ESSAY BY BRANDON VOGEL | ILLUSTRATION BY NICK EVANS

THE OPTION

Why college football's greatest play is still king in the Cornhusker State

It starts in a dirt patch in front of my grandparents' house. It's a good-sized square of earth between the barn, the garden, the garage, the bunkhouse, the old gray barn that's going to fall down and the henhouse. Depending on how many people are over, it is either the driveway or the yard, lit by a lone light thanks to FDR and the REA.

My cousin and her husband, John, are there, in from North Platte. He's the age, late-20s, that an 11-year-old can appreciate. Big arms. Mustache. Looks like he could be an off-duty cop but he works for the railroad and knows how to run the option.

It's 1990 so we're probably talking Mickey Joseph. The Cornhuskers' quarterback will finish that season as one of six Husker backs averaging more than 6 yards per carry and John is going to show us how.

We head out into the yard, into one of those fall nights you only get a few of on the plains each year, cold and dry and both are good. My cousin, Todd, a year older than me, draws fullback duty which is too bad for him because in the history of options for fun or demonstration, no one has ever chosen "give" on the first try. I get to dot-the-I and John is running things.

"I'm going to fake it to him up the middle and then we're going to run to the right," he says. "There's a steel bar between our hips. You're going as fast as I am, always 3 yards away. When the time is right, I'll pitch it to you."

John gets down in his quarterback-under-center pose and barks out the nonsense. On "hike" he reverse pivots and sticks the ball in Todd's gut for a second, then we carry on down the line. The imaginary linemen have all gotten their blocks and John is swinging the ball across his bread basket with two hands until he gets to that big, dumb defensive end, unmolested only because we want him to be.

It happens quickly. There's the pitch, end-over-end. I make the catch and turn it up, running until the dirt goes dark outside that circle of New Deal light.

We do it again and again, but all it really took was one try and, instantly, two more people in Nebraska understood the option, the greatest play in college football, and the Cornhuskers' identity for nearly three decades.

It's a nice image, young Nebraskans feeling connected to their culture through football, but I'm not sure I totally trust it. That's the battle of getting older: You fight to hang on to your memories even as you're learning to trust them less and less.

Ask me today, and I'm not sure Nebraska was an "option team" the way everyone remembers, but, because those teams ranked among the game's best and more modern iterations of the Huskers haven't, the option and power football remains the circle of light in Lincoln.

Everything else has been Nebraska bumbling around in the darkness of mid-level bowl appearances and a conference title drought that now spans 16 seasons.

WHERE did the option come from?

"It's really not all that important," Homer Rice, a head coach who ran the option offense at Rice and Cincinnati before becoming the athletic director at Georgia Tech, wrote in 1973. This is strange.

Strange because he wrote this in a chapter titled "Birth of the Triple Option" in a book titled *Homer Rice on Option Football*. It's hard for me to believe that he actually felt that way. I certainly don't. But I also understand not everyone finds detailed accounts of innovative coaches that riveting.

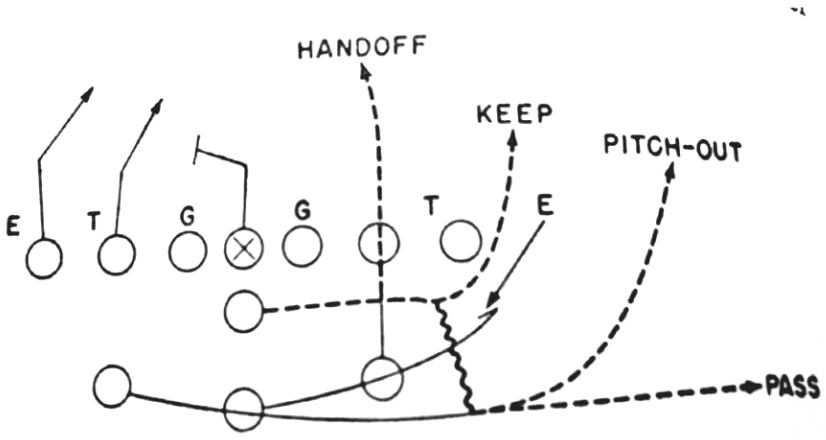

Fig. 5. Sequence of basic plays.

