

Tuesday, November 8, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Red, Blue And Pigskin will again not be around this week because the Utes have won their last two games, and I'm an extremely superstitious fella.

Okay so that's not true, but you better believe I'm scared to death that I'm jinxing the Utes, in what has become an surprisingly scary game.

A lot has happened since last we met. Utes got their first conference win, and followed it up with a brilliant defensive effort to secure their first conference road victory and first conference win streak. It also served as the first win streak of 2011.

BYU had their last chance to legitimize their eventual 8-4, or 9-3 record, and failed. During that game Riley Nelson managed to blow it for the Cougars, while at the same time proving their should be no QB competition in camp next season.

However, this week's will be spent in a mode of remembrance, as a sideline incident during the Weber State vs. Montana State game has led to the retirement of the man responsible for getting the Utes where they are now. A Costly Loss

In the opening moments of last weekends 44-24 loss by the Weber State Wildcats to the Montana State Bobcats, there was a sideline collision that involved Weber State head coach Ron McBride. After the collision, coach Mac shrugged it off, let know one know he was hurt, and continued coaching the game, even seeing his Wildcats takes a 24-20 lead into half time.

After the game, we found out exactly how bad the collision was. Coach Mac tore his Anterior Cruciate Ligament, and sustained a Micro Fracture in his knee.

Today, the damage gets even worse, as Coach McBride is going to announce that the end of this season, will also be the end of a coaching career that began in 1965.

There And Back Again

During his tenure McBride has been around the country, but always seemed to find his way back to the Beehive State. During his career McBride coached in the Pac-10, the Big Ten, and in SEC country, but he always seemed to come back to the state of Utah. He had four different tenures in this state, three of them with the Utes, and the one that just ended with the Wildcats.

His first tenure with the Utes was at Offensive Coordinator during the Wayne Howard era. It was during this tenure that he witnessed, what he would later recall as one of the moments of the BYU/Utah rivalry that left a bitter taste in his mouth. This of course, was when despite sitting comfortably in the 4th quarter with a 38-8 lead, and having previously pulled his starters, BYU Coach LaVell Edwards was alerted that starting QB Marc Wilson was on the verge of setting an NCAA record for passing yards. Edwards would then re-insert Wilson to allow him to break the record.

While it never bothered Coach Mac the way it did Howard, in many interviews since then Coach Mac points out this moment as one of his least favorite rivalry moments.

After Wayne Howard resigned McBride went to Wisconsin as their OL coach, until Jim Fassel brought him back for a couple years as the OL coach at Utah. This tenure would only last for two seasons before he'd go to Arizona for three seasons.

Then came 1990. Jim Fassel was released as head coach, and Utah Football was beyond rock bottom. Utah football was so low, that the requirements for success at the job wasn't to win bowl games. McBride described the state of the Utah Football program as such:

Utah was a soft program, an underachieving program and a program that was going nowhere. Their expectations

weren't that high. When they hired me they said, 'Well, if you cannot embarrass us against BYU and be in about the middle of the league, and be respectable you can stay here as long as you want.' The bar was low. The expectations were they just didn't want to get embarrassed on Saturday.

Ironically, McBride did so well, and raised expectations at Utah so much, that when he went through a few years of accomplishing exactly what he said above (Being middle of the league, respectable, and not being embarrassed by BYU, it wasn't enough anymore, and Utah let him go.

McBride would spend two seasons in SEC country as the Linebacker's coach for Kentucky, before coming back to Utah as the head coach of the Weber State wildcats. There he's spent the last 7 seasons making the Wildcats a playoff contender in a competitive Big Sky conference. He won the Big Sky Championship in 2008, and took the Wildcats to the playoffs in 2008, and 2009.

Changing a culture

In 1992 the Utes made it to their first bowl game in 28 years, a 31-28 loss to Washington State. They would follow it up in 1993 with a 28-21 blow loss to USC.

1993 was special for another reason. That was the first 34-31 year. It was also the first Utah victory in Provo since 1971.

I remember going to an early season game in 1994 with my dad, where we got two T-shirts with the slogan saying 3rd down and Bowl. Simply going to a bowl game wasn't enough, the Utes wanted to win.

No one knew how special that 1994 season was going to be, but an early season upset of eventual Rose Bowl bound Oregon Ducks, started everyone dreaming. Then came week 7. The undefeated and 18th ranked Utes, met up with undefeated and 12th ranked Colorado State. In what was an exciting matchup, the Utes held a 38-31 lead. The Colorado State Rams were driving down the field to tie the game up. With 7 seconds left, the Rams were knocking on the door for a TD. What happened next is a play I will always remember.

Colorado State's QB dropped back to pass, and saw his WR in the end zone, and let his pass fly. Instead of a touchdown for the Rams, Utah DB Harold Lusk sealed his place in Utah lore by stepping in front of the pass and taking it back 100 yards for a Utah TD and the game was sealed.

Unfortunately for Utah, they suffered two inexplicable victories a couple weeks later. These losses were the type of losses that would become far too frequent during McBride's tenure, and was part of the reason his teams never made the leap. But after starting the season 8-0, before two sudden losses to New Mexico, and Air Force, Utah found itself ranked 21, and matching up with a 20th ranked BYU team, eager for vengeance after the previous year's defeat.

