

Thursday, October 30, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

What a difference a single month makes. A month ago, the Cougars were undefeated, and fans were dreaming of Heisman trophies and national championships. An October full of tricks later, and the Cougars have lost 4 straight. Lost numerable personnel, including most importantly Taysom Hill. Now the Coaches are on the verge of losing the locker room.

Basically the last month went from tweets like this, to a hypocrisy filled, self contradicting "open letter" like this, by the same loud mouthed former player.

After the final weekend in September, a single loss had Ute fans on a ledge, ready to jump. They were ready to get Whittingham out of town immediately. The Utes still couldn't win a close game. They were calling for Kendal Thompson to replace Travis Wilson. In general Ute fans were ready to give up on any chance of a bowl game. Three dramatic, last minute victories later, and the Utes are highly ranked, and bowl eligible. Fans got their chance to look at Thompson and immediately wanted Wilson back. Now some are even (crazily) whispering that "P" word, despite being 17th in the initial rankings.

But October is the time of scares and nightmares, so fittingly, the Utes end October with a really brutal trick. Submitted Without Comment

There is NO way the utes get to 6-6 this year. Another bowlless year for the MUSS and the Utah Man (or Fan, whatever). - Rhett - August 28, 2014

I Really Don't Know What To Say Anymore

At this point I really have nothing new to add to the trouble in Provo. Another week, another dismal performance. It shouldn't be this bad. The Cougars aren't this bad. I'm even inclined to say that Bronco isn't this bad a coach. Something is wrong in Cougar-ville. It's gotten so bad, that I don't really want to continue talking about it because, how often can you repeat the same thing, and I also don't want to feel like I'm piling on.

Bronco even took over the defensive gameplan and play calling duties, though it didn't do much good. Afterwards he admitted it left him too distracted to be effective.

The players are all saying the right things in the media. "Most fun week of practice." "Leaders will step up." Although it doesn't matter what is said, it's what they do. On the field last week it look like they quit.

Of course the last time the Cougars were absolutely throttled, and completely quit on the field, they followed it up by winning 9 of 10 games.

Time To Rise Up

This week the Cougars try to rebound yet again with a matchup at Middle Tennessee State. The Blue Raiders are 5-3 on the season. A win will get them bowl eligible. Middle Tennessee isn't particularly impressive in any one are, but they are a frequent passing team. Middle Tennessee is second in the country in pass plays of 20 yards or more, so they might just be able to exploit the weak link of the Cougars weakest unit.

Though, much like two of the last three weeks, this is a game the Cougars should still win. If the team is really as unified as they say they are, they will be. If not, then another loss could send the team into a tailspin worse than what they are. The good news is they still have Unlv and Savannah State to play, so a losing record is extremely unlikely.

Back And Forth They Go

The Utes and Trojans battled it out, in a game that saw both teams squander opportunities to put the game away. Twice Utah lost a fumble on the Usc 1. The Trojans were able to move the ball at will in the first quarter, but an adjustment by the Utah defense held the Trojans to just 17 yards of offense in the 2nd quarter.

Running, as expected, was extremely tough for both teams. The top 2 running backs in the Pac-12 conference just couldn't find any room. Fittingly, they both ended up with near identical lines. Buck Allen rushed 27 times for Usc gaining 101 yards. Booker meanwhile ground out 102 yards on 26 carries and a touchdown, although he did have a huge fumble on the 1 yard line. The big difference in the running game, though, is that Allen had more success in the first half, before Utah clamped down, Booker only had 33 yards going into halftime, before wearing down the Usc defense.

Much like you'd expect from a game between the 19th and 20th team, when one team would make a move, the other team would respond. A "you need to learn to play to the whistle," brain fart of a lateral led to a Utah score just two plays in. Usc answered by driving down the field to tie it up. Late in the 2nd quarter, Utah kicked a field goal to make it 10-7, and the Trojans respond by taking the ensuing kick off to the house.

It went that way the whole game, and not just on scores. Utah gets a huge punt return from Kaelin Clay, the Trojans responded by stripping the ball from Tim Patrick at the 1. Utah responded then by taking advantage of a bad throw by Kessler and intercepting the ball, which led to a TD.

After all that, the back and forth, the big plays, the fumbles, the fantastic defense on both sides. After the Utes finding an offensive rhythm, the Trojans led 21-17, about 2:20 to go in the game. I'm still shocked at what happened next.

