Coach Tom Wants to Be a Player

TOM OSBORNE IS BLITZING CONGRESSIONAL OPPONENTS IN NEBRASKA, WHERE NO ONE SEEMS TO CARE THAT SOME OF HIS PLAYERS WERE AS TERRIFYING OFF THE FIELD AS ON.

By Larry Platt

They have come to a local senior citizens’ center to hear their father figure and moral beacon tell them where America has lost its way. Later in the day, they will back him overwhelmingly in the Republican primary, the election pretty much a coronation anyway. But for now, Cozad—a farming town in Nebraska’s hardscrabble Third District, which has an average age of 58 and household income of $18,000—has Coach Tom all to itself. Tom Osborne, longtime University of Nebraska football coach turned candidate for Congress, ambles toward the microphone in front of some 75 seniors. One, a farmer in a faded plaid shirt with thickly calloused hands, gushes, “This is like sending your dad to Congress.”
WHEN OSBORNE DECLARED HIS CANDIDACY, A SLEW OF OPPONENTS SIMPLY WITHDRAW: "IT'S NOT EASY GOING AGAINST GOD."

PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRY DOYLE
Tall, thin, with an almost fragile gait, Osborne, a former wide receiver himself, begins to mumble in his "Aw, shucks" monotone, first about the economic perils facing this rural community, then about where society has gone wrong. This is what these people have come to hear, and why Osborne will capture more than 70 percent of the votes in tonight's primary. This is what Coach Tom does: He talks about right and wrong in language you can understand. He comes from a family of preachers, and he himself enrolled in the seminary. But then, as he tells it, he decided football would be his ministry, and he sought to save souls while winning games. There are no statistics on the number of souls he saved, but he did win a lot of games. And he turned himself into a statewide deity before retiring in 1997.

And now here he is, at 63, taking his crusade to another playing field: "One of the areas I'm most interested in is what I call the unraveling of the culture," he says, speaking from notes scrawled on a napkin. "Over 36 years of coaching, one thing I noticed was a progressive slide in terms of the well-being of our young people. Some of it has to do with the messages we send our children... I think the thing that comes across so often to our young people is the idea that if somebody disrespects you, violence is the best solution. By the time you're 21, 22 years old, you've probably seen between 20,000 and 30,000 people blown away on your TV set.... At some point, the tide needs to turn a little bit."

A sea of heads nod in grim agreement, seemingly oblivious to the moment's irony. For a good part of his career, Osborne coached kids who all too often exhibited precisely the kind of behavior he now bemoans. His Nebraska football teams in the early to mid '90s were known to win on the field and terrorize off of it; their rap sheets included charges of domestic violence, assault, theft, and one instance of shooting a gun into an occupied car. Most of the time, Osborne responded by defending his players to the hilt—often declining to discipline them and insisting they were the victims of overzealous reporters and prosecutors. After the 1996 season, when Nebraska won its third national championship under Osborne, three Cornhuskers—Lawrence Phillips, Christian Peter, and Tyrone Williams—went to the NFL; all were subsequently convicted of crimes committed while playing for Osborne.

None of this concerns the senior citizens in Cozad. Nebraskans see their best selves in Osborne. For years, they've dreamed of sending their sons to be molded by him and told their daughters to marry someone like him, solid and good and faithful. They flock to him after his speech, and a woman in a floral-print shirt says, "Now, don't be going to Washington and get all swallowed up by those sharks. We don't want you changing now."

Inside the Beltway, his arrival is already eagerly anticipated. Jim Nicholson, chairman of the Republican National Committee, says, "If Tom Osborne wants to be a national player, I'd love it. He's a big draw, someone whose appeal reaches beyond the party. He's demonstrated an ability to team-build, which in politics we call coalition-building."

Of course, Osborne won't be leading this team. He'll go to Washington as a 63-year-old rookie, one who's already made a rookie mistake. After Osborne's primary victory, House Majority Leader Dick Armey called to offer congratulations. Osborne never returned the call. While Armey says he didn't mind—"He must have been out campaigning, God bless him"—he cautions against pushing Osborne too fast. "If they set Tom up as a star," says Armey, "they're going to put him at a disadvantage."