MISSOURI'S SPLIT-T, 1941

Not unlike today's spread offenses, Missouri head coach Don Faurot took the traditional T-formation and widened it, opening up running lanes for a talented Tigers backfield. Inspired by basketball's 2-on-1 fast break, Faurot gave his quarterback the choice to pitch or keep and the option was effectively born. Missouri went on to win the Big Six in 1941 and 1942.

So let's take the abbreviated tour of option football up to its arrival at Nebraska. And it's important to keep in mind here that all of this, as with almost any football innovation, is disputed by somebody somewhere, but the following timeline represents a general consensus.

Start with Don Faurot at Missouri in 1941. He took the classic T-formation, widened it (not unlike today's spread offenses) and had a suite of plays – fullback dive, quarterback sweep and what Faurot called the "running pitch-out" – that, in combination, looked a lot like the triple option. Missouri wins a bunch of games and two Big Six titles this way. Then World War II happens.

That sends Faurot to Iowa Pre-Flight where he meets an assistant coach named Bud Wilkinson. After the war, Wilkinson goes to Oklahoma and installs Faurot's Split-T and option football spreads. The Sooners win a bunch of games and 14 conference titles this way. And, if you can win a bunch of games by not blocking one defender – the defensive end – on the line of scrimmage, why not leave two unblocked?

Bill Yeoman starts doing that at Houston in 1965 when he introduces the veer option attack. Houston's program has only been in existence for 16 years at that point, but the veer gives its undersized teams an edge. The Cougars win a bunch of games this way and leads the nation in total offense in 1966, 1967 and 1968.

A couple of hundred miles away in Austin, the Texas football program is struggling at the end of 1967 so head coach Darrell Royal asks his linebackers coach to become his offensive coordinator. That coach, Emory Bellard, had been in the high school ranks just two years prior but it is those prep years that serve as the inspiration for his new weapon – the Wishbone. He shifts the fullback forward a few steps in the traditional T-formation, making the dive a really quick hitting play. It's a minor change that makes a major difference. The Longhorns win a bunch of games – 30 straight from 1968 to 1970 – this way.

And then Texas gives that offense to its bitter rival, Oklahoma. At least that's the Longhorns' version of events. Barry Switzer, the Sooners' offensive coordinator in 1970, says Oklahoma would've figured it out eventually. Whatever the inspiration, Switzer definitely instigates the switch four games into the 1970 season. Not long after that, Oklahoma, as Switzer always put it, starts "running track meets" and

"hanging half a hundred" on people. The Sooners win a lot of games this way and the Wishbone becomes the must-have offense of the decade.

But perhaps no team ran that offense better than Oklahoma. The Sooners never lost more than one game in a season between 1971 and 1975, winning national championships in 1974 and 1975. From the fourth game of that 1970 season, the Sooners' first running the Wishbone, to the end of the decade, Oklahoma attempted 394 passes – remember that number – while running the ball 7,592 times.

And this, of course, would eventually have an effect on the man who was to become the Huskers' new head coach in 1973.

It has had an effect on every Nebraska coach after that, too.

LIKE TEXAS and Oklahoma, Nebraska was struggling a little bit in the late 1960s. Bob Devaney had come over from Wyoming in 1962 and gotten the Cornhuskers into the national conversation quickly. Nebraska finished in the top six of the final AP poll each year from 1963 to 1966, but Devaney was feeling the heat following back-to-back 6-4 seasons in 1967 and 1968.

And like with the Longhorns and Sooners, some anxious boosters and the pressures of the job were the impetus for an offensive overhaul. Devaney turned to Tom Osborne, making him the offensive coordinator in 1969.

"We had been running what was heavily oriented towards an unbalanced line, full-house backfield," Osborne said. "That's what Bob brought with him from Wyoming and he first was exposed to that at Michigan State as an assistant."

Given a clean slate, Osborne could've chosen nearly anything but he went with the I, a formation credited to Tom Nugent, who unveiled it in 1950 at Virginia Military Institute. USC was running the I with great success in the 1960s. It was also the most popular formation in the pro game, but Osborne's inspiration was a little closer to home.