A Game Of Inches

Sure it's a cliché, but the month of October has shown just how true it is. Ucla's second field goal is a few more inches in and it's good giving the Bruins a win.

Any game that goes to OT, you can always point to a few plays that were a few inches short. Any of them could have helped turn Utah's win against Oregon State into a loss.

Same goes for Utah's loss at Washington State. Andy Phillips boinked a field goal off the upright in the third quarter. Just a few more inches, and Utah's undefeated.

However, no scenario "of inches" is more incredible than what happened Saturday in front of the largest crowd in Rice-Eccles history.

Utah is had just it's final time out. Usc has the ball at the Utah 28 yard line, up by 4. 4th down and 3. A first down essentially clinches the game, as the Utes wouldn't be able to get the ball back with more than about 10 seconds left. With the wind swirling, and his field goal kicker not having attempted a field goal in two weeks, Trojan head coach Steve Sarkisian decided to just put the game away.

The play call was perfect, with the Utah defense obviously focused on Buck Allen, the Utes pitched it to WR Nelson Agholor on the sweep. Only Nate Orchard stayed with the ball, and tried to spread push him wide, but it was clear he could get the corner, so Orchard attempted to dive, but couldn't get there. Agholor turned the corner and sprinted for a 5 yard game, and a game clinching first down.

Only, in an actual case of a phenomenal play call, and poor execution, Agholor didn't get the first down. In a moment of extremely poor field awareness, Agholor stepped out of bounds, 1 yard shy of the first down. To make it worse, he didn't step out of bounds because the momentum from his cut. He had already made his cut, and was moving forward, he had gained the corner, he just stepped out of bounds.

Travis Takes Control

Suddenly the Utes had new life, but could Travis take advantage. First a quick 9 yard pass, Booker gets a first, suddenly the Utes are moving the ball down the field. They crossed midfield. Next a huge catch by Dres Andersen (his last ever for Utah) followed by a 2 point wrestling takedown on the sideline. A short pass to the middle of the field with :30 left put the ball at USC 19 yard line.

The clock is running, and rather than panic, Travis calmly gets to the line, and snaps the ball. Only this wasn't the Travis from the Ucla game, and the Oregon State game. This was Scorpion Travis. The rush forced Wilson out of the pocket, and he scrambled for a first down, but instead of going out of bounds he kept running, to the 3 yard line and took off airborne. While the play would eventually be ruled out of bounds at the 1/2 yard line with 17 seconds to go, it was the kind of leadership the Utes had been missing from the QB position the last two games.

Two plays later, Wilson connected with Clay for a Touchdown. A Kickoff and a sack later, the Utes had beaten the Trojans.

View From The Red Zone

Going into the game, the fact that the atmosphere was going to be electric was obvious. Add in the mix that it was the Blackout game. Then figure in Utes "shiny" new helmets, in both the literal and browncoat sense of the word. Finally add College Football royalty in USC, and it's no surprise that the game was played in front of the largest crowd in Rice-Eccles history. For once, the stadium was actually too full to allow the Student Section and the Northeast corner to push down, leaving the large blank spot.

USC defensive end Leonard Williams is arguably the best player in college football. He's in the top 2 on pretty much everyone's big draft board. So it says a lot about how the Utes were able to handle him, that his biggest contribution on the night was interacting with the North End Zone. After a punt left the Utes with the ball on their own 10 in the third quarter, the game went to a media timeout. Waiting for the game to start, the Trojans defense was around the ball, at which point Williams responded to some heckling by the crowd with a taunt where he would lift his arms in the air.

The North End Zone responded with the same, and Williams responded back. This continued for pretty much the rest of the game whenever the USC Defense was in the area, and play was stopped Williams and the crowd would feed off of each other. Almost a week later, I'm still not entirely sure what was going on.

P.S. This was a great victory. I'm not so sure it was a rush the field worthy victory. After all we have beaten USC in the past, though never as a conference mate, and not since 2001. Plus we were the higher ranked team. That said, many of the Utah players liked it.

It's Not All Good

Sadly not everything from Saturday is good. News broke this week that at some point in the game, Senior WR Dres Andersen injured his knee and will be done for the season, and therefore his career. 4 years ago I wrote how excited I was to have Andersen on the team, because his dad was my favorite player as a little kid growing up. By watching Dres, I would be reminded of a time when I loved the game of football, and didn't really care much about the intricacies of the game.