Instead the Holy War was officially a rivalry again, and the numbers 34-31 forever became ingrained in State Lore.

That bowl season, Utah finally got it's long awaited bowl victory.

Planting The Seeds

That 1994 season would end up being the high point of McBride's tenure, but the roots created during those early years, eventually would spread to much greater heights.

1994 was significant for another reason. That was the year that McBride hired a 35 year old up and coming defensive coordinator away from Idaho State to become his Defensive Line coach. In 1995, that line coach would later become McBride's defensive coordinator.

If you need any proof that the roots of the McBride era are what would influence Utah today in the Pac-12, that defensive line coach should provide all the evidence required. After all, he's now the coach of the Utes.

MAFU Forever

While roaming sidelines or practice fields, a common site, is to see McBride sporting a ball cap adorned with the acronym M.A.F.U. The acronym stands for mental toughness, attitude, fanatical effort and unity. It was this philosophy that transformed the Utah football program from the joke it was, to the team that would go to 6 bowl games during his tenure, and finish 1994 ranked #8 in the nation.

This attitude could be seen by the types of recruit McBride would go after. Specifically it was the setup of the "Poly Pipeline" that truly built Utah's success. McBride worked the Islands. He went after the polynesian players, and brought them to Utah. With them came an attitude, and an unmatched toughness.

So much so, that when McBride's replacement Urban Meyer was hired, then defensive coordinator, Kyle Whittingham took him aside and gave him, what Meyer would later call, the best advice he received. Whittingham told Meyer to take a trip to Tonga, but when he got there, don't knock on any recruits doors, don't talk football, don't do any recruiting whatsoever. Instead, Whittingham told him, simply become a part of the community.

Meyer listened to Whittingham, and was able to land some major recruits from the Polynesian culture.

It was this philosophy of M.A.F.U. that helped Utah McBride send over 70 players into the NFL. Names such as Jamal Anderson, Mike Anderson, Kevin and Andre Dyson, Luther Ellis, Steve Smith, and Jordan Gross, along with many more.

Rival, Opposition, Friend

One cannot think of the Ron McBride era of Utah football, and not immediately think of how he brought back the Holy War rivalry. I'm not sure that any rivalry that would become as competitive, and closely matched, as the Holy War, could ever have had the opposing coaches be such friends.

On the field, the two wanted nothing more than to defeat the other. In the 11 years that both LaVell and McBride were on the opposing sidelines, the Holy War saw 6 BYU victories, and 5 Utah victories. Keep in mind, this was a rivalry that saw Utah win a measly two times in the 17 previous years. Of Course, McBride likes to remind everyone, that it should have been 6 victories for Utah, as Staley did fumble on that final drive of LaVell's final miracle.

Yet even as the two coaches become fierce rivals and opposition on the field of play they became even bigger friends off the field. They are frequently linked together. When the two get together, you can bet that they will start ribbing one another, and start remembering fond moments of the rivalry.

It's a relationship that is rare among such rivals, and a relationship that is definitely gone from the current iteration of the rivalry.

Goodbye To An Icon

At the end of this season, when McBride hangs up the headset he will be saying goodbye to a game he loved. At the Utah vs Oregon State game, Mad Giggler and I were talking about how much McBride loves coaching. McBride will always have a place in the hearts of all Utah fans.

Even moreso, when he steps down, the state of Utah will be losing a Football Icon. You could argue, that there is only one other person, to have done so much for Football in this state. There are only a handful of people who have done as much for sports in the state of Utah as Coach McBride.

In 2006 and 2007 the curse the cost McBride his job, seemed destined to cost Kyle Whittingham his job. A frequent joke was that Whittingham was Ron McBride 2.0. Coach Mac got Utah as high as he could take it, and Urban Meyer came in and took them to a whole new level. Going back to simply being respectable wasn't acceptable any longer. In everything one does in life, one should strive to make the situation much better than it was before you got there. McBride certainly did this for Utah.

Make no mistake, without Ron McBride, there is no Urban Meyer in Utah. Many members of that magical Fiesta Bowl team were recruited by coach Mac, including Alex Smith. McBride left a foundation. Urban Meyer built the house, and Whittingham has continued the remodeling project, but Utah football is the house that Ron built.

In a way, as McBride as the curtain closes on his coaching career, it's fitting Utah begins it's new era in the Pac-12 with a team that is most reminiscent of a McBride team. McBride would love a running back like John White who only gets stronger as he gets that 26th, 27th, or 34th, and 35th carry. McBride would love to watch as his defense dominated, and secured victories. This is a team that has started to win games with M.A.F.U. The team that we'll take Rice-Eccles Stadium this Saturday against new conference mate UCLA, is a team that would do Ron McBride proud.

More than just a football icon, McBride was a great person. You'll be hard pressed to find anyone talk badly about McBride. When McBride recruited a kid, he wasn't recruiting them to join a football team, he was recruiting them to join

a family. Even now, McBride isn't content to just go off into the sunset. Determined to uphold the promises he made to families of his most recent recruits, he has asked to be able to stay around the Weber State football program for the next few years. He wants to be there for the kids.

Mac loved football. It's what he's done for 46 years. Even a heart attack couldn't keep him away. Sports fans in this state, whether you are red, blue, or purple are better for him having been here.

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