

Wednesday, December 16, 2015

Red, Blue And Pigskin

On September 21, 2013, when the Utes left Rice-Eccles Stadium - South after their 4th consecutive victory in the Holy War, there was a sense that when these two teams met up in 2016, one or both of the coaches would no longer be at their school.

After all, Kyle Whittingham was coming off a 5-7 season, and would end up having his second consecutive 5-7 season that year. Meanwhile Bronco Mendenhall had seemed to reach his ceiling of what could be accomplished with Byu, which was far short of fan expectations, and Mendenhall's own National Championship comments. Plus Mendenhall had never really seemed to like the Byu fans.

Last year it seemed like both coaches might be gone, as rumors of discord between Whittingham and Athletic Director Chris Hill swirled, and Bronco Mendenhall applied for the open Wisconsin job. A job that was only open, because (supposedly) Gary Andersen threw his hat in the Oregon State ring when they called him as a referral for Mendenhall.

Then on December 4th, Mendenhall announced he was going to Virginia. It was a move that while guaranteeing the two coaches wouldn't be on the field in 2016 together, it help put in motion, wheels to get them on the field one last time. Closing Out Bronco

Bronco's departure brings to an end a successful tenure at Byu, that saw him help rescue the school from the dark, scandalous days of Gary Crowton, and saw early success with two undefeated in conference seasons, topped with two miraculous victories against Utah in 2006, and 2007. After 3 seasons, Byu was coming off of back to back 10 win seasons, and was a popular preseason pick to be a BCS Buster in 2008.

What came next was a Quest for Perfection that ended up making a lot of Bronco's BYU imperfections start to come to light.

Over the next 8 years, Byu never again approached the level in 2006 and 2007, and instead the rest of his tenure became known for consistently getting 8-10 wins through inconsistency on the field play against lower level teams, a bizarre, infatuation with RB's playing QB, never quite living up to potential, and a struggle with the off the field PR aspect of being head coach.

What happens over the next few years will tell us a lot about both Byu and their place in the new world of College Football, and about Bronco himself. Was Byu and it's restrictions a hindrance to Bronco, or was the majority of his success built on the back of weak competition? Can Byu finally break through, or is this their lot in life, to simply be among the best of the rest? We saw what happened when fans and boosters in Nebraska ran off a coach because he couldn't win 10 games a year, and they were tired of consistently winning 9 games. What if the next guy can't match Bronco?

Next Man Up

The big question of course is who the next guy will be? Byu wouldn't be Byu without restrictions, and the Head Coach is no different. As such the list of candidates is pretty narrow. Once you get past the unrealistic, keep dreaming top 3 of fans of Andy Reid (the white whale of Byu coaching hopes), Darrell Bevell (Not jumping from NFL Coordinator to Byu head coach when he has public NFL head coach aspirations, and Kyle Whittingham (Just keep dreaming, but I find this funny on so many levels when you consider how much Byu fans have been bashing him the last 11 years), most people think the top 3 is as follows:

1. Ken Niuamatalolo. - He was a prominent figure in the movie Meet the Mormons. He's the current head coach at the Naval Academy, as well as their winningest head coach of all time, and with an 8-0 record against Army, he clearly knows how to beat a rival. He's dealt with being an independent in the past, before Navy joined the AAC. He also knows how to recruit with restrictions, as the Service Academies have even more recruiting restrictions than Byu. He also comes from a place where the words Tradition, Honor, and Spirit, actually have real meaning, as opposed to being catchy phony buzz words thrown out that are completely different than the way the team plays and is coached. Questions around him, are would he bring the triple option that he's been involved with for the last 15 years at the Naval academy, and would he be able to go from somewhere with limited fan expectations, to a place where the expectations

are unrealistic and out of control. It is also though that it would be a bit of a pay cut for him to come to Byu. He was in town on Monday, and left without accepting the job. While nothing official has come from his camp, it's looking more and more like he will be staying at Navy.