The fact that Dres evolved into a big play receiver for the Utes didn't hurt. There are many memorable plays from Dres. His catch and run during the 54-10 blowout game, when it was still close. His big TD against Stanford last year. The TD against Michigan that essentially broke it open. Yes Dres struggled with drops at times, but he was by far my favorite player of the last 4 years, and I'm sad that he will no longer suit up for the Utes. I knew I'd have to say good bye to watching him this year, but it's 5 (and actually 6 now that the Utes are Bowl Eligible) games too early.

Face The Heat

So anyone with half a brain, knows the Cougars are still the Utes rival. In conference the Pac-12 is trying to tell us it's Colorado by shoving the Rocky Mountain Rumble down our throats.

But for me, when it comes to conference play, there isn't a team I dislike more in the past 4 years than Arizona State. ASU in one of three teams the Utes haven't beaten since joining the conference. (Oregon (0-1)/Washington (0-2)) The Sun Devils absolutely destroyed the Utes the first two games. The Sun Devils +52 point differential over the three games is the largest point differential the Utes have given up. Last years game was a 1 point heart breaker, even though it felt like the Devils were never in danger.

On top of all that they've done it with such an attitude as though Utah doesn't belong on the field with them (and at this point it's deserved.)

Two years ago when the Utes went to Tempe it basically turned into Taylor Kelly's coming out party. Fittingly after missing multiple games, Taylor Kelly is expected to come back and start again this week. If Kelly struggles, ASU would have no problem going to his backup, Mike Berkovici, who has been playing stellar since the thumping they received against the Bruins in his first start.

It's great that the Utes are now bowl eligible. It's now officially time to adjust expectations and goals. The next goal should be a winning conference record for Utah, which requires two more wins. They won't be easy to come by, as 3 of the next 4 opponents are all ranked, and the unranked team is Stanford. It starts this week against Arizona State. As

hinted to above Utah is as close to 3-4 as they are to their 6-1 record. The Utes have been walking a fine line all season.

Utah needs to continue to rely on Booker. The Sun Devil run defense has been a bit weak at time, as they are replacing 9 starters from last year's squad. Assuming he can manage not to fumble, the more the Utes can rely on Booker, the more it allows the Utah passing game to continue the rhythm they found last week. Consistency will be key. We've seen Wilson get in grooves before, but he's not really ever been able to sustain it. Contrary to popular opinion Wilson didn't outright put the QB controversy to bed last week. He merely gave it a dose of NyQuil. If Wilson can come out and move the offense like he did against the Trojans, than it'll be time to start singing a lullaby.

Enough With The Replays

I know that every play is eligible for review, and that the ultimate goal is to get it right. This is doubly important on scores and turnovers. Same goes in the NFL.

Anyone else notice though, that it seems like we're stopping games and going to reviews on painfully obvious plays anymore. Especially on scores.

Take for example last weeks game against Usc, and the winning catch. Kaelin Clay was a yard deep in the end zone. Grabbed the ball with two hands, secured it enough that the ball didn't move an inch as the Usc player rolled him over and tried to take it from him. It's clearly a TD. Sure enough the Refs call for a replay.

I'm all for calling replays on close plays, but stop wasting our time with replays of obvious plays. Just because it's a scoring play, it doesn't make it less obvious.

This goes for the Nfl too.

What's This? Two Games On Saturday

For the first time in a month, both the Utes and Cougars play on the same Saturday. Also somebody find the old guy from the "not in the afternoon, anymore" press conference, because for once the Cougars are in the afternoon. The Cougars and Blue Raiders will kick off at 1:30 MST, and will be broadcast on Cbs Sports Network.

Utah meanwhile, clearly is not in the afternoon anymore. In fact the game kicks off late enough that it has a chance to send a ripple into the space-time continuum.

Kickoff is at 9p.m. MST, or 11p.m. EST. Technically it's Eastern Daylight Time. Sunday morning Daylight Savings Time comes to an end. The official switch happens when the clocks go from 1:59 a.m. to 2:00 a.m., when it'll revert an hour back and repeat the 1:00 a.m. hour. If somebody scores during the 3rd quarter, it will most likely be during that 1:00 Daylight Savings Time hour on the east coast. Games usually last more than 3 hours, meaning it should go past the 2:00 a.m hour, and therefore repeat the 1:00 hour. If a person scores during the 3rd quarter, it is feasible that they could score again towards the end of the game. We would then have 1 person score twice at the exact same time on the clock.

You'll be able to watch it all unfold, and possibly time unfold, on ESPN.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 06:30