"At that time Oklahoma had had quite a bit of success with the I-formation and Steve Owen, the tailback, so I looked heavily at that," Osborne said. Unlike the double-tight look of the Wishbone, the I-formation could easily feature a split end and a flanker. Or, in the case of the Sooners, that flanker could be a wingback and Nebraska thought it had a pretty good one on the way.

"We had Johnny Rodgers coming on and so as a result we went to the I-formation and also used a little bit of spread formation and kind of evolved from there," Osborne said.

The move to the I-formation righted the ship. The Huskers went 9-2 in 1969 and finished 11th in the AP poll. National championships, the first two in school history, followed in 1970 and 1971. While the Wishbone was becoming the must-have offense of the 1970s, Osborne said Nebraska had one option in that first I-formation playbook.

There was no reason to change that when he became head coach in 1973. The Huskers were operating an attack that wouldn't have looked out of place on Sundays. Nebraska finished No. 8 nationally in passing offense in 1972. Between 1971 and 1976, the Huskers recorded four top-10 finishes in total offense and five in scoring offense.

The massive rushing totals? The options? That wouldn't come until after Osborne had lost eight of his first nine games against Oklahoma.

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TOM OSBORNE

The problem, as Osborne saw it, was the amount of preparation defending the Wishbone required. Nebraska had taken to practicing against the formation every Monday of the season – whether that week's opponent ran it or not – just to be ready for the Wishbone by Thanksgiving. And if the option out of one basic backfield formation could cause that many problems, what if you ran it out of a formation, the I, that afforded so many more possibilities? By 1980, with the speedy Jeff Quinn at quarterback, the number of options in Nebraska's playbook began to grow.

"We really began to do quite a few things (around that time)," Osborne said. "I wouldn't say they were carbon copies of what Oklahoma did, but they were a lot of Wishbone principles out of the I-formation. We incorporated some of the option game that they were using, but along with that we maintained the power running game that you can run out of the I-formation with the fullback."

Nebraska didn't beat Oklahoma in 1980, but it did lead the nation in rushing, a feat it would achieve 10 more times in the 17 seasons before Osborne retired at the end of the 1997 season.

SO HERE'S my theory: The Huskers' much mythologized option offense, the image almost anyone conjures when thinking of Osborne-era Nebraska, was actually a run-first pro-style offense, both in its origins and in its application. This theory, admittedly, requires some creative thinking.

The "pro-style" label is pretty vague. Literally, all the term tells us is that said offense "isn't a college or high school offense," which gives the label a connotation of sophistication. The most visible indicator of that sophistication is multiple formations and sets.

We're not talking about choosing to split out the tight end or not here, either. We're talking about lining up in the I-formation on one down then maybe the shotgun on the next down and then perhaps an Ace (single back) set on the next down. Nebraska, during the option years, used all of those formations and plenty more. Power-I, trips, no-back, double-wing, those were all in there, too.

When it comes to actually moving the ball, the traditional pro-style offense is generally a combination of two key tenets – a power-run game balanced with a controlled passing game. Nebraska had plenty of the former and little of the latter, so it's here that the comparison will break down for some. Nebraska ran a lot of play-action passes over the years, but it didn't run many passes in general. Once the Huskers started to really make the option a key part of the attack, Nebraska ran the ball about 70 percent of the time in most seasons. How can that be considered a pro-style offense?

Well, you have to think of all of those option plays as passes.

Why would anyone do that? For starters, because Osborne did.

"We were sometimes criticized because we didn't throw the ball very

HOUSTON'S VEER, 1965

When preparing to face Ole Miss in 1965, Houston head coach Bill Yeoman noticed that his lineman had trouble blocking the Rebels during the previous season's 31-9 loss. So he decided to stop trying, leaving the defensive tackle and end unblocked and making option reads based on which player the defenders tried to tackle. The Cougars beat Ole Miss 17-9 in 1965 – a win Yeoman said saved his job – and would lead the nation in total offense in 1966, 1967 and 1968 running the veer.

much," he said. "I often mentioned that lots of times when maybe another team would run a pass play, we would run an option."

From a yards perspective, the option plays were often just as effective.

"We'd probably run about a dozen options in a game and 14 or 15 pass plays in a game," Osborne said. "We averaged as much on those option plays as other people would on a pass play."

