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## Korean Choi finds home on Nebraska's offensive line

By **Brandon Vogel**  
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Seung Hoon Choi started playing football at 14 after immigrating from South Korea. (Huskers.com)


Nearly three weeks ago, Seung Hoon Choi made his first start for the eighth-ranked [Nebraska Cornhuskers](#). It registered as a blip on a computer screen in his hometown of Seoul, South Korea. That's how his father watches Choi play, following the multicolored bar graphs of an online gametracker, a foreign sport in a foreign language. That's the only way he has ever watched Choi play live.

Occasionally his father gets some game film, not that there was much to see before the Sept. 17 game against [Washington](#). Choi, a walk-on junior left guard, had a career that consisted of two mop-up appearances in blowouts of [Western Kentucky](#) and [Tennessee-Chattanooga](#) to open the past two seasons.

San Jo Coi and Yu Mi Chu have never seen their son play because they never left South Korea. Their son did reluctantly, sent off more than seven years ago at age 14 to get an American education.

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"When they told me they wanted me to go to America, I was like 'No, I don't want to go,'" Choi said. "They pretty much made me."

Choi came to Lincoln to live with his uncle, a researcher at the University of Nebraska. The timing was bad. Choi's uncle left before he even got there. He moved into an apartment with his sister and six cousins. They moved 13 times in three years. Choi called his mother daily, begging to come home.

Nebraska wasn't the America he imagined. Choi wanted big buildings. He got a flat prairie state that's home to roughly one-fifth as many people as his hometown.

"I thought in America the people would be really tall and big," Choi said. "I thought I would have all the fast food I could eat."

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The people weren't tall and big, at least in comparison to Choi, partly because America does have all the fast food you can eat. Based on his size alone -- 270 pounds at age 15 -- a teacher at Lincoln Christian High School asked him if he knew the game of football.

Choi said no. It was one of two English words he knew well.

The teacher asked if he would like to.

Choi said yes. It was the other English word he knew well.

It wasn't much of a vocabulary, but it was a start.

Lincoln Christian coach Matt Farup's first step was to get a custom helmet that was big enough for Choi to wear for an entire practice. The next step was simplifying the scheme. Zone left, zone right, pass block, when in doubt "kill the guy in front of you." The last part was a challenge for the soft-spoken Choi.

"He was always extremely powerful, but to begin with I think he dialed it down," Farup said. "It's not in Seung's nature to want to hurt somebody."

Farup knew he had a talented player, but says he hardly thought Choi was a Division I prospect.

"He didn't have the years under his belt. I didn't think he was there developmentally."

Nebraska thought he could get there. At a summer football camp in 2007, Choi held his own against a pair of highly regarded Nebraska recruits -- Baker Steinkuhler, now starting at defensive tackle for the Huskers, and Trevor Robinson, now a four-year starter at right guard for Notre Dame. An offer to walk on at Nebraska followed.

Choi sat for three years, the most foreign of imports at a school where home-grown, hard-driving offensive linemen used to be considered a birthright.

But that was the problem with Nebraska through two games this season. There were big plays and young talent, but little muscle. Quarterback Taylor Martinez jetted to 301 yards rushing and five touchdowns in the Cornhuskers' first two games but the rest of the running game was sputtering along at 3.34 yards per carry.

The prognosis wasn't good heading into the Washington game. Nebraska had already started a true freshman, right tackle Tyler Moore, on the offensive line in a season opener for the first time in school history. When starting left guard Andrew Rodriguez went down with an injury, Nebraska's offensive line suddenly looked like this: an undersized former walk-on at center, a juco transfer at left tackle, a true walk-on at right guard, a true freshman at right tackle and a mild-mannered, unknown left guard from South Korea.

This time, Choi's timing was good.

Nebraska ran for 309 yards against the Huskies' seventh-ranked rushing defense. Yoshi Hardrick, a talkative left tackle from Mississippi prep powerhouse South Panola High School, lined up knee-to-knee with Choi in his first start. He called it the most fun game he has ever played.

"Choi was talking on every play, saying to Washington 'call me a fat Asian again,'" Hardrick said. "I didn't know he talked that much."

There's a lot that college football fans didn't know about Choi three weeks ago. Like that he used to train with his father, a collegiate judoka and retired police officer, and that he had kept his athleticism from his days as a pitcher. Or that at Lincoln Christian, and later Nebraska, he became a weight-room junkie, going from struggling to bench press the bar to regularly putting up 400 pounds.

Nobody could have known that Choi would start again last Saturday at [Wyoming](#) or that offensive coordinator Tim Beck would call his number again and again, asking him to pull on a simple toss play that made up a good chunk of running back Rex Burkhead's career-best 170 yards on 15 carries.

"I thought I did all right, but there were some plays I should've done better," Choi says with the humility of someone who has known nothing but unknowns for the past seven years.

But what Choi does know now is this: His play has prompted a trip from Seoul to Lincoln. His parents are coming for the Michigan State game on Oct. 29. This time, he won't be begging them to take him back.

"Now I grew up," Choi said. "I love being in Nebraska."

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