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# Graduating with a plan

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How's this for a formula for success: Trade football practice for a medical practice.

**PAT CLARE**

Whenever Pat Clare ran into his former teammates, he heard stories about the seemingly revolutionary principles that their new coach was bringing to the offense.

It was 1962 then, and Clare was in medical school in Omaha — just a few months after he'd finished a running back career for the Huskers and Bill Jennings had ended a five-year coaching stint with Nebraska.

Enter Bob Devaney, who opened up the offense a bit for Clare's old teammates, started winning and soon established the foundation for a program that evolved into one of the nation's powerhouses.

Turns out Clare was a year too late.

"In those days, most teams lined up and ran at you or around you," Clare said. "When I was there, they put on a real emphasis on defense. They didn't have a lot of flash on offense until Coach Devaney came."

Clare came back and joined the NU medical staff in 1974. He was behind the scenes for all but one of Tom Osborne's 25 seasons as head football coach, forming countless memories along the way.

"It's been a great experience, a great ride," he said. "I get to be around people like Tom Osborne and Bob Devaney, and Bo Pelini now — a great bunch of folks."

Clare completed his four-year residency in Minneapolis and served two years in the military before returning to Lincoln.

He's been caring for Nebraska athletes during the 35 years since, now as the chief orthopedic surgeon for the NU athletic department. He's one of three surgeons who operate on all of the injured Huskers, no matter the ailment.

"You're going to concentrate in certain areas, shoulders and knees — those are some of the more common places that people get hurt," Clare said. "But we take care of all the athletic injuries from spine to the big toe."

Clare planned from the beginning to attend medical school, and he always figured that specializing in bone, muscle and ligament treatment was something he might end up doing.

Before his advanced schooling, though, Clare played two seasons as a running back for Nebraska in 1960 and 1961.

The team, rooted in its defense-first ideals, struggled much of the time, finishing 7-12-1 during those two seasons. A couple of those losses stick out in Clare's mind, maybe even more than the wins.

Nebraska suffered a 26-14 defeat to Minnesota in 1960. The Gophers went on to become national champions that year.

In 1961, Ernie Davis and Syracuse beat the Huskers 28-6. Davis became the first African-American to win the Heisman Trophy that season. A movie, called "The Express," was released in 2008, documenting Davis' historic season.

While witnessing a surgeon at work as an undergraduate at Nebraska in the early 1980s, Scott Strasburger realized what he wanted to do with his life. This photo of him performing surgery was taken about 20 years later, in 2004.

COURTESY PHOTO

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"We didn't have the greatest teams in those days," Clare said. "It was tough. It was a rugged deal in a lot of ways."



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The former Nebraska football player was friends with Tim Clare growing up. Tim's father happened to be Dr. Pat Clare, the NU team physician back in the early 1980s.

One day, Tim Clare invited Strasburger to watch dad perform two surgeries, including one on Husker teammate Paul Miles.

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"It was one of those moments in life where you say, 'Oh, this is what I'm going to do,'" Strasburger said. "I just thought, 'This guy has a great job.' That was kind of an epiphany."

"I had planned on going into medicine. I just had really no idea what I wanted to do until I saw that."

The best part about choosing sports medicine is that it eventually brought Strasburger back to NU football. The native of Holdrege, Neb., lettered as a Husker defensive end from 1982 through 1984.

Dr. Strasburger now works alongside Pat Clare and another son, Dave Clare, as team physicians. For how long?

"Until I retire or die," said Strasburger, 46. "Pat Clare, he's 70 years old and keeps practicing, because he loves the university. It's fun. I love going down there. They're great kids."

During football season, Strasburger usually is with the team four times a week. The bigger time commitment comes during the winter, he said, when more Husker sports are going on.

In between, Strasburger is based at Nebraska Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine, where the majority of his practice is "weekend warrior" or high school athletes, or just moms or grandmas needing a new hip or knee.

Strasburger was All-Big Eight in 1984 before injuries derailed his own playing career. After the ninth-round draft pick spent a season on Dallas' injured-reserve list, he asked for his release as the 1986 season started.

After completing med school at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in 1990, Strasburger did his orthopaedic training and residency in a five-year stay at the Campbell Clinic in Memphis, Tenn. A fellowship at the American Sports Medicine Institute allowed him to work under Dr. James Andrews.

"The guy is truly a genius," Strasburger said.

Strasburger soon felt the same way about Clare after joining his staff after the Summer Olympics in 1996. With NU and Nebraska Orthopaedic, Strasburger now specializes in working on knees and shoulders.

In the late 1980s, Strasburger actually was hurting former Husker coach Tom Osborne's graduation rate. Even though he carried a 3.85 GPA as a life science major and was a two-time Academic All-American, Strasburger did not redshirt and left for the NFL with some course work to complete.

So he finished med school and his undergraduate degree together, graduating from UNMC and receiving his NU diploma on back-to-back days in May 1990.

