

# 1997 National Champions – 13-0

A pajama-clad Tom Osborne was packing for home in the early morning hours of Jan. 3, 1998, when he heard the news.

“By that time, I was wrung out enough that there wasn’t much emotion left,” he would say later that morning during a post-Orange Bowl game news conference.

## 1997 National Champions (13-0)

**Head Coach:** Tom Osborne

**Captains:** Vershan Jackson, Jason Peter, Aaron Taylor and Grant Wistrom

Date	Opponent	Result
A 30	Akron	W, 59-14
S 13	Central Florida	W, 38-24
S 20	at Washington	W, 27-14
O 4	Kansas State	W, 56-26
O 11	Baylor	W, 49-21
O 18	Texas Tech	W, 29-0
O 25	at Kansas	W, 35-0
N 1	Oklahoma	W, 69-7
N 8	at Missouri	W, 45-38 (OT)
N 15	Iowa State	W, 77-14
N 28	at Colorado	W, 27-24
	Big 12 Championship	
D 6	Texas A&M	W, 54-15
	<b>Orange Bowl</b>	
J 2	Tennessee	W, 42-17

His response to the news was typically low-key.

“Naturally, I was very pleased, very gratified,” he said.

The source of his pleasure had been the announcement on ESPN — the television set in his room at the Sheraton Bal Harbour on Miami Beach had been tuned to the network “by chance,” he said — that his 25th and final team had been voted the USA Today/ESPN Coaches national champion.

The Huskers, No. 2 going into the Orange Bowl game, had squeezed ahead of Michigan in the coaches poll on the strength of a 42-17 victory against No. 3 Tennessee.

The Wolverines retained the top spot in the AP poll.

“Being a coach, I know a little bit how they think,” said Osborne, who was among those with a vote in the USA Today/ESPN poll. “They probably looked at the fact we were 13-0, and to be unrewarded in some way would be . . . I don’t mean to say an injustice. But it wouldn’t be a good thing.”

No major college football team has gone 13-0 and been deprived of a national title. On the other hand, Michigan argued, no No. 1 team had ever won its bowl game and been dropped from the top.

The split title seemed a reasonable solution. That was Cornhusker quarterback Scott Frost’s point immediately after the decisive victory against Tennessee.

“I can’t see how any coach outside of the Big Ten or Pac-10 would vote for Michigan because if somebody from North Carolina, Florida State, wherever it might be, Notre Dame, coaches from there, if they were undefeated and won the Alliance bowl game, they would expect to share the national title,” the senior from Wood River, Neb., said on the field, in front of CBS television cameras.

“It’s been split before. It’s OK to split it. It should be split.”

Frost was well-versed on national championship history. The title had been split nine times previously since the coaches poll was established in 1950, most recently in 1990 and 1991.

Nebraska’s first national championship in 1970 was split with Texas.

Cornhusker defensive tackle Jason Peter was less sharing than Frost.

“If you ask me, I don’t think it should be a split title,” he said after the Orange Bowl game. “I mean, we proved today that we’re the best team in the country, without a doubt.”

There probably wouldn’t have been much doubt in anyone’s mind had it not been for Nebraska’s dramatic 45-38 overtime victory at Missouri in early November. The Cornhuskers traveled to Columbia with the No. 1 ranking in both polls but returned to Lincoln ranked No. 4.

That same weekend, Michigan went from No. 4 to No. 1 on the strength of a 34-8 victory against No. 2 Penn State, and Florida State, which subsequently lost to Florida, went from No. 3 to No. 2.

Michigan might have slammed the door on Nebraska’s national championship aspirations with a more decisive victory against Washington State in the Rose Bowl game, but the door was open “at least a crack,” Osborne told his team after it watched the Wolverines win 21-16 on New Year’s Day.

Coaching the Cornhuskers to a third national championship in four seasons was a fitting conclusion to Osborne’s Hall of Fame career. The National Football Foundation waived its three-year waiting period for induction, allowing Osborne to be enshrined alongside the game’s greatest coaches without delay.

Nebraska became only the second major college football program since the Associated Press began ranking teams in 1936 to earn three national titles in four seasons. Notre Dame won titles in 1946, 1947 and 1949.