You can find a remarkable number of old playbooks floating around coaching sites and message boards online. Nebraska's playbooks from the Osborne era are particularly fun because they all contain a detailed accounting of which plays were run, from which formation and how many yards they gained during the previous season. In an era before anyone was concerned with "advanced analytics," these breakdowns were essentially that.

In 1982, for example, Nebraska ran the ball 73.5 percent of the time. Nearly 23 percent of those rushes were option plays and those options averaged 6.74 yards per play. That was better than Nebraska's 6.57 yards per pass attempt. The best passing team that season, Long Beach State, averaged 6.88 yards per attempt. Push those option plays over to the passing side for Nebraska and all of the sudden you're looking at a 60/40 run-pass split.

Thirteen years later, the option was playing a slightly larger role in the offense. In 1995, Nebraska ran the ball 74.1 percent of the time. Option runs made up 25.7 percent of those rushes and gained, on average, 7.26 yards, not quite equal to the 7.51 yards the Huskers averaged per pass but close. With the options-as-passes method in place, Nebraska's run-pass split becomes 55/45 in 1995. Use the method a year later, you can make a team that ran the ball three-quarters of the time look like a team that was 60/40 run-to-pass on paper if you want to.

And you do have to want to. Pull up any of those old game films and nobody is going to see anything other than a team that ran the ball and ran it a lot. The options were the biggest source of highlight-reel plays during those years and thus we still talk about Nebraska's "option offense" even though the Huskers were only running the play about 15 percent of the time in any given year.

I asked Osborne if he ever defined his own offense as an "option offense."

"It was pretty much multiple," he said. "It wasn't Wishbone or what Georgia Tech or some of the service academies are currently running.

"We ran five different kinds of options. We ran multiple sets. In some cases we were just one back or no backs, which makes it hard to run option football. So we had a variety of things, but we also ran just traditional I-formation. I don't think you can say it was strictly an option offense. What we tried to do was put extra stress on the defense by making them prepare for a lot of things."

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> **TOM OSBORNE**

Multiple. Nebraska's past three offensive coordinators – Shawn Watson, Tim Beck and Danny Langsdorf – have all used that word, an ideal really, at various times in describing what they wanted for the Huskers. It sounds a lot like what you find with a pro-style offense, but Osborne didn't totally agree with that characterization either.

"I wouldn't say it's a traditional pro-style offense in that most pro

teams don't run options at all. We were heavily into options," he said. "In terms of multiple formations, however, we were a long way from two tight ends and a full-house with three backs in the backfield and a quarterback. We ran a wide variety of formations, so in that sense, I guess you could say it was similar to a pro-style offense."

WHY DOES any of this matter? It matters because the option and Nebraska have become inextricably linked over the years.

That's not because the Huskers ran it better than anyone else ever did. Of the top 25 rushing seasons in history, as listed by yards per game in the 2015 NCAA Record Book, all 25 of them came from teams running some sort of option. Nebraska claims seven of those spots, but 17 of the remaining 18 spots belong to Wishbone teams or service academies running its modern variant, the Flexbone. The one remaining slot belongs to the 1948 Texas-El Paso team, which ran the Split-T. Plenty of teams ran the option to great effect over the years.

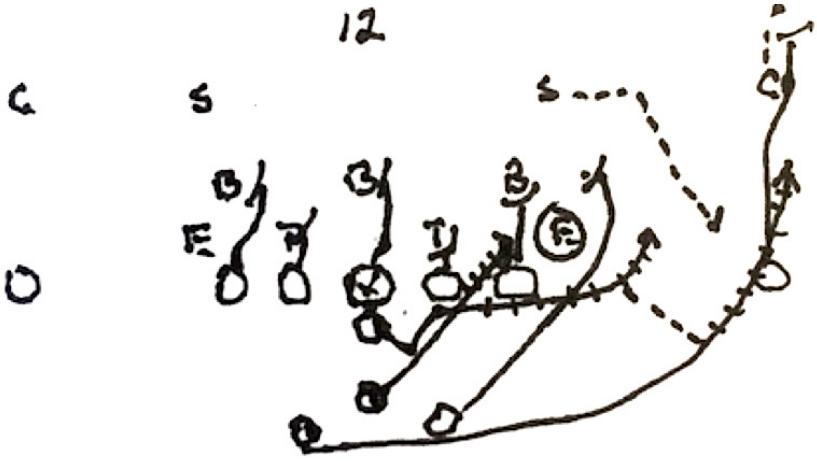
But Nebraska was the last major college power to run it and win big. Also, the Huskers haven't won as big since, so you don't have to listen very hard or for very long on an autumn Saturday before the "run the ball" grumblings start among Nebraska fans.