Yet he's no ordinary rookie. Coach Tom has already shown skills—the ability to see what he wants to see, to say one thing and do another—that will serve him well in his new arena. When Osborne announced in January that he would seek to replace retiring Republican Bill Barrett, who had represented the
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old prosecutors, "I saw Lawrence Phillips at the time of his assault pounding the victim's head against the wall." Even today, after Phillips pleaded no contest to third-degree misdemeanor assault and trespassing, Osborne takes issue with her account. "You see repeated references that Lawrence beat the young woman's head against the wall," says Osborne. "That never happened. He did pull her down the stairs, and her head bled from that, but there was no brutal beating."

Over breakfast at a Holiday Inn, while Coach Tom methodically arranges the fruit on his plate (he hasn't eaten red meat since bypass surgery in the mid '80s), he says Phillips was a kid from a group home in Los Angeles who'd been abandoned. "The one thing in his life that motivated Lawrence was football," says Osborne. "And if we gave him some possibility of playing again, he'd jump through a lot of hoops to get there. Otherwise, he'd go back to L.A. and take up with his old friends."

The decision to let him play, Osborne insists, was made to help Phillips, not the team. "It really was an easy decision," Osborne says, "even though in retrospect it didn't turn out all right." Phillips has been in and out of trouble ever since and was arrested for beating up another girlfriend in Beverly Hills two weeks after Osborne's primary win. "But it ain't over for Lawrence," Osborne says. "I've seen guys in their thirties come full circle. The one thing I've found in coaching is that most people, if you believe in them and support them and love them, they'll respond positively."

One such case is Junior Miller, who played for Osborne in the late '70s and went on to a five-year NFL career. Miller says he never would have overcome bouts with drugs and alcohol had it not been for Osborne. "I was a fatherless kid from Midland, Texas, and Coach's faith and belief in me when I went through my hard times helped pull me through to the point that I turned my life over to Christ," says Miller, who today runs Miller Mailing in Lincoln, a bulk-processing company.

Phillips isn't alone. During '94 and '95, eight Cornhuskers were charged with serious crimes. Time and again, Coach Tom circled the wagons:

RILEY WASHINGTON was a wide receiver when he was arrested in 1995 for attempted murder. Osborne allowed him to remain on the team while awaiting trial (he was acquitted after an eight-day trial featuring conflicting eyewitness testimony). REGGIE BAUL was the team's top receiver in 1994 when he was arrested for theft. Osborne continued to start him; Baul later pleaded guilty to receiving stolen goods.

TYRONE WILLIAMS, a defensive back, was arrested for firing two shots at a passing car after the 1993 season. Coach Tom, "I'm certain there was no intent to hit anyone with gunfire," Williams was not disciplined by the team but later served a six-month sentence for the incident.

CHRISTIAN PETER, a lineman, was accused of sexual assault in 1993 by Natalie Kuijjenhoven, then Miss Nebraska. She alleged that Peter cornered her in a bar, grabbed between her legs, and squeezed. He pleaded no contest and was sentenced to 18 months' probation. At the time, Osborne questioned her motivation, erroneously suggesting that her boyfriend had been cut from the football team. Today, Osborne minimizes the charge. "He groped the rear end of a woman in a bar who was fully clothed. For that, he's been labeled a sex offender."

After Peter was sentenced, Osborne suspended him for one game, a practice game.

Kathy Redmond was raised to believe in God and Tom Osborne—and not necessarily in that order. When she was 10 years old, she stood aрестрест aswrest before the coach as he signed an autograph for her. When it came time to attend college, there was no doubt: She would be a Cornhusker. But then, in 1993, she, too, filed sexual-assault charges with campus police against Christian Peter, who now plays for the New York Giants. She claimed that she was raped twice by Peter in 1991, when she was a freshman. When she came forward nearly two years after the alleged incident, Osborne, her longtime hero, stated publicly that Redmond's delay in reporting the rapes caused him to "assume the charges were rather suspect." The local prosecutor's office chose not to pursue the case at least in part because of the delay.

