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Nigerian immigrants' sons an inspiration to Texas Longhorns

By JIMMY BURCH

jburch@star-telegram.com

AUSTIN — The road to the Red River Rivalry does not usually lead through Nigeria.

But for five Texas football players, all sons of Nigerian immigrants, that is the case heading into Saturday's matchup in the Cotton Bowl between the fifth-ranked Longhorns and No. 1 Oklahoma.

The only seniors in that group, defensive end Brian Orakpo and tailback Chris Ogbonnaya, are expected to play major roles. The rest will be reserves, or unavailable because of injury, when the Longhorns and Sooners meet to thin the number of undefeated teams in the South Division standings.

Orakpo, the Big 12 leader in sacks (six), said he is "a man on a mission" this season. He considers 2008 his opportunity "to make up for lost time" after playing most of last season on an injured right knee that limited his effectiveness.

As he pushed himself through grueling workouts to rehabilitate the knee, Orakpo said he looked to his parents for inspiration. They arrived in Houston "with nothing," Orakpo said, but worked "24/7" to earn enough money to put themselves through college at Texas Southern University. Today, his father is a car dealer and his mother owns a rehabilitation center.

"I know where I come from. I'm a harder worker and a better person because of it," said Orakpo, who learned to appreciate his heritage during a trip to Nigeria after graduating from Houston's Lamar High School in 2004.

Orakpo (6-foot-4, 260 pounds) recalled seeing "huge poverty" in a country where most residents travel along dirt roads and many villages lack electricity or running water. During the visit, Orakpo lost more than 20 pounds, causing him to report for his first fall camp at Texas weighing only 210 pounds.

"I learned you don't drink the bad water," said Orakpo, who was redshirted in 2004.

Ogbonnaya, the Longhorns' scheduled starter at tailback for Saturday's game against Oklahoma, joined Orakpo as a member of the 2004 signing class. The two have become close friends, in part because of the Nigerian heritage they share with three other teammates: defensive end Sam Acho, linebacker Emmanuel Acho and safety Ishie Oduegwu, a Denton Ryan graduate who will not play Saturday because of shoulder surgery in August.

Among that group, Ogbonnaya said the five share a heightened work ethic instilled in them by their immigrant parents.

"It's just one of those things that we take a lot of pride in," said Ogbonnaya, whose father, Kalu, is a doctor in Houston. "Our parents are very hard-working individuals, and I speak from experience with my own father. He came here in 1976 as an immigrant. There's been a lot of adversity [to overcome]. Everything I know of life from him ... is something I take a lot of pride in and have great respect for."

Ogbonnaya saw the adversity, up close and personal, during a 1999 trip to Otutu, the Nigerian village where his father was raised. To get there from Houston, Ogbonnaya took a 16-hour flight to Lagos, Nigeria's largest city. From there, an 11-hour bus ride — much of it on dirt roads — carried him to Otutu, where his father leads medical missions on an annual basis. Ogbonnaya called the experience "eye-opening."

"In '99, their government was run by the military," Ogbonnaya said. "So we were on buses with people that had guns. You could be stopped at any time on the road for any reason. A lot of the buildings are run down, especially in my dad's village. There's no electricity. Recently, they just put in water. ... It's a different experience. You take a lot of things for granted living in the [United] States. It's very different when you go over to a third-world country. But it was something I needed to see. I needed to understand my dad's heritage and where he came from and where I came from."

Ogbonnaya cited lessons learned during his journey as an important step in shaping the drive that has allowed him to complete one degree (history) and close in on a second (communications) while contributing to a football team that is in contention for a national championship. In last week's 38-14 victory over Colorado, Ogbonnaya led the Longhorns in rushing yards (71) and receiving yards (116).

Texas cornerback Ryan Palmer, a senior from Arlington Bowie, pointed to the influence of Orakpo and Ogbonnaya as a factor in creating a "blue-collar mind-set" that has allowed these Longhorns to succeed despite the presence of 13 freshmen who are expected to contribute against Oklahoma. Linebacker Rashad Bobino agreed, citing the Acho brothers — who have combined for 16 tackles in spot duty this season — as further proof there is something special about UT's Nigerian connection.

"Those guys can play," Bobino said. "I don't know what it is. I guess they're just built differently. ... They work hard in everything they do."

Much to the delight of Texas coach Mack Brown.

"All of the kids that have family ties [to Nigeria] have incredible work ethic," Brown said. "Somebody's instilling discipline in them because they make good grades and they play well. They definitely have their thing together."

"Obviously, they've been in situations with their family where they've had to rely on each other more."

Now, the Longhorns are relying on them.

Nigerian notables A look at Texas' five players of Nigerian heritage and their production this season:

Player	Pos.	Class.	Key stats
Brian Orakpo	DE	Sr.	19 tackles, 8 tackles for losses, 6 sacks, 2 forced fumbles
Chris Ogbonnaya	RB	Sr.	93 rushing yards, 244 receiving yards, 4 TDs
Sam Acho	DE	Soph.	8 tackles, 1 sack, 3 pressures 1 forced fumble
Emmanuel Acho	LB	Fr.	8 tackles, including 2 on special teams
Ishie Oduegwu	S	Jr.	Has not played (shoulder surgery in August)