It has been a common refrain during the first year of the Mike Riley era. In Riley's pro-style system, Nebraska ran it almost exactly as often as it passed the ball through the first 11 games of the 2015 season. Nebraska had the second-best offense in the Big Ten at that point based on yards per play, but it was also 5-6 and just two wins removed from what looked like it was going to be the worst season in 50 years.

And when things start to go bad, Husker fans turn to what once made their program good – running the football. Facing a first-and-goal from the 2-yard line and trailing No. 6 Michigan State by 12 with just under three minutes remaining, a chant arose out of the north stadium stands a couple of weeks ago. "Run the ball! Run the ball!" It was part joke, part commentary. The joke being that these coaches, with their obsession with offensive balance, might consider throwing it. The commentary being that Nebraskans will always believe that their team should and could pound it straight ahead

It's not just fans, either. Plenty of the paid commentariat wistfully mentions Nebraska and the option offense. When Andy Staples, senior writer for *Sports Illustrated*, evaluated the current "brand" at each Power 5 conference school and made recommendations for what said schools' brands should be in the summer of 2015 his suggestion for brand building at Nebraska was that it should "go back to a pure option offense." For Staples and many others, until the Cornhuskers win something playing another way, the option is Nebraska.

And if we're being honest, Husker fans like that connection. The option represents many of the traits Nebraskans like to attribute to themselves, anyway. It's strong and unassuming. It requires hard work to run it well. It's a hand-in-the-dirt,

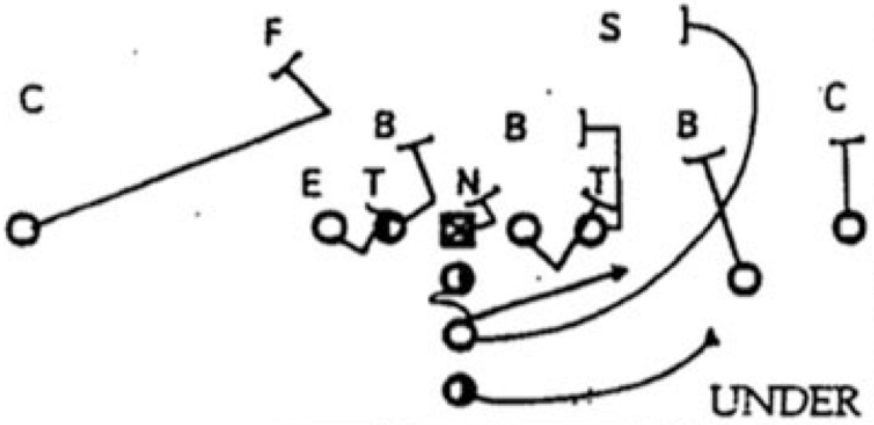


TEXAS'S WISHBONE, 1968

Coming off a four-year conference title drought, new offensive coordinator Emory Bellard was charged with rethinking the Longhorns' offense. He spent the summer of 1968 in his backyard with his sons developing the Wishbone, a basic T-formation with the fullback shifted forward. Texas tied Houston, a veer option team, in its first game running the Wishbone and lost to Texas Tech the following week, but then the Longhorns went on a 30-game winning streak, claiming national titles in 1969 and 1970.

kick-up-some-dust-type of offense and dirt and dust are a big part of the state's identity, too. The Nebraska State Capitol is an architectural marvel thanks mainly to its mosaics, which tell the story of the state in artistic form. It's beautiful and full of big ideas about what it is to be Nebraskan. But if someone wanted to add a mural to the capitol that was nothing more than a diagram of 11 Wall Option, I don't know that there would be much of a protest.