2. Kilani Sitake - Former Byu RB and Current Oregon State Defensive Coordinator. Spent 6 years as the Defensive Coordinator at Utah under Kyle Whittingham where his teams were always among the best defenses in the country. In 2014, his last at Utah, the Utes led the country with sacks. As Utah has struggled offensively the last few years, it was the defensive side of the ball that they could rely on. Sitake does have a good relationship with the Polynesian community. With Kilani the main question is if he's ready to be a head coach. There's always a risk when hiring a first time coordinator of whether they can make the jump or not. Also, how much of his success at Utah is because it's the Whittingham defense? Sitake only has 1 year as a defensive coordinator away from Whittingham. That was this past year at Oregon State. The results weren't so good, but he also inherited a bare cupboard, and suffered through many injuries. Add into it that the Utah defense actually improved, despite losing quite a bit of talent, from 2014 to 2015 and it's enough to question exactly how good is Sitake?

3. Lance Anderson - Current Stanford "Willie Shaw Director of Defense" and Outside Linebackers Coach. He's been with the Cardinal for the past 9 years having come with Jim Harbaugh from the San Diego. While he's only been Stanford's "Director of Defense" for 2 years, he's been in charge of the Linebackers for 6, and has seen many of his players lead what is typically a stout unit for a defense that has helped propel, and keep Stanford back in the nations elite. He's very familiar with recruiting in the State of Utah, as he's been the lead recruiter on many of Stanford's biggest gets from the state over the past few years. Like Sitake, he's never been a head coach, and only has 3 years as a defensive coordinator (2 with Stanford, 1 with Bucknell), but unlike Sitake we know it's his system.

If it's not one of these 3 guys, I'm not sure who's on the list. Maybe Tom Holmoe could always return to the coaching ranks. Whoever it is, they won't have much time to get acclimated, as 2016, and 2017 are, on paper, their toughest schedules ever, and will give Byu a taste of what an actual P5 schedule is like.

Once More Into The Breach

Before we can say goodbye though, the fates have aligned, and Utah and Byu will meet in the Vegas Bowl. (By fates aligning of course I mean, ESPN maneuvered and politicked like crazy to arrange the meeting.) While it sucks for Utah as they clearly deserved a better bowl game, and one of the fun things about bowl games is seeing two teams who typically don't play each other get matched up (as opposed to two teams who play each other twice over their next three games now.)

But ultimately, it is the Holy War, and while my thoughts on whether the game should still be played regularly has changed, if and when it's played, it's still a game I really enjoy when it is played. It is one of the best rivalries in the nation, and this year it will actually be featured to the nation. It's considered one of the top 10 bowl games of the year.

It's time to break out the Holy War in Sin City Comparison.

Schedule

The schedules for the two teams typically vary a bit during the year, but in 2015 they actually had 4 games against the same opponent. Both teams played Michigan with Utah winning at home, and Byu getting trounced on the road. Ucla, with both teams losing, Byu by 1 in the Rose Bowl, Utah by 8 at home, with both being games Ucla should have lost. Against Utah State and Fresno State, both teams won with Utah facing the Bulldogs on the road, while the Cougars faced the Aggies on the road.

Byu's schedule was top heavy, while Utah's schedule was balanced all year, and from top to bottom was clearly the more difficult. Both teams ended up 9-3 on the season with Utah's wins being more impressive, while the worst loss is a tie between Arizona and Missouri.

Advantage: Utah

Statistics

It's hard to compare statistics since the variety of opponents is so varied, but we do what we can. Defensively both teams give up an equal 21.8 points per game, while the Cougars score more at 34.2 points per game compared to Utah's 30.4

Yardage wise the Cougars gain 428 per game versus the Utes 376.8. The Cougars do more on through the air with a passing/rushing breakdown of 294.9 to 133.1. The Utes on the other hand are very balance with 189.1 through the air, to 187.8 rushing.

