



Photo by Sr.A. Leslie Lawrence

backer Johnny Harrison, 38th Reconnaissance Squadron pilot, takes a quick before a play during practice.

From academy to Beef: Football is tie that binds

by Sarah Anne Carter
Staff writer

They played together as cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Now they both play for thousands of fans at the Omaha Civic Arena.

Johnny Harrison, 38th Reconnaissance Squadron pilot, and Shannon Yates, 45th Reconnaissance Squadron pilot, are members of the Omaha Beef indoor football team. Harrison is a linebacker, and Yates is a defensive back.

The Omaha Beef is the newest franchise in the Indoor Professional Football League. It is one of seven teams and has a record of 3-3.

For Harrison, playing for the Omaha Beef brings him back to his roots. He started playing football when he was 8 years old for a children's league team in Omaha. His father was a fullback for the University of Nebraska-Omaha's football team.

"I've been playing football for as long as I can remember," Harrison said.

He also played through middle school, high school and college. In high school, he was all-county and all-district. At the academy, he was an all-conference linebacker, runner-up defensive player of the year and played in the Hula Bowl. After graduating, Harrison coached football at the academy prep school.

For Yates, playing football is almost a family tradition. He started playing when he was 6 years old.

"I enjoy football," Yates said. "I come from a

very athletic family."

His father was a high school coach, and his brother was his head football coach in high school, where he was all-state. At the academy, he was an all-conference safety and defensive MVP in the Hula Bowl.

Harrison and Yates were both involved in coaching football at North High School in Omaha before trying out for the Omaha Beef.

"I ran into Johnny after I came to Offutt and found out he coached high school football," Yates said. "I volunteered to help coach defensive backs."

Harrison found out about tryouts for the Omaha Beef when the defensive coordinator at North High School decided to try out.

Yates, on the other hand, saw an ad in the newspaper about the open tryouts.

"I was TDY during the tryouts, so I e-mailed the coach and told him I'd love the opportunity to try out for the team," Yates said. He was given the opportunity to workout with the team for a week when he returned. At the end of that week, he was offered a contract.

While both Harrison and Yates have paid contracts with the Omaha Beef, their first priorities are their jobs in the Air Force. They attend as many practices and games as possible, but when they are called to fly or go TDY, the team has had to learn to be flexible.

"Working on the Cobra Ball, I could be gone at the drop of a hat," Yates said. "My commitment is with the Air Force."

Both plan on playing for the Omaha Beef next year

if the Air Force doesn't move them somewhere else. Harrison and Yates have both received great support from their squadrons.

"A lot of people from my squadron went to the first game," Harrison said. "Not everyone could go, though, since it sold out."

"It helps that my squadron commander is a complete nut about football," Yates said. "His office has nothing but Packers memorabilia in it."

Yates believes the support from the city is strong. "Omaha is a great town, but it's starving for something in the spring," he said. "There are the Golden Spikes, but so many people here are crazy about football. Indoor football gives people in Omaha an alternative as a recreational sports activity in the spring."

"If I wasn't playing, I'd go to the games," Harrison said. "The game is geared toward fans having a good time. It is also geared toward having the offense score points."

Harrison and Yates are still getting used to playing indoor football, which has a different set of rules than outdoor football.

Harrison is getting used to having only one line backer on the field. The rules are stacked against the defense, he said.

"I never thought I'd be able to play football again," Yates said. "It feels great."

"I'm just in it purely for the fun," Harrison said. Tickets for the Omaha Beef games range from \$10 to \$36. For more information or tickets call the Omaha Beef office at 558-4849.