMER JUNIOR JERALD FOSTER & SENIOR DAVID KNEVEL WITH SUPPORTING ACTORS JUNIOR COLE CONRAD SOPHOMORE JALIN BARNETT SOPHOMORE MICHAEL DECKER  
SOPHOMORE CHRISTIAN GAYLORD REDSHIRT FRESHMAN BRYAN BROKOP REDSHIRT FRESHMAN MATT FARNIOK REDSHIRT FRESHMAN JOHN RARIDON & REDSHIRT FRESHMAN BOE WILSON

**BIG**

**OL** OFFENSIVE LINE

OPENING SEPT. 2, 2017



# OFFENSIVE LINE

## Ensemble Cast

**A**ccording to a calculation by Football Study Hall, Nebraska returns just 26 percent of its “offensive production” in 2017. Offensive production includes receiving yards, passing yards, rushing yards and offensive line starts, all of which are weighted based on their correlation to year-to-year performance. The good news for Nebraska: The Huskers return four starters on the line and 63.1 percent of their starts, by far their best category of the four mentioned above.

The bad news: Offensive line starts carry the least weight. Still, consistency and leadership have to count for something and Nebraska is deep in that regard.

Junior Nick Gates started all 13 games at left tackle and may be as firmly entrenched in his role as anyone on the line. Junior left guard Jerald Foster played well in four starts after returning from injury late in the season and should have a solid hold on that job. The right side could be a little more fluid.

Junior right guard Tanner Farmer started 11 games, missing two to injury, and senior right tackle David Knevel started the first eight games of the season before an injury gave junior Cole Conrad a shot. Conrad, a former walk-on who was put on scholarship for the spring semester, played well enough over the final four games that he could be considered the leader at right tackle entering 2017. Nebraska’s lone hole on the offensive line is at center, where the Huskers must replace Dylan Utter (13 starts in 2016).

Behind those five upperclassmen is a group of sophomores – Jalin Barnett, Michael Decker and Christian Gaylord – that is still looking to crack the regular rotation. The greatest competition on the offensive line, however, might come from four redshirt freshmen.

Boe Wilson was close to playing in 2016. “Physically he was probably ready to go between his athletic ability and just his strength and power,” offensive line coach Mike Cavanaugh said in December. It was the mental aspect of playing as a true freshman that led the staff to redshirt Wilson, but with a year in the system he

could be a contender at guard.

John Raridon may have the clearest path to immediate playing time after spending his redshirt season working at center. “He’s a nasty dude,” Cavanaugh said, citing Raridon’s ability in the screen game, a key part of Nebraska’s attack.

Matt Farniok is going to be a “really good tackle,” Cavanaugh said. Good enough to challenge one of the returning starters? We’ll see. Bryan Brokop is a bit more of a wildcard, but should offer additional depth right away.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that Nebraska’s offensive line struggled with consistency given the injury situation in 2016, but options abound

### THE CAST

Tanner Farmer.....	} The Starters
Jerald Foster.....	
Nick Gates .....	
David Knevel .....	
Cole Conrad.....	} The Walk-On
Jalin Barnett.....	
Michael Decker.....	} The Sophomores
Christian Gaylord.....	
Bryan Brokop.....	} The Redshirts
Matt Farniok.....	
John Raridon.....	
Boe Wilson.....	

this spring. The Huskers list 22 offensive linemen on the roster, including true freshmen who have yet to enroll, and there’s a chance to build depth here, even though Cavanaugh has stated numerous times he prefers playing his starters as much as possible.

Is there enough talent on this roster to challenge that notion? Maybe we’ll find out this spring. It was pretty clear what Cavanaugh was looking for in December – he’s looking for action-movie heroes.

“I like toughness,” he said. “You want to watch guys finish their dudes.”



FROM THE CREATORS OF 'THE MIRACLE IN MISSOURI'  
& 'WESTERKATCH' COMES ...

# THE SEQUEL





# WIDE RECEIVERS

## The Next Chapter

**T**he Riley-Langsford offense offers star-making turns at wide receiver and that will be particularly true in 2017 as the Huskers presumably move to a more pass-heavy offense given the cast at quarterback. Somebody in Nebraska's receiving corps has the potential for a breakout season, the question is who?

Start with junior Stanley Morgan Jr. He's Nebraska's leading returning receiver and already has a ton of tough catches under his belt. Senior De'Mornay Pierson-El is the other most-experienced option. He has a handful of highlight plays but has yet to be a true featured player in this offense. Beyond that, things get hazy quickly as the Huskers look to replace Jordan Westerkamp, Brandon Reilly and Alonzo Moore.

Junior walk-on Bryan Reimers could reprise the Reilly role as Nebraska's stretch-the-field option. He's also the Huskers' tallest receiver at 6-foot-5. Senior walk-on Gabe Rahn could be in the mix as well after a handful of appearances in 2016. He only had one catch in 2016, but it went for a 35-yard touchdown catch against Wyoming.

