

# Visit To Cemetery Brings Back Memories

*Berringer would like this year's Husker team*



**Bob SCHALLER**

GOODLAND, Kan. — The cold wind blew briskly, but with the unseasonably warm temperatures in Kansas this time of year, the weather certainly wasn't unbearable on the morning of Halloween, 1999.

Just off Interstate 70, through Main Street to its end north of town lay the Goodland cemetery, in a quiet little town in a quiet part of America, just 20 miles from the Colorado border in western Kansas.

Coming back from the Kansas-Nebraska game, I decided to stop in and visit the grave of Brook Berringer.

The young man who embodied so much of Midwest America in his heart and soul is buried here. Scattered around his headstone are a pair of small Nebraska footballs, a Nebraska "Husker" emblem and various notes, some in sealed baggies so the weather won't take its toll. The notes are addressed to Brook. Right next to Brook is his father — another premature death, at age 40 in Warren Berringer's case — who died when Brook was just 8.

It's odd, because it seems so normal to leave a note for Brook. Of course, the notes will go unopened, but it makes us feel better because we really do expect the day to come when we see Brook's smile again, hear his laugh, see his long stride . . .

But he's gone. It was just three and one-half years ago that Berringer was waiting to be selected in the NFL draft, in all likelihood by the Denver Broncos. He came to Scottsbluff, where I was, at the time, the sports editor of the newspaper there.

That was Saturday, and Brook and I talked about a lot of things, including my son, Garrett, who was 2-years-old at the time. Brook was born in Scottsbluff, too, so there was that common link. Of course, Brook left that night, and four days later, he died when the small plane he was flying crashed in eastern Nebraska. I guess his death hit me so hard because of two things: He had been in Scottsbluff so recently, and he represented everything I want my son to represent when he grows up.

I never did put Brook's death behind me. I guess I'm not as mature in my Christian walk as his coaches were because it just seems so wrong that such a shining star should be plucked from our universe at such a young age.

Earlier this year, I spent time in Goodland visiting with Jan Berringer, Brook's mom.

"Everyone says it will get easier as time passes by," she said, looking heaven-ward not for answers but to keep the tears in, "but it doesn't. It's as hard today as it was the day (of the crash)." She told me about a young woman in Colorado who has the license plate "MissU18" in Brook's memory, and how much those little gestures and cards and letters mean to her.

Anyway, when I stopped on the last day of October to

visit Brook, I went by Jan's home. She wasn't there, but maybe that was for the better, because I am of little comfort since I'm no closer to coming to terms with this than she is.

But as I sat at the cemetery in my favorite sweatshirt — the one with red letters spelling Nebraska across the front and the "N" and "Huskers" on the front of it, at the bottom — I chatted with Brook.

"You know Brook, you'd really like the Huskers this year. They have a quarterback who you would just love, Eric Crouch, this gutty young kid with the heart of a warrior and the kind of courage that comes along rarely . . . You'd like the guy who is wearing your number, No. 18, Jeff Hemje — he's an overachiever from Grand Island, and he's a really good person . . . I wrote Tommie Frazier's book — and although he is still brash, impersonal and at times aloof, he seemed so



**Brook Berringer died in a plane crash April 18, 1996.**

very genuine and heartfelt when he told me how much respect he had for you, and that he's so glad you two were able to talk after you got back from the NFL Combine . . . Sat next to Tom Shatel of the World-Herald last night at the game, and he's going to get down here and see you as soon as he can . . . My son turned 6 Friday, and you'd really get a kick out of him . . ."

I rambled on and on and on until I felt like Brook was really up to date on everything going on in the program. Then I wrote a note on the depth chart from the KU/NU game and left it with the other mementos. As I stood to go to my car, for some reason I felt like I could do more.

The wind was blowing colder, and — as senseless or morose as it seemed — I worried about Brook. So I took off my Nebraska sweatshirt, and lay it over where the ground had been broken three years ago to lay Brook to rest. I nestled the arms around the headstone, so hopefully it won't blow away.

I realized a lot of things at that moment. First, that somehow, somehow, I have to find a way to put this all in perspective. Secondly, I realized that I felt colder because I was no longer wearing a shirt, and also because the tears streaming down my face were being slapped at by the cold wind. And I realized that I should go home and give my son hugs and kisses before I took him trick-or-treating because we never know when someone we love so much will be taken away from us so suddenly.

I had a football-sized lump in my throat, my heart had broken again, and I made a promise to myself that I'd get back here and see Brook again next year. I put my car in gear, and squinted through the tears to see the headstone "Brook Warren Berringer, 1973-1996" a final time. And I said:

"MissU18." ■

**Bob Schaller** covers the Huskers for the Scottsbluff Star-Herald. He has also written several books, including "Touchdown Tommie" and "Roar of Silence: The Kenny Walker Story." Bob can be reached at schallerrc@aol.com.