Rodgers worked well in the system.

In 1969 a young man out of Omaha Tech high school had offers from numerous colleges around the country. Not only to play football, but the Dodgers wanted him to play baseball instead of going to college.

As a senior he was named All-City in football, basketball, baseball and track. All-American in football and baseball, and a high school national champion in the long and triple jump.

The most well known and former electrifying return man, Johnny Rodgers chose Nebraska after Coach Bob Devaney won him over with his plan of a system.

Rodgers participated last weekend in the Adrian Fiala’s 12th annual Husker Heritage Golf Tournament at Wild Horse Golf Club. This year, 18 teams competed with a former Husker on each team.

“Coach had a system that he trusted, a plan for success and sold me on that,” Rodgers said. “He didn’t talk about me winning conference awards and championships. His pitch was me being an All-American and winning National Championships.”

He worked out a deal with Devaney so he could play baseball, his better sport, while in college.

Devaney recognized the big play potential that Rodgers brought to the team and asked him to contribute to the football team full time.

Rodgers said that was a tough decision, especially coming from a man who had preached to them loyalty and integrity. This same man was asking him to break the deal of playing both sports they had made during the recruiting process.

Rodgers recalls Devaney saying to him, “Johnny if you willingly come out for spring ball and contribute to the team, you’ll be the first player we endorse for the Heisman trophy.”

That statement led to Rodgers giving up baseball and putting on a football practice uniform, he said.

“The reason Devaney was a good coach and we were such a good team and I played as well as I did was because of his leadership,” Rodgers said. Devaney surrounded himself with smart guys who knew what he wanted to do with his system. The team was filled with smart, athletic guys that knew what he wanted to do on the field.

That was part of his system, and that system works in life. Devaney knew that surrounding yourself with smarter guys or people who make up for your weaknesses would make you successful.

“The reason I was so good is because I was used at the right time. I had seven or eight All-Americans on my team that made me look good,” Rodgers said.

Loyalty was another reason that Devaney’s teams played so well.

“We could trust him, and we would rather fail than disappoint him. Trying to reciprocate that loyalty led us to be a great team,” he said.

In the “Game of the Century,” Nebraska played Oklahoma University and Rodgers shined brightest in that game. He returned a punt 72 yards and led the Huskers to a 35-31 victory over the Sooners.

“We were always working on mental toughness at Nebraska,” Rodgers said. “We worked on it just as much as our physical toughness.”

In the big game, and on the biggest stage, Nebraska and Oklahoma only committed one penalty between the two of them. A five-yard offside penalty was the only mistake made.

Devaney instilled in the team that the key to success was to keep from making mistakes, or having a plan to come back from them after you do mess up, he said.

“In life bad things are going to happen,” Rodgers said. “It is the back up plans and what you do after you make those mistakes that proves who you are.”

On the field Rodgers could do no wrong, but an off-the-field incident would put the mental toughness he had learned from playing to the test.

Another lesson that he learned from Devaney was fighting adversity.

Everyone has some type of adversity in their life, there are just different levels of it, Rodgers said.

His adversity was getting in trouble and reaching a low point, he said.

“I thought about quitting right after that, but me solving my problems was about the football team, the coaches and about the entire state that needed me to straighten myself out,”Rodgers said.

Coach Devaney and Tom Osborne were great mentors and taught players many things while at Nebraska, Rodgers said. Networking and being around people who know people in all areas of business, and life is the way to become a success, in anything.

Now, over 30 years after he was named “The Jet” for his quickness and speed on the gridiron, Rodgers is asked daily to do something because of his reputation.

The Husker Heritage Golf Tournament director Adrian Fiala has asked Rodgers to play a few times, he said.

“I try and get out here any time that I can to support Adrian,” he said. “It is a lot of time to commit playing in this event but he is a part of our large team and we owe loyalty to that.”

The former players that were on Devaney’s team, or members of Tom’s team, make up the legacy that has gone on, and that will continue to go on, he said.

After the playing days ended for these former icons and legends they went on to do different things.

Some went into or started businesses and organizations. Others went back home to farm or help family members. But because they were successful and part of the Nebraska dynasty they continue to be part of this state.

“Teams that win together remain closer than teams that don’t win, Rodgers said. “That is what we’re doing here. We are still a team and each of us has done something different with our lives. A reason we are playing in this tournament is to network ourselves.”

Networking is putting youself around others that are more successful and studying that person like a scientist, Rodgers said. Trying to be successful alone won’t work.

He said that in Devaney’s system, people were surrounded by individuals who made the entire team stronger. His coaches complemented his strengths and players complemented one another.

“That is why we were successful, because we had a system that worked.”

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