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## After Paterno's departure, Nebraska gears up for unique environment

By Brandon Vogel | CBSSports.com



**Bo Pelini doesn't believe his team will be distracted at Penn State.** (US Presswire)

Nebraska's big black-and-red semitrailer full of football equipment had just passed through Cedar Rapids, Iowa, when Joe Paterno was fired Wednesday night.

By the time the truck hit Chicago the rioting on Penn State's campus -- born out of outrage, support or a simple desire to be present -- was mostly over. One of the most remarkable coaching careers in any sport had just come to an unthinkable and ugly end, but the wheels were literally in motion for a game on Saturday.

Ron Brown is the coach Nebraska turns to in times like this. An assistant under Tom Osborne and now Bo Pelini, Brown's a rarity in the coaching game in that he likes to talk about ideas that don't always involve picking up blitz packages. When you expect the standard coachspeak about limiting distractions, he gives you a parable. "You can look at a snowstorm and just see the snow coming down, see it all, that's not focus," Brown said. "Try to follow a flake all the way to the ground. That's focus. If you're scope is small enough, you'll have great focus."

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But that was before the snowstorm of allegations surrounding Paterno and his former defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky turned into a blizzard Wednesday night. The moral issue that every observer of college football has had to confront over the past week became a safety issue for university officials in the aftermath of the rioting in State College.

On Thursday morning, Nebraska Regent Tim Clare asked to see a detailed security plan for the game. Tom Osborne, Nebraska's athletic director, said shortly thereafter that he had been in touch with the Penn State police department

and was confident in their ability to ensure a safe environment for the game. He couldn't stop himself, however, from issuing an unthinkable caveat for Nebraska fans: Don't wear red.

"If [fans] have a red sweater or red shirt on that's great," Osborne said. "Most people have a winter coat that's not red. If they want to wear that it might be a good idea. I just don't know if it's a good idea under the circumstances to stand out."

By that time Nebraska's equipment truck had stopped in Youngstown, Ohio, -- the home of Bo Pelini, defensive coordinator Carl Pelini, and offensive coordinator Tim Beck -- to regroup after 18 hours on the road. It's where most of Nebraska now turns for some sort of understanding on how to handle a game unlike any other.

"The atmosphere is something we can't control," Pelini said following Nebraska's final practice of the week on Thursday. "I don't care [what it's like]. Whatever it is, it is."

It's the sort of answer that's become a Pelini trademark -- tough and to the point. It might have been the demeanor that got him the Nebraska job back in 2008.

Pelini, a former Ohio State safety, was hired to patch the cracks in the storied Nebraska football program with Big Ten toughness and defense. Those cracks started to show in Nebraska's last trip to Happy Valley, a 40-7 loss in 2002. The Cornhuskers entered that game ranked No. 8 in the AP poll. It would be seven full seasons and three different head coaches before Nebraska returned to the AP top 10.

It was Pelini who got them there but following a surprising loss to Northwestern, Pelini's sixth home loss in four seasons, some Nebraska fans have started to wonder if he can take the Huskers from conference contender to champion.

Coming off back-to-back appearances in the Big 12 championship game, Nebraska was the preseason favorite in the Big Ten. Now they trail Michigan State by a game in the Legends Division. Saturday's matchup with Penn State was viewed

as a must-win before the allegations broke, but the game has become much bigger than that. Now seemingly every college football fan has a stake in the game.

But Pelini has repeatedly told his players to look inward this week.

"We're pretty far removed from the situation [at Penn State]," he said. "Our players understand that you can only control what you can control. In this environment, where we live right here, you coach through distractions every week."

And with that he walked off Nebraska's practice field. The distraction of talking about distractions was gone. All that's left now is the game.

A few hours earlier the Nebraska equipment truck driver tweeted that he'd made it to State College, Pa.

"All is good," he said.

More proof that, yes, there is still going to be a football game in a week where fans across the nation were asking if anything is good.



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