"You're everything this program is all about," were Coach Bo Pelini's parting words to his fifth-year senior as Taylor Dixon and fellow seniors experienced the famed tunnel walk for the last time as a Husker gridder. Members of Dixon's family joined in the moment by greeting him on the sideline before his final game in front of the 80,000 cheering Big Red fans. (Photo by Lynn McBride)

By Lynn McBride

Guest Writer

"From now on, I know that most people I encounter will not know I played football for the Huskers. But in Wauneta people know," said Taylor Dixon, a 2008 graduate of Wauneta-Palisade School.

Dixon, a wide receiver for the Huskers, fulfilled the dream of virtually every little boy in the state as he grew up aspiring to be a Husker. "Yeah. When friends and I played any pick-up game of touch or flag football in the yard, at the park, whatever, I never imagined being anything else but a Husker. We never thought about being a Wildcat or anything else. It was always a Husker."

Dixon ends his Husker career as a product of the fabled walk-on program that sets the Husker Nation apart from most other universities in the country. Walk-ons are invited by the coaching

staff, but enter school without a scholarship. Some walk-ons eventually are awarded a scholarship, but most pay their own way through college.

Dixon credits his dad, Brad, first and foremost, in feeding the dream to be a Husker. "I just assumed I'd go to school at Chadron, or Kearney, or some place like that, but Dad would say, 'Why don't you call some coaches? Why don't you go to some camps? Why don't you...?' He's the one that encouraged me most."

Dixon had attended a quarterback camp at the University, so he called Coach Watson, the quarterbacks coach at that time, mostly to see if he remembered the Bronco from W/P. "Of course I do," was Coach Watson's response. He followed that with a request for any game tapes Taylor might have. "So I got out a bunch of old VHS tapes, knowing they're obsolete now days. It was really crude. My game film was highlight–static–highlight–static. I put it together myself in our basement." But it worked.

Dixon, in the fall of 2008, was one of 30 invitees to the Husker walk-on program. He redshirted his freshman year. Athletes are granted five years to complete four years of eligibility. A redshirt is part of the team, but will be a practice player only.

The season of 2012 was the culmination of his college career as a Husker football player. Dixon graduated from the University Saturday, Dec.15.

But, the real story can now unfold. After a stellar career at Wauneta-Palisade, a stint abounding with team, conference, district, and state-wide honors, a career in which he basically single-handedly carried the team on his shoulders as a senior, according to his high school coach, Randy Geier, Dixon was faced with no real promising prospect of getting much playing time. Was this a problem? Was it frustrating?

"Not at all," was the sincere response. "I don't really care about the headlines and getting my name in print. I'm more than content knowing that this kid from a small town did his best to overcome all odds to be part of one of the biggest things in the state, an experience that most kids would die for. I'm just proud that I stuck it out all these years. It was a lot of work, but it's all paid off."

Dixon alluded to the pride felt in getting to play in four games this year. "Hopefully people will realize that I didn't just occupy a spot and that I did work for my position. That's part of the legacy I think I'm leaving."

The temptation to transfer to a smaller college where stardom would be almost certain, or to decide against being a part of the Husker program must have presented itself. "Not really," was Dixon's quick response. "To give it up was never an option. I had too many people back in Wauneta behind me. If I had changed my mind, I not only would have let many friends down, but I'd be just another guy if I were not on the team here. My name will be on the letterman's wall (a wall-of-fame, of sorts, in the west hallway of Memorial Stadium), and I take a lot of pride in that. Again, it's all paid off."

Individual recognition is not important if one has a "we, not me" outlook.

Football, as is the case with other athletic endeavors, is a team sport. The Husker roster might list as many as a dozen wide receivers. Did the competition for playing time present any problem as far as team unity? "Never," was Dixon's firm answer.

"We're all doing it for the same reasons...to win games, to have the opportunities for conference and national championships. If that's the main goal, I don't care who's out there. It's not a big issue. In fact, it makes us stronger friends. We are not going to spend all this time together to have a mediocre season." Dixon added, in an unselfish manner, that his role is to prepare his teammates who will be playing in the games, pushing them in practice, holding them accountable. He said that everybody has a role, even if it's not directly playing in games.

Does that 'team first' attitude surprise his high school coach? "No!" was Coach Randy Geier's emphatic answer. Now the superintendent of schools, as well as still being involved in coaching, Geier saw this trait several years ago. "As a sophomore in high school Taylor was our whole offense. But for his junior year, we retooled the offense a little. The result was that Taylor was not going to pile up the yards he was used to the year before. He was very sincere when he told us that he's fine with that. He told us that the team is what counts, and that he would do whatever it takes to help the team win."

Later when Dixon suffered a broken thumb, he had to be replaced as the team's quarterback, becoming a running back. "That, again, was fine with him," said Coach Geier. "For a 16, 17 year-old to unselfishly accept the team concept the way he did was very impressive."

When telling about his dad's part in his decision to pursue a Husker career, Coach Geier's was the very next name mentioned. "Coach Barney Cotton (an associate head coach on the Husker staff) called me. He told me a lot about the values of the program when his first question was, 'What is Taylor Dixon's character?' I told him that he would never find a better individual character-wise than Taylor Dixon."

As Dixon exited from the famed tunnel walk for the last time, he was greeted by Coach Bo Pelini. "He told me, 'You're everything this program is all about. Thank you for everything you've done.' We told each other that we love each other. I just wanted to absorb everything about the moment. I'm glad my family was there to enjoy the moment with me."

Taylor Dixon stepped out of a dream-come-true. The kid from a small town took on the big time with a stick-to-it attitude that set him apart from others. Of the class of 30 walk-ons, just 11 shared this moment with him.

He takes with him, "A broad experience I would never have had. I have friends on the team from South Korea, Texas, Florida, California, Louisiana, and, yes, Nebraska. I have learned about diversity, about accepting different views, and about learning to respect all of them."

Dixon also takes with him a University degree in Fisheries and Wildlife Management, his helmet, a couple of jerseys, (one of which is the red 'throw-back' jersey worn for one game), knowing his name is on the letterman's wall, many tight-knit friendships, and the inner satisfaction of having taken full advantage of a gigantic opportunity afforded only a select few.

Yes, he also takes his leave acknowledging the huge role that representing 'all the people in Wauneta who were pulling for me' played in his career as a Husker. In Coach Geier's words, "Taylor is, and always has been, all about we, not me." The 'we' most certainly includes those for whom Taylor Dixon played, his friends and family back in Wauneta. It's all paid off.

Taylor Dixon, a wide receiver for the Huskers, is responsible for more than simply catching passes, foremost of which is blocking opponents. In action in the Arkansas State game he does just that. (Photo by Lynn McBride)