Yet how much of that remains true if Nebraska wasn't still looking for its first conference title since 1999?



NEBRASKA'S I-FORMATION, 1980

Tom Osborne won 77.6 percent of his games over his first seven seasons as Nebraska's coach, but he was 1-7 over that time against Oklahoma's Wishbone. In answer to the Sooners' system, Osborne started to add more option to the Huskers' playbook around 1980 and massive rushing totals followed. Of the five different options Nebraska had in the playbook, the Huskers' sprint option (above) was the most frequently run in most years. In the national-title year of 1995, Nebraska averaged 11.28 yards per play on its 41-49 Sprint play.

Remember the nine-year stretch when Oklahoma threw the ball 394 times total? The Sooners eventually ditched the Wishbone, like all of the other national powers that were running it, and stumbled around for a bit post-Switzer. In 1999, Bob Stoops first year as head coach, Oklahoma ran offensive coordinator Mike Leach's Air Raid offense, threw it 566 times and went 7-5. A year later, sans Leach, Oklahoma threw it 489 times, still a decade's worth of passes in the old days, and won the national title.

Nebraska has never had that proof of concept for any other offense. Frank Solich ran the option and the returns diminished. Bill Callahan tried the West Coast offense and it didn't work. Bo Pelini transitioned from the West Coast to a power spread during his tenure and that couldn't quite get it done either. Riley's first year with his offense got off to a rough start and the run-the-ball exhortations will continue until it gets better.

It would be naive to think that Nebraska fans wouldn't be accepting of any other system. If the Huskers win with something else, that'd be just fine too, but until that happens, the option still rules.

I do wonder if being the last great option team doesn't sell Nebraska short, however. Like all labels, it lacks complexity and that's why its usage is widespread – it boils things down. But when it comes to offensive innovation, simplicity is rarely celebrated. We like to view our play-calling geniuses as tinkerers and thinkers. Most importantly, they need to be innovative, though most every coach – even the most celebrated ones – will tell you they just took something they saw somebody else doing and tweaked it a little bit. Osborne will tell you that, too.

And since he's averse to taking much credit at all, we'll turn to Homer Smith to heap it on.

Smith was born in Omaha and was a middling college head coach – career record: 53-71-1 – but a great assistant, serving offensive coordinator stints with UCLA, Alabama, Arizona and the Kansas City Chiefs. He also wrote a handful of coaching texts that are still in wide use today and he once described Osborne like this:

"Tom Osborne understood what made option plays (and other run plays) work and what had stopped them. So, he ran them — he ran almost all of them — but only when they would work. He checked to them versus vulnerable defenses. His smash mouth runs, run action passes, and QB runs kept defenses from mirroring properly against his options. The result was staggering totals of rushing yards. No matter how successful the options, etc. had been in their individual heydays, they

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were never better than when Coach Osborne 'played a medley of tunes.' What would stop it? The only thing that could stop Bill Walsh's passing attack, which was retirement of the man who made it work."

Interesting comparison there to Walsh and his West Coast offense, but that's not really the point. It's the "medley of tunes" line that always makes me think of that night under the yard light 25 years ago. Did I learn the secret to Nebraska's football success that night? That's what I always thought. But maybe I just had the cover cracked on a wildly diverse and complex playbook that is mostly remembered for how simple those plays looked on turf.

I don't know, but I'm willing to test that theory out. Next time we get the family together, I'll ask them if they want to go out into the yard and learn 21 or 29 Counter Sweep. Nebraska averaged 10.20 yards per play with that one in 1982. Joe Gibbs took it and it helped him win his first Super Bowl with the Washington Redskins in 1983 and two more over the next 10 years. By Osborne's count, Ohio State ran some variation of the Huskers' counter "more than 25 times" while grinding down Oregon in the 2014 national championship game. It's an old play now, though no less effective. We'll see if the young ones' eyes light up.

Or maybe they'd rather run Riley's jet sweep or some other staple play – maybe even a pass, maybe even something crazy like four verts – from whatever trendy offense comes to Lincoln next.

I don't know if that would be a good thing or a bad thing as far as the state's culture is concerned. The option is a fine way to be remembered.

But I do know it would mean Nebraska's winning again.