Defensively the teams are similar with the Cougars edging out the Utes 358.1 to 365.2. The Cougars allow 213.3 through the air, and 144.8 on the ground, while the Utes allow 253.4 in the air, and only allow an extremely stout 111.8 on the ground.

At first glance the Cougars seem to have the better numbers, but when you look at the competition it's probably a slight edge to Utah. We'll split the difference.

Advantage: Push

Quarterback

The Utes are led by Sr. Travis Wilson while the Cougars have RS Freshman Tanner Mangum. Funny note, Mangum is actually 3 months older.

While Wilson may have the advantage in experience, that's about the end of it for him, well that and possibly heart. Wilson is what he is. He's a warrior who has done a lot for Utah during his time. There is no doubt he has poured his heart and soul into the Utes, and he's been around for some of the biggest victories in school history. But he's also erratic, and can easily be taken out of the game mentally. He's not a quarterback who will lose you games, but he is a quarterback that will frustrate a team with decisions and drives that just stall.

Mangum on the other hand is a freshman in experience, and at many times has played that way, and made those freshman mistakes. But talent wise, he's about equal to what Wilson is, and mentally he seems to be much stronger. He doesn't get rattled very easily, but he can be confused by the defense.

All in all with the game on the line with either of these QB's it's a coin flip whether it'll be good or bad.

The other area that Wilson has the advantage is running the ball. He may not ever look the most graceful, but when the giraffe starts to run it, he's deceptively quick, especially against non P5 opponents where he typically has his best games running.

Advantage: Push

Running Backs

Even without DeVontae Booker this position is the biggest advantage for either team. When Booker went down Joe Williams responded by averaging over 150 yards a game, showing that while he might not be as good as Booker, the drop off won't be nearly as bad as many were expecting. The one area where the drop off is bad, though, is ball security, as Booker has shown an tendency to cough it up. It's also unclear how well Williams does coming out of the back field.

For Byu, their running game went to a committee basis as the year went on due to departures and injuries. The leader on the season was Algernon Brown who is more of a bruising style running back. Outside of Brown, it's been Adam Hine, Francis Bernard, and Nate Carter, with none of them really ever becoming the guy. Going against a defense like the Utes, it's not expected much that the Byu running game will carry the day. There is speculation that incoming Washington State transfer Squally Canada may see some time, similar to the way the Utes were able to use Jason Thompson last year, because of the timing of the game exhausting the 1 year transfer sit out.

Advantage: Utah

Pass Catchers

With neither team really using their TE much, this year they are combined together. Byu brings a crop of Big Tall WR's in Mitch Matthews, Devon Balcmon and Nick Kurtz. While all three have been productive throughout the year yardage wise, none of them are really fast, or great route runners, instead preferring to rely on their size to get jump balls in big chunks. As the field gets shorter the Byu WR's really lose their effectiveness. The only one of the three who have managed to turn the yardage production into scores is Mitch Matthews, who also thinks he is interfered with on every single play (even when he's not the target.)

For Utah though, their WR's lose effectiveness on pretty much the entirety of the field. Their best WR is slot receiver Britain Covey, but he's dealing with a high ankle sprain, and it is unclear whether he'll play. Outside of Covey, the best option for the Utes is Harrison Handley, who likes to work the middle from his TE position, and Kenneth Scott, who was probably among the conference leaders in drawing pass interference penalties, which is really strange since he's not an over the top threat. The rest of the Utes WR's are big on raw talent and speed, but limited on the ability to get it to translate. It also doesn't matter how good of a WR you are, when the QB doesn't always have the confidence to hit the windows.

Advantage: Byu

Offensive Line

It's a testament to Booker and Williams they've gotten as many yards as they have, because when it comes to run blocking, the Utes offensive line hasn't been that great. Where they have done really well though is in pass protection as they've managed to keep Wilson relatively clean throughout the year. They are led by center Siasi Aiono and guard Isaac Asiata. Getting bigger on the OL was one of the team's goals during the transition to the Pac-12 and it shows as all starters are taller than 6'2" and all run at least 305 pounds.

