

Buffalo Tales

September/October 2011

The Zikmund Era 1955-1972: The Golden Age of Blue and Gold Football (part I)

By Ross Huxoll

As the 1955 football season drew to a close for the Nebraska State Teachers College, *The Antelope* reported that “during the past few weeks we have seen our school spirit branch out and grow into truly magnificent proportions” and that “the contribution made by the football squad toward a revival of genuine school spirit is of

commended.” These comments published by the school newspaper of a new era in the brought about by the Coach Allen Zikmund in 1955. Prior to Zikmund’s arrival, the Blue had not played their way ference in almost ten meager attendance dwindling in school spir-disappointing seasons ten as Coach Zikmund spring of 1955. Under mund, the Antelope tained a level of domi-experienced in the histo- resulted in an unprece-school spirit and com-Zikmund’s innovative teams, and victorious winning tradition that was undoubtedly the golden age of Blue and Gold foot- ball.



Photo property of the Donald K. Briggs Collection, Calvin T. Ryan Library, University of Nebraska, Kearney.

importance and to be comments published proved to be indicative school’s history hiring of Head Football 1955. Prior to Zik- and Gold football team to the top of their con- years, which resulted in numbers and an overall it. However, these would soon be forgot- took the helm in the the tutelage of Zik- football program ob- nance never before ry of the school, which dented echelon of munity support. Coach ideas, successful seasons all resulted in a

As World War II came to a close, first-year Head Coach and Athletic Director Charlie Foster led his 1945 Antelope football team to a 7-1 record, which earned them the distinction as “all-state mythical champions.” Unfortunately, the football program would not experience this kind of success again for the duration of ten long years. Apart from Foster’s successful inaugural season and his team’s third place ranking in 1946, the Antelope football team found themselves at the bottom of their division every year from 1947 to 1954. This long streak of unsuccessful seasons was responsible for decreasing the attendance of games from an average of 600 fans in 1946, to less than 100 in 1954. This “period of drought” not only had an enormous negative impact on school spirit and support, but also proved detrimental to the team itself.

The impact of the failure of the Blue and Gold football program to produce a dominate team in seven consecutive years became most evident when Athletic Director Charlie Foster hired Marvin “Preacher” Franklin to take command of the squad in 1953. In Franklin’s first season as head coach he compiled a dismal 3-5-1 record. Moreover, during the 1954 season he

watched his roster of gridgers dwindle down to a lowly nineteen players. As if Franklin had given up or just did not care anymore, he instructed the team's bus driver to pull over in a small town as they made their way to a scheduled game in Arkansas. There, in a dimly lit Safeway parking lot with all nineteen players, Coach Franklin proceeded to put in a new offense that night before the game. Needless to say, the Antelopes did not score a single point and were defeated badly by the Arkansas State Indians. This season marked the end of Coach Franklin's short two-year stay at Kearney, as he happily accepted an assistant coaching position with Coach Bill Meek at the University of Houston. Thus, President Herbert L. Cushing began his search for a new football coach and extended an offer to future Hall of Fame Coach Allen Zikmund in the spring of 1955.

When surveying Coach Zikmund's resume, there is little doubt that President Cushing knew he had found the right man to turn the demoralized program



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around. Coach Zikmund was no stranger to the gridiron when he arrived at Kearney having been an all-star football player in high school at Ord, Nebraska, and later at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. After an impressive undefeated high school career at Ord, Zikmund began his college career at the University in 1939 where he lettered all four years, won the Big Six title with the Huskers, and caught a touchdown pass against Stanford in the 1941 Rose Bowl. In addition to these accomplishments, the all-star athlete also won the state Class B broad jump his senior year at Ord and later went on to receive two letters in track at the collegiate level with the Huskers. After graduating from college, Zikmund got his first coaching experience while training to be an officer in the Navy at Columbia University's Midshipmen's School in 1944-45. There, Zikmund as coach and player, competed with the team in the 1944 Metropolitan AAU Championship and won three events. After being discharged from the Navy as a lieutenant, Zikmund declined a contract offer from the Chicago Bears and returned to the University of Nebraska to get his master's degree.