Now 27 and living in Colorado, where she runs the National Coalition Against Violent Athletes, Redmond still doesn't come forward sooner because she was trying to get over the trauma on her own. When she did come forward, Osborne says he tried to get her to meet Peter in the coach's office—"so she could identify him," Osborne says. When she declined, Coach Tom took it as proof that her story was fabricated. (Redmond denies Osborne invited her to his office.) Around this time, Lincoln County Attorney Gary Lacy complained publicly that in a string of cases Osborne had used his influence to disrupt the criminal justice system...He should stay out of the criminal justice system.

Not satisfied, Osborne told a reporter that Redmond had filled the charges to try to get the kind of attention from her parents that her sister had gotten after she was raped. The suggestion that her sister was raped, says Redmond, is a "totally, viciously false" lie. Osborne says he doesn't remember saying that Redmond's sister had been raped—but if he did, he says, it was "never intended for public purposes."

Within days of his telling me that, I receive a letter from Osborne that seems to repeat the claim: "I can assure you that I did not tell anyone, on the record, about the difficulties that Kathy Redmond's sister had encountered," he writes. "At one point, I asked University of Nebraska attorneys involved in a civil lawsuit why Kathy had waited nearly two years to file charges against Christian. Their comment to me was that she filed charges not long after her sister had supposedly been raped and had received a good deal of attention from family members and other interested parties. Their answer to my questions was speculation on their part."

Even now, Osborne stands by his defense of his players. When I tell him I'm having a hard time resolving his rhetoric of grace and compassion with his attacks on the motives of people like Redmond and Kuijjenhoven, he says: "You can say, "Well, what about your compassion?" but my compassion was for the truth, and I saw some lies there."

Today, Redmond counsels about 150 women nationwide who are the victims of athlete violence. I couldn't believe it when I heard [Tom Osborne] was running for Congress," she says. "How can a man make laws when he's harbored criminals?"

It is the end of a long day of campaigning, and Osborne is tired when he arrives at Kearney's Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center, a progressive reform school where over 90 percent of the teenage boys come from abusive homes and even more have had drug and alcohol problems. For the next hour, he'll speak to four separate groups of boys who are on the "wrong path." He'll shake each kid's hand, ask for each kid's name, and repeat it while looking the youngster in the eye.

At one point, in front of a group of kids on their second and third tours of duty here, he scans every face as he tells them, "You guys have been dealt a few bad blows, and some of you probably didn't come from the greatest home life. The main thing is, when you make a mistake, what do you do then? Do you keep making them or do you learn?"

He pauses. Every eye is upon him. "As some of you may know, I'm running for Congress," he says. "But I'm not here campaigning, because you're too young to vote. And even though I could be somewhere else, giving votes, I wanted to come here to tell you about you. And to wish you well."

It is vintage Coach Tom, telling kids who don't have a lot of experience being cared for by adults that he does, indeed, care. It is vintage Coach Tom, too, because he is both being good and aware of his own goodness. Nothing, after all, stands in the way of Tom Osborne telling young men how much he believes in them.

Leaving the facility, Osborne observes, "No society is ever more than one generation away from dissolution." His brow is knotted in sincere concern, making it all the more difficult to square this Osborne with the one who shreds off his players' mistakes. But there may be a clue in the experiences of Art Wilkinson, Osborne's agent for many years.

In the mid 1980s, when the NCAA was looking into whether Husker players had been loaned cars by boosters without making payments on them, Coach Tom called in Wilkinson for an internal review. "He started moving around the office, mumbling about how it can't be true," Wilkinson recalls. "He was looking out a window, saying, 'How am I supposed to know what these kids drive?' But the window overlooked the parking lot, where a bunch of his players were pulling up in their fancy cars. And he's standing there, saying this..."

"Tom Osborne is a helluva lot smarter than anyone's ever given him credit for," Wilkinson says. "He ran a very clean program, graduated his players, and took an interest in those kids. But he mastered the fine art of not seeing any situation he doesn't want to see. I always thought politics was in his future."