Byu's OL on the other hand had to shift gears in gameplan after Taysom went down and have done an effective job. The offensive line did a good job of helping Tanner Mangum adjust by keeping pressure off of him. Overall the Cougars defensive is slightly undersized, and they are led by Tejan Koroma who has been known to be a bit... fiery.... knuckleheaded.... emotional at times. It'll be interesting to see how Koroma handles the Utah pass rush.

If we compared OL vs the DL they would face this would be a runaway for Utah, but comparing the OL's to each other it's actually around even.

Advantage: Push

Defensive Line

The bread and butter of Sack Lake City is its defensive line, and this year's is no different. This is a very talented group on all fronts. Despite having lost Nate Orchard to the pros last year, the Utes managed to get better on the defensive line. When Hunter Dimick, who was the early focal point for the opposing teams went down, Utah replaced him with Kylie Fitts who was even better. In the Middle the Utes have 4 very, very good defensive tackles with Lowell Lotulelei, Filipo Mokofisi, Viliseni Faunouku, and Stevie Tuikolovatu. When the Utes want to just speed past the offensive line, they love to send Pita Taumoepeu. This is a defensive line that loves to live in opposing teams backfields, and generally create a ton of havoc.

For Byu it's all about Bronson Kaufusi. Kaufusi is now a senior, and came into Byu with a lot of hype, but rarely could live up to it on the field. This year though, he finally started to become the matchup problem he always should have been. Outside of Kaufusi there just isn't much for the Cougars, especially after the Travis Tuiloma squandered another opportunity given to him when his season long suspension was lifted for this game, by missing team activities and getting suspended again.

Advantage: Utah

Linebackers

Usually linebackers is a spot that Byu tends to matchup very well with Utah. Not this year. The Utes are led by 2 all pac-12 conference team members in Gionni Paul and Jared Norris. Gionni Paul should have been the Pac-12 defensive player of the year. Paul and Norris both have a nose for the football, and always find a way to be in on the play. Norris is the tackling machine, while Paul meanwhile is the jack of all trades type irritant. Paul was 2nd in the Pac-12 in total tackles, 3rd in tackles per game, 6th in tackles for loss. He led the conference in fumble recoveries, was fourth in the league in interceptions, and was involved in 8 total takeaways. He also had 3 sacks on the year.

For Byu their linebacking crew is led by Fred Warner and Harvey Langi. Both have shown a knack to get into the backfield when used at the 4th rusher in Byu's 3-4 defensive scheme. Langi in fact has shown a better ability to hit the whole on the defense, than he ever did as a running back. Langi and Warner are both good LBs but overall this unit is down from those of Byu's past. The core as a whole tends to be out of position a lot, which allows opposing teams to have success in the running game.

Interesting tidbit. The only member on Byu's roster to know what it's like to play on a team that won a Holy War, as he was part of Utah's 2011 team that won 54-10. (Remington Peck was on Byu's roster during the last Cougar victory in 2009, but he was a scout team member and didn't play in the game.)

Advantage: Utah

Secondary

Before the season began to wear down the depth chart a bit, the Utah secondary was one of the deepest it's been in awhile. On the edges they're led by Junior Dominique Hatfield who has a knack for being a shutdown type of corner. He's especially good at the press man coverage that Utah likes to run to jam receivers at the line. The other side of the field hasn't necessarily been locked up by any individual player with Brian Allen and Boobie Hobbs getting the majority of the time. In the Nickel Justin Thomas has held down that position for the last three years.

As for the safeties Tevin Carter is the Strong safety while first team Pac-12 All Conference member, and league leader in interceptions Marcus Williams is his backfield mate. The Utes like to use Carter to help out with the run, while Williams always seems to know where to go to steal a pass, having 5 interceptions (17th in the nation) on the year.