Equipped with a master's degree, extensive knowledge of athletics, and an ever-growing family, Zikmund decided it was time for him to get a permanent job doing what he loved to do—coach and teach. He signed a contract with Alliance High School in Alliance, Nebraska, in 1947. Prior to, and for a short time during Coach Zikmund's stay in Alliance, Coach George Halas of the Chicago Bears kept calling Zikmund and asking him to come play for the team. Coach Zikmund politely refused each time, however, he did ask the legendary Bears' coach for a playbook, which he received. Coach Zikmund then implemented and adapted the Bears' pro-style offensive schemes to his own teams. Needless to say, as Zikmund pointed out, "those people had seen nothing like that with the split ends, and the slot backs, and the wing backs in motion. It served me real well." Indeed it did as Coach Zikmund's Alliance teams won three Big Ten Western Division Championships. After spending seven years in Alliance, Zikmund accepted a position in Grand Island, Nebraska, where he only coached for one year but still managed to win the Big Ten Championship in his inaugural 1954 season. In addition to coaching football, Zikmund also coached track where his teams won two Big Ten titles in Alliance and one in his first and only season in Grand Island. At the end of the

1954 football season, the Nebraska State Teachers College football program was lacking enthusiasm, innovative ideas, leadership, and a desire to win. As President Cushing realized, Coach Allen Zikmund would provide all of these previously "missing" qualities when he arrived on Kearney's campus in the spring of 1955.



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Coach Zikmund began his career at the Nebraska State Teachers College as the head football coach, assistant track coach, and full-time professor teaching twenty-two credit hours. Wasting little time, Zikmund met with the nineteen players remaining from the disastrous 1954 season and discovered what "a defeated and down attitude they had." With only nineteen players returning and no athletic scholarships to attract recruits, Coach Zikmund needed to find a way to get the motivated players he needed to fill his roster.

Zikmund began to improvise and implement his own recruiting methods and did not let the fact that other non-conference schools were allowed to give athletic scholarships to their athletes perturb him. Coach Zikmund and his staff sent letters to every coach in the state and asked them to recommend talented athletes from their school and their opponents' schools. Upon receiving these recommendations, the Kearney coaches then sent out a letter to each individual player and invited them to come to Kearney to meet with the staff. Coach Zikmund also got a lot of players from Alliance and Grand Island where he had coached previously. In addition to high school coaches recommending prospects, the staff at Kearney would go and watch high school games or have current Antelope players go and visit with the young players in high school. In fact, Zikmund stated, "Some of our players are our best salesmen." Aside from occasionally obtaining a job for players at the local tuberculosis hospital, maintenance department, or hotel, Coach Zikmund and his staff had to promote the program themselves, with no added incentives, in order to acquire the athletes necessary to be successful.

Sources

The Antelope, April 1955, September 1955, November-December 1955, January 1957, July 1969, July 1970, July 1971


Blue & Gold Yearbooks, 1946-1955

Allen Zikmund, interviewed by Ross Huxoll, September 18, 2007.

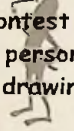
About the Author: Ross Huxoll

Ross Huxoll received his Bachelor of Arts in History at the University of Nebraska at Kearney 2007 with Honors. He then went on to receive his Masters of Art in History at UNK in 2009. His MA Thesis, under the direction of Dr. Mark Ellis, won the university-wide "Outstanding Thesis Award." Mr. Huxoll is currently an instructor at UNK in the History Department.

Ghost Hunting with MPI

 The next regular Ghost Hunting class with MPI at the Trails & Rails Museum will be on September 30. The class is \$40 per person or \$75 per couple. Contact the Trails & Rails Museum to register or for more information at 308-234-3041 or bchs.us@hotmail.com.