The biggest shoes to fill are at slot receiver, where Westerkamp departs. Redshirt freshman JD Spielman will likely man that spot in the spring. He has drawn rave reviews from the staff and nearly played as a true freshman in 2016.

Nebraska also has two true freshmen enrolled in time for spring practice. Keyshawn Johnson Jr., whose name precedes him, for better or worse, will have every chance to impress right away this spring. Jaevon McQuitty, from nearby Columbia, Missouri,

may be the forgotten man at wide receiver in the 2017 class, but don't be surprised if he's right in the mix for snaps when the Huskers hold their spring game on April 15. "He's a perfect fit for us right now," Riley said.

Tyjon Lindsey – a 5-9 speedster from prep powerhouse Bishop Gorman High School in Las Vegas, Nevada – joins the race this fall and seems likely to challenge for playing time right away. It wouldn't be a total surprise if all three freshmen wide receivers challenged for playing time in 2017.

"We love that group," Riley said of

### THE CAST

Stanley Morgan Jr.....	Officer Stan
De'Mornay Pierson-El.....	DPE
Bryan Reimers.....	Stretch
Gabe Rahn.....	Hawkeye
JD Spielman.....	The Next Big Thing
Keyshawn Johnson Jr.....	The Magnet
Jaevon McQuitty.....	The Scene Stealer

the freshmen receivers on signing day. "Maybe we would like to have one or two more guys, but when you get a lot of guys in one class and you start trying to fit them into play, it becomes a little tougher. We are going to say this is the perfect number and go forward."

Given the uncertainty at quarterback, chemistry could go a long way to deciding who sees the field first at receiver. For that reason it's worth noting that Spielman shared the offensive scout team MVP award with Lee. Also, the Huskers have to replace three seniors at tight end.



INTRODUCING  
**BOB DIACO**  
IN



THIS SQUAD IS NOT YET RATED



# DEFENSE

## New Director Attached

After two years stuck in development, Riley opted to make a directorial switch for *Blackshirts: The Movie*, removing Mark Banker and landing new defensive coordinator Bob Diaco. The former Connecticut head coach and Notre Dame defensive coordinator will move the Huskers from a 4-3 to a 3-4 scheme.

That should serve as a blank page for the Blackshirts in 2017. The depth chart at this stage might be best represented by one big question mark. Position changes seem likely and will be necessary in some cases. Diaco has shown a willingness to get creative. Needing a linebacker in his one year at Cincinnati in 2009, he found one at quarterback. Maybe Nebraska's shuffling won't be quite so dramatic; there's still a lot to sort out here, so let's start with the most solid information we have.

The Huskers return three full-time starters in the secondary – safety Kieron Williams and cornerbacks Joshua Kalu and Chris Jones, all seniors – and has plenty of other experience options adding depth. Junior safeties Aaron Williams and Antonio Reed both have starts under their belts. There's also a slew of former 4-star recruits – Eric Lee Jr., Avery Anderson, Lamar Jackson, Marquel Dismuke – looking to battle for playing time. Tony Butler, a redshirt freshman, was close to playing as a true freshman, and JoJo Domann did. Sorting through the secondary will be a big part of the spring, but the competition should be fierce.

Things are less clear in the front seven. Senior linebacker Marcus Newby is perfectly tailored to be an outside linebacker in Diaco's scheme and Chris Weber and Dedrick Young II bring plenty of experience. Redshirt freshman Quayshon Alexander is another guy who has


the look of a classic 3-4 outside linebacker. True freshman Avery Roberts, one of the most highly regarded members of the 2017 recruiting class, is on campus for the spring and seems to be on the fast track for immediate playing time. Diaco said Roberts has “innate leadership ability as a youngster” during a Huskers.com signing-day interview.

The process on the defensive line will be about finding the right fit as position responsibilities change in the 3-4. There's no shortage of options. The roster lists 22 defensive linemen, including true freshmen and walk-ons. Freedom Akinmoladun, Carlos Davis and Mick Stoltenberg all made at least four starts in 2016

### THE CAST

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and return. That's a starting point. Players like Alex Davis, Khalil Davis, DaiShon Neal and Peyton Newell could benefit from the clean slate of a new defense.

It's hard to pencil any of those names in at specific positions right now. The 2017 recruiting class includes a few defensive linemen who seem better cast, at least based on body type, for traditional roles in the 3-4, but those players won't be on campus until the summer, so expect plenty of twists and turns this spring as Diaco looks to build his first Blackshirts defense. The movie itself may not be fully cast yet, but expect to see a lot names – some expected, others not – in the mix this March. 

# ... TO BE CONTINUED