For as good of a defensive mind as Bronco is, he never could figure out the defensive back situation at Byu, but this year's team may have Bronco's best DB recruit in Kai Nacua. Kai Nacua, of course became famous during last year's Miami Beach Brawl. This year he took his frustrations out on opposing QB's bad choices. He's 2nd all time on Byu's career interception list. If the QB makes an errant pass, Nacua will make a play on it.

While Nacua does a good job with the errant passes, the rest of the defensive backfield isn't as good. Though they may be helped out in this game with the Utah WR's struggles to get open.

Advantage: Utah

Special Teams

In the Kicking game, Utah's Andy Phillips struggled a bit more this year being downgraded from Automatic Andy to Accurate Andy. For Byu Trevor Samson did what kickers do being relatively accurate and showing good range. Both kickers were around 86% on the season.

For the punters they say imitation is the sincerest form a flattery, but as usual the copy isn't quite as good as the original. Byu's Johnny Linehan a.k.a. Johnny Rugby and Utah's Tom Hackett are both Australian kickers, who utilize the rugby style kick. On the year Linehan average 43 yards net, while Hackett led the nation with over 47 yards net. Linehan's season long was 1 yard better than Hackett's 77 to 76.

The difference though is Hackett's ability to down the ball inside the 20 and inside the 10 yard line. Hackett was such a weapon all year long that opposing teams frequently kept 2 returners back, to limit his damage. Hackett won the Ray Guy award for the 2nd consecutive year.

Also there isn't a funnier interview in all of football, college or pros, than Hackett. It's weird for a fan base to love their punter, but in this game, both fan bases really love their punter, but Hackett is better on and cooler off the field.

Advantage: Utah

Coaching

It's so very fitting that the last game that both Bronco and Kyle are coaches for Beehive State teams is against one another. After all they've been tied to each other since Kyle turned down Byu for Utah in 2005, and Byu eventually went with Bronco.

Bronco is attempting to get his 100th career win, and currently has a record of 99-42 while Kyle is 94-46. Head to head in the rivalry game the victory is Kyle's as it's currently 6-3, meaning Bronco cannot overtake him even if they win this week. Postseason Bronco is 6-3 in the bowl games, while Kyle is 10-1 (Kyle is recognized as co-Head Coach for 2005 Fiesta Bowl). Big Game Criteria is now separated into two eras, pre and post Pac-12 (Pre Pac-12 covers 2010 and earlier). For both

era's there are some similarities. Notre Dame, Ranked Teams, Rivalry Games, and Bowl games count. For the Pre Pac 12 era there are other situations that need to be taken into account. For 1 the rivalry both teams had with TCU, meaning TCU pre Pac-12 is considered a big game. Also due to the national significance of any non-AQ versus AQ win, all games against teams from an AQ conference were considered big games pre Pac-12. Post Pac-12 only ranked opponents from AQ conference count, as well as any team of extremely national significance such as (Alabama, USC, Florida, Texas, Michigan, Ohio State). Bronco is 20-30 in this criteria. Kyle is 30-24.

The high points for both of the coaches hasn't changed. For Bronco it's still 2006-2007 and 2 consecutive undefeated years in conference. 11 wins both seasons, and beating Oregon and UCLA in consecutive Vegas Bowl.

For Kyle it's the Sugar Bowl, 13-0 2008 season.

Low Point for Byu would be Riley Nelson. For Kyle it was 27-0 shutout by Unlv.

Outside of the head coaches, which is already a mismatch in Utah's favor, there's a question of just how focused Byu's coaches will be. Most have already announced that they will follow Bronco to Virginia, meaning they'll be pulling double duty trying to get Byu coached up, while taking care of transition duties, and recruiting duties for Virginia. Bronco himself has already shown a problem when it comes to multi-tasking as head coach, and defensive coordinator, and now he has yet another plate in the air.

