



Oh sure, Saturday's Husker game against Minnesota had more goose bump type moments than most.

There was Tom Osborne, Nebraska's retiring athletic director and legendary head coach, helping Bo Pelini lead this year's team out of the locker room for the tunnel walk for the final time this season.

There were numerous salutes to Osborne throughout the game on the big screens and a special presentation on the field to him and his entire family at halftime.

And there was of course senior day, Will Compton, Rex Burkhead and 27 others gracing the turf for the final time ever in front of the Husker faithful.

But perhaps the best part of the whole day was Nebraska's ability to put the game away in the first half instead of waiting until the final minute or even seconds of the game, the first time that's happened in weeks.

The Gophers were on the receiving end of a remarkable passing day from Taylor Martinez, the junior establishing himself as Nebraska's all-time leading thrower by firing 21 of 29 passes and two touchdowns for 308 yards. And he did it against the nation's sixth best pass defense.

His total for career passing yards now stands at 6,140, passing Zac Taylor's mark of 5,850.

"I think he's played at a high level all year, but when he's comfortable with the game plan, which he was today, and has a good understanding of what we want to do, he executes really well," said Pelini at the post-game press conference.

Aurora's Andrew Rodriguez once again helped protect Martinez in the pocket from his right tackle position, and also helped pave the way for 133 yards on the ground, a season low but a good compliment to the remarkable passing day under a stiff and swirling southerly wind.

Still, he said following the game that it was good to put one away early for a change.

"Definitely, that's a lot of stress that's not needed," Rodriguez joked. "We prepared a little differently, physically and mentally. We're a better team because we're more focused. We're just more focused as a team."

The Huskers struck first in the opening quarter at the 11:49 mark on a 39-yard field goal by senior Brett Maher, moving the ball 53 yards in seven plays.

Just over five minutes later Martinez hooked up on the first of two touchdown throws to receiving sensation Kenny Bell, this one a 36-yarder when the sophomore dove and corraled the football at the two yard line, sliding into the end zone.

In the second quarter freshman bulldozer running back Imani Cross scored twice, once from three yards out and another from just a yard away to up the score to 24-0 and the rout was on.

Nebraska could have had more before the break, but Minnesota's defense held inside the five as time ran out. Cross was stopped at the one yard line when Rodriguez lined up ahead of him at fullback. Minnesota's Mike Rallis, a senior middle linebacker, made a good play and stopped Cross in midair.

Rodriguez, who regularly comes in on the third series of both halves at right tackle, said he pays

close attention when he's on the sideline to how the defense is reacting on certain situations.

"Mostly just watching, in certain moments, their techniques. I'm just watching what the defense is doing."

It was a remarkable day for the Blackshirts as well, limiting Minnesota, which came into the game bowl eligible, to just 60 first half yards and 177 total.

Nebraska salted the game away in the third quarter when Bell caught a flare pass and then outraced Gopher defenders down the left sideline for six more points, making the score 31-0. The sophomore totaled nine catches on the day for 136 yards.

Seven minutes later Stanley Jean-Baptiste put the icing on the cake when he caught a deflected ball off a Minnesota receiver, returning the ball 48 yards for a pick six.

So now the Huskers find themselves one win away, a Black Friday win, to secure a Legends Division championship at 4-7 Iowa.

If successful there, it's on to Indianapolis where a rematch against Wisconsin awaits with a berth in the Rose Bowl on the line. A Michigan loss at undefeated Ohio State would send the Huskers to Indiana regardless of the outcome in Iowa City.

Rodriguez said it'll be one step at a time.

"It's definitely satisfying," he added about the Huskers five-game win streak, noting their ability to battle back after the disappointing loss to Ohio State.

"We have to look at every game, one team at a time. We can't overlook any opponent."

Pelini too was already looking ahead to a short work week.

"Now the challenge will be to come back in a short week and be ready to go on the road and to finish out the second half of the year the way we want to."

DAVE BRADLEY

can be reached at advertising@hamilton.net.