5th Annual Trivia Contest and Soup Supper

Mark you calendars for the 5th annual Trivia Contest and Soup Supper on September 27th from 6-9:30!!! It is \$10 a person for teams up to 6 people. Prizes for the winners plus raffle drawings throughout the evening. 

Old Fashioned Halloween Party and Haunted Trails

Join us for our first ever Old Fashioned Halloween Party and Haunted Trails on Saturday, October 22nd from 4-9pm! There will be trick-or-treating, games, and a costume contest for kids and a spooky Haunted Trail for adults. Come in costume and be ready for a spooky good time!

8 Days of Ghost Hunting

8 days of Ghost Hunting, just in time for Halloween will be Oct. 21-28 from 6pm-1am. These will be special classes dedicated to the paranormal and are the perfect way to prepare for the scariest time of year! Classes are \$59 per person or \$99 per couple. Contact the Trails & Rails Museum to register or for more information at 308-234-3041 or bchs.us@hotmail.com. Ask about special group rates!

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Katherine Wielechowski, Editor

2010 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Individual.....	\$35.00
Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00

We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 2012: Bernie Hascall, Janice Martin, Dan Speirs, Gary Straatmann

Term expiring June 1, 2013: Vicki Bissell, Chad Henning, Lynn Rauner, Jim Cudaback

Term expiring June 1, 2014: Mary Beth Lowe, Sharon Martin, Duane Muhlbach, Mike Peak

Officers (1 year term)

President.....	Dan Speirs
Vice-President.....	Sharon Martin
Secretary.....	Mary Beth Lowe
Treasurer.....	Lynn Rauner

2011 Calendar of Events

Tuesday, September 27th from 6-9:30: 5th Annual Trivia Contest & Dinner

Saturday, Oct. 22 (time TBD): Old-fashioned Halloween Party

Saturday, December 3rd from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 24th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

The first two weekends in December (3rd/4th and 10th/11th) from 1-5 pm:
Open to the public: 24th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Volunteers and sponsors are still needed for these events. Please contact any staff or board member to help!

Education notes:

March hours: Monday-Saturday 1-5 pm daily (crane season)

Wild Science Thursdays will return in the summer!

Ghost Hunting classes-check the web site for more info!

Kearney Public Schools have the museum reserved for two weeks: May 2-14, 2011

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68848

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We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

Director's Report

-I am still working on ideas to use the existing memorial funds. One idea is to have area artists/sculptures come up with an idea and present it to us to choose from. I am thinking of the little brick 'nook' that is empty and directly north of the bench in the flower garden. This will fill a void and have seating already nearby.

-A man came to discuss donating funds to build a blacksmith shop on property. I connected him with the other two gentlemen wanting a blacksmith shop here and they are going to get a proposal prepared for the Building committee to review in October.

-Mary Yager contacted me from the Nebraska Humanities Council to see if we could fill in for a museum that backed out of the Journey Stories traveling exhibit. I agreed (after chatting with Dan and Bernie) and we will be hosting this event in June and the first half of July 2012. Event planning will begin with a meeting in Lincoln on Nov. 7.

-Joe Colgan and his wife, of Durango, CO, came in to see me to tell me we should be receiving \$250,000 from his father's estate (Wayne & Kathryn Edwards Trust). Before we sat down, they used the restroom and Mrs. Colgan 'just loved' the note in the bathroom that explained the loud faucet and how it will be fixed when a new building is built. Therefore, they are really excited if we could put this money towards the new building and hopefully use it to solicit additional funds for the project. This check was deposited 10-6-11. While reading the will paperwork, it looks like BCHS is in line to receive another \$24,000 in mid-November, too.

Be sure to join the Buffalo County Historical Society group or the Buffalo County Historical Society/Trains & Rails Museum fan page on Facebook!

Trails & Rails Museum

Buffalo County Historical Society

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www.bchs.us

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