Advantage: Utah

The Crowd

The game sold out within 24 hours of the official matchup announcement and despite being in Las Vegas, this crowd will be mostly Byu as ticket allotment, and lead time to purchase ticket both are in Byu's advantage. But we all know Byu crowds aren't exactly the rowdy, game affecting bunch, and are easily taken out of the game. Utah hasn't had problems with pro-Byu crowds in the past, as they've had as much success at Rice-Eccles South in Provo as they have up on the hill. In addition this will be a game played in a stadium that serves alcohol so all the Byu fans in attendance will be too worried about getting beer poured on them to pay attention to the game.

Advantage: Push

X-Factors

The X Factors of this game are intriguing. When the matchup was announced I immediately thought Byu would have the edge here. After all, Byu was excited for this game, and from a fan base perspective Utah was disappointed to be here. I wasn't sure how the team itself would react. After all with 2 weeks to go in the season the Utes were thinking Pac-12 South division championship. As it is, they still ended up co-South division champions, but even after their best season in the Pac-12 they're back at the Vegas Bowl. It's now easy to see why so many Pac-12 teams have come out flat in this game in the past. Add in the extra motivation of Bronco's last game, it started out being a major edge for Byu.

But in the past week things have changed. Now it's not just Bronco leaving but essentially all of the Byu staff is pulling double duty. There is a legitimate reason to question the focus of the coaches, which can also affect the focus of the team. Meanwhile, the Utah players have all said the same thing, that while it's not what they were hoping for, they're excited to get to play in a rivalry game, especially for many who haven't played in one before (such as Gionni Paul), and few are as good at finding a chip to firmly plant on their teams shoulder like Kyle Whittingham.

The one place Byu really has an edge is they have nothing to lose, whereas Utah really has nothing to gain from this game. If Byu wins, they send out their coach on a high note, while also having broken a 4 game losing streak to their rival who is also from a P5 conference. If they lose it's no big deal, as most think they're expected to lose. Plus they already have their excuse for this year built in (after all Byu never loses, there's always an excuse) with Bronco having left. If Utah wins though, they're supposed to win. They're favored, they're the P5 team, and they're the more talented team. If Utah loses though, they've lost to the rival the fans say they don't need anymore. It's definitely more embarrassing if Utah lose than if Byu loses.

The emotion will definitely be on the side of Byu, but emotion isn't always a good thing (especially for a team that already plays on the edge), but it's enough to give the X-Factor edge to Byu, just slightly.

Advantage: Byu

When Utah Has The Ball

For Utah, the running game, even without Booker, will be the focal point of the offense. During last year's bowl game,

the team installed a few other trick plays and did enough to help Travis open up the field. There is even talk of Kendal Thompson being used as a WR (something that should have happened earlier in the year.)

Byu will need to get in Wilson's head early in the game by trying to rush. Not having to worry about the wide receivers stretching the field will help.

Utah will look to take advantage of the speed matchup by getting out on the edge, and taking advantage of a defense that has a tendency to over pursue.

When Byu Has The Ball

Michigan gave the nation the blue print for how to deal with the Byu WR's. Jam them early, get physical and they'll wilt from the pressure. That is right in Utah's wheelhouse as they love to play a press man style of defense, and are just as good as Michigan when it comes to physical coverage.

For Byu they must give Mangum time, and that means they need to prevent the Utah defensive line from living in the back field. The Utah front 7 should be able to rush Mangum and try to confuse him. If they can make Mangum uncomfortable that means he'll rely more on the jump ball passes that his tall WR's can take advantage of, but that also means more mistakes, which means more Gionni Paul and Jared Norris opportunities.

Final Thoughts

First off, it's a rivalry game which means we never know what to expect. Matchup wise, while Byu has the edge on a few offensive spots, top to bottom the Utes are deeper and more talented, but where Byu has the edge happens to be some of the most important positions on the field.

It's also not just a rivalry game, but it's the Holy War, which seems to be a matchup filled with magical moments. It's the first time these two teams have met up in the postseason, and it's the end of an era. Will this be the time that Byu finally manages to break the streak, and send Bronco off victorious, or could this be the first of a few "be careful what you wish for" moments for Byu and their fans.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:50