Peter and rush end Grant Wistrom, the Lombardi Award winner and two-time Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year, were the heart and soul of Nebraska’s 1997 national champions.

“Those two guys, among some others, ramrodded that football team,” Osborne said. “They decided a year ago they were going to come back and get the thing done. Their leadership was invaluable.”

Peter and Wistrom earned All-America honors, as did offensive guard Aaron Taylor, the first Cornhusker to be named an All-American at two positions. He played center in 1996. Taylor was voted the Outland Trophy winner, with Peter being one of two runners-up.

Frost and I-back Ahman Green were among other key players on offense. Frost became only the 10th player in major college history to rush for 1,000 yards and pass for 1,000 yards in the same season, finishing with 1,095 and 1,237, respectively.

Frost’s 2,332 yards of total offense were one short of the Nebraska single-season record, set by Jerry Tagge in 1971, since surpassed by Heisman Trophy winner Eric Crouch (2,625) in 2001 and Jammal Lord (2,774) in 2002.

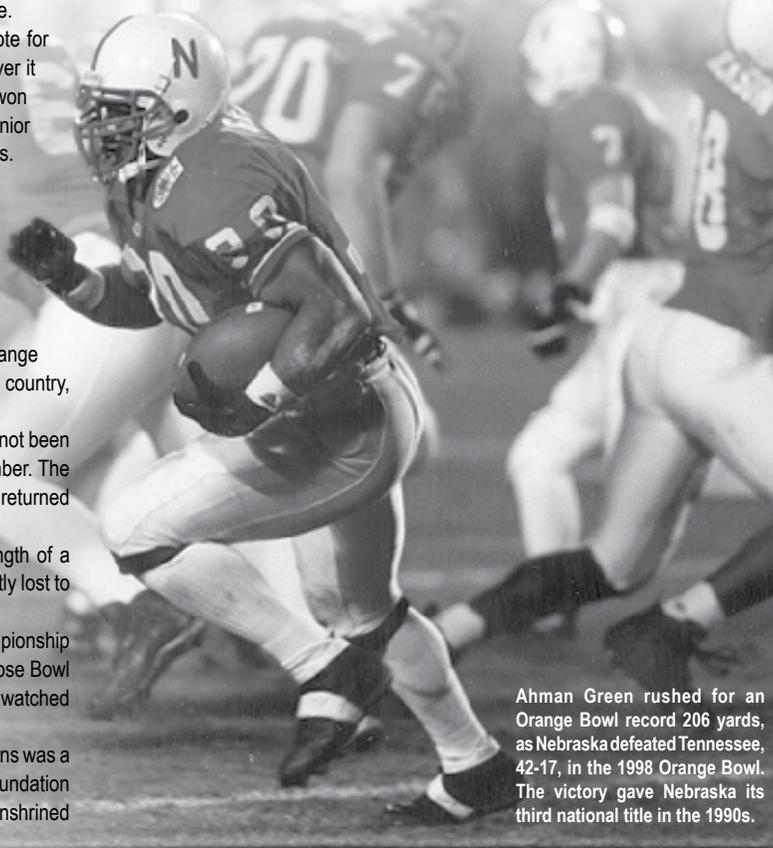
Green rushed for 1,877 yards, which ranked second in the nation. His yards also placed him second on the Cornhuskers’ all-time single-season list, behind 1983 Heisman Trophy winner Mike Rozier’s 2,148 yards.

Every Cornhusker, from freshman Matt Davison, whose touchdown catch of a deflected Frost pass on the final play of regulation against Missouri kept the title hopes alive, to scout team players such as senior Doug Seaman, contributed in varying degrees to Nebraska’s fifth national title.

The 1997 national championship team was “somewhere in between” the 1994 and 1995 national championship teams, according to Osborne. It was “probably a little more talented than ’94, certainly not near as controversial as ’95. That was nice,” he said. “So it was just kind of a nice way to go.”

“Great leadership on the part of the players, and I didn’t have to do much.”

He was being overly modest, of course. The record will attest to that.



Ahman Green rushed for an Orange Bowl record 206 yards, as Nebraska defeated Tennessee, 42-17, in the 1998 Orange Bowl. The victory gave Nebraska its third national title in the 1990s.