The commitment and discipline involved with football carried over to med school, Strasburger said. Both included their share of fighting through mental fatigue and stress, which became just as important as talent when the going got tough.

It just always helped Strasburger that he could see where he wanted to go. At least after that day he watched Pat Clare in action.

"We were just remodeling the house, going through stuff, and I found a scrapbook with something where I was interviewed my sophomore year," he said. "This thing must have just happened, because I kind of said I wanted to do sports medicine and wanted to go on to a Dr. Andrews fellowship. I found that, and it was just kind of ironic."

— Rich Kaipust

#### JEFF TOMJACK

Jeff Tomjack didn't know that there were so many options for an aspiring medical student when he first stepped foot on the Nebraska campus.

Tomjack, from Ewing, Neb., was used to seeing one face for all his ailments, so he naturally made some assumptions about the medical job field.

"I didn't know there were so many specialties," Tomjack said. "I grew up in a small town and the family practice doctor did your appendectomy if you needed it, took your tonsils out, you saw him for a cold. It was the only doctor we saw."

He soon learned better.

Tomjack, a three-year letterman as a Husker safety, had four knee operations during his collegiate career, giving him plenty of small talk opportunities with the NU doctors on staff who provided Tomjack with glimpses at possible avenues he could pursue.

He's final year with the Nebraska football team came in 1987, and then he completed medical school and his residency at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. By the summer of 1996, Tomjack was practicing as an obstetrics and gynecology doctor in Lincoln.

Tomjack rattles off his schooling resume like it was smooth from stop to stop, but he insists that it did take some time for him to identify his area of expertise.

"It wasn't an epiphany," he said. "It just was kind of a gradual increase of understanding of what was out there in terms of different fields and interests."

He actually began college at Nebraska with an undeclared major, though he figured he'd get involved with science at some point. Eventually, he was enrolling in med school.

But that was after Tomjack spent time in NU's defensive backfield.

The Huskers were 29-7 with Tomjack contributing as a safety from 1985 to 1987. Now 45, Tomjack said the specific in-game memories are fading a bit, but he won't forget the friendships he formed while on the team.

"Mostly what I remember is just the locker room stuff and the friendships," he said. "I remember all the other things surrounding the football team, just not necessarily playing itself."

However, Tomjack's friends retell one story over and over again.

As a junior in 1986, Tomjack intercepted a pass against Oregon, but before he could take the pick into the end zone for a defensive score, he was met by an offensive lineman. Tomjack fumbled the football into the end zone and Broderick Thomas recovered it for the touchdown.

"I hadn't carried a football, running with it, in years," he said. "I got to like the 5-yard line and a big offensive lineman put a hit on me and I guess I forgot how to tuck the football away."

— Jon Nyatawa

### ROB ZATECHKA

If you're assuming biological sciences was the hard part and football came naturally for Rob Zatechka, the former Nebraska lineman says you might have it turned around.

Yes, really.

"I was probably less gifted from an athletic standpoint," Zatechka said. "The more stressful effort went toward football than academics. I'm not saying it was easy academically, I was just less talented in football."

That might seem hard to believe for somebody who started two seasons on the NU offensive line, was a fourth-round draft pick and went on to play four-plus NFL seasons.

But Zatechka was even more decorated off the field: two-time Academic All-American, holder of a 4.0 grade average, Walter Byers Scholarship recipient, Draddy Trophy winner.

It helped lead Dr. Zatechka to where he is now, practicing as an anesthesiologist at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

Both of Zatechka's parents were involved in education. His brother had the same major at NU. So nobody was giving him a hard time when he chose to balance Husker football with high academic standards.

"It was more an expectation that I should go that route, if anything," he said. "Nebraska really had a good tradition of supporting academics. I almost felt like there was more pressure to perform than it was discouraged."

Zatechka took pride in what he accomplished, but pointed to friends who were working two jobs to get through school or involved in other activities.

Football did provide lessons to take to med school and beyond, though, particularly working through high-stress situations and realizing how to function as a team.

"I started one fall camp with 180 people — people you were going to sweat with, bleed with, run laps with until you were ready to puke," Zatechka said. "And all from different backgrounds."

"Just as some people are very easy to work with and very amenable to a whole lot of situations, there are people that are difficult to work with. To be halfway successful at anything, you have to be able to work with the agreeable people and be able to work with the difficult people."

During his NFL time, Zatechka worked with team physicians or shadowed them to stay sharp. He would return to Lincoln and take graduate classes in the summer.

Zatechka started med school at age 28, graduated at 33 and finished his residency at 36. Even at 37 he can't fully escape his past, because patients either want to talk sports or recognize him from his Sunday night appearances on a local television call-in show.

"About once a day, it seems, I have somebody say, 'Hey, you really are a doctor,'" he said.

—Rich Kaipust

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