

Wednesday, September 6, 2017

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Well.....

I've got nothing. There's really not anything of value that can come from last week. Utes played a lesser opponent, while Byu was involved in a game so horrifically and historically one sided, that it would be impossible to extrapolate anything of value from it. Let's just move on shall we.

Besides. It's Holy War week, and while my thoughts about whether this game should be played on a yearly basis has changed over the last 6 years (it shouldn't), my enjoyment of the game when it's actually here hasn't changed.

So let's get to the Holy War Breakdown. But First A Reminder

I will say this about the rivalry. People are what make or break it. When you've got good neighbors and friends who can give and take a joke, it makes it real fun. As we go about this week, let's remember that the majority of people, jokes, trash talk, ribbing, and pranks are all of this variety. Not all Ute fans are the moron in suspenders or the dude with the sacrament tray. Not all Byu fans are the inhabitants of Cougarboard. I know that none of the people who read this blog fall into those 10% outliers, but I still wanted to put it out there.

That's not to say that I don't think a rivalry should be totally devoid of hate. Truthfully, as bad and as ugly as the Holy War gets at times it's still timid compared to some other rivalries like Auburn/Alabama, or even Georgia/Georgia Tech. The latter of which has a rivalry nickname of "Good Ole Fashioned Hate" and in order to get access to some of the fraternities the pass phrase is "F&*# Georgia/Georgia Tech" depending on which campus you're on.

In the end though let's just keep it fun and clean.

Who's Who

A lot has changed on both sides of this game in the last year. So let's see who the participants are.

Quarterback

Byu - Junior Tanner Mangum is now the man calling the shots at QB for the Cougars. Mangum played in 2015 when Tayson Hill went down with injury, and was the backup for all of last year except during the Bowl Game when Hill once again got hurt. Mangum has been a bit inconsistent in the time we've got to see him. We all remember the back to back Hail Mary plays to beat Nebraska and Boise State, but we also remember the lame duck performances like Michigan, Utah in the Vegas Bowl, Wyoming, and most recently LSU. Mangum has struggled early on in this young season as he's still trying to find his footing in Detmer's West Coast offense.

Utah - Utah nabbed true Sophomore Tyler Huntley to be their starter this year. Against North Dakota, Huntley struggled on the first drive but eventually settled in. Huntley looks to be a dual threat type of QB, who can hurt you with his arm and his leg. In what little we have to work off of this year, Huntley did a good job of keeping his eyes downfield when forced to scramble. However he did miss a few open routes. Last year's starter Troy Williams is the backup. Williams isn't as dynamic a runner, but having survived the Holy War last year, in which he was at times poised, and at times dreadful, he's a solid #2.

Advantage - If it were Williams #1 with Huntley as the backup, this would be a Utah advantage as Williams and Mangum are roughly equal, but the lack of experience with Huntley starting gives this edge barely to Byu.

Running Back

Byu - It's hard to replace your all time leading rusher, and through two games, Byu still isn't sure what they're going to do. So far Squally Canada has been the main guy, and against Portland State had 98 yards on the ground. However against a team with a pulse Canada was only able to get 8 yards rushing against LSU. An inability to run will really hinder the offense and Mangum this season. During the LSU game Byu lost two of their runningbacks in KJ Hall and Kaviko Fonua, so Trey Dye will probably be the secondary back.

Utah - Utah had wanted to do a running back by committee approach this season but when they lost Armand Shyne for

the year with a broken arm, it became clear that true sophomore Zack Moss would be the guy. Moss had a good opening performance getting 128 yards on the ground. For a change of pace, the Utes also employ Troy McCormick Jr as a speedster, out of the backfield threat. Also wouldn't be surprised to see true freshman T.J. Green get some playing time.

Advantage - Utah

Wide Receiver

Byu - So far no position has been a bigger disappointment for the Cougars than the Wide Receivers. They've really been non-existent so far. On the year 10 different Cougars have caught passes, but of those 10 only 5 of them are WR's. WR's struggled severely to get separation in both games played so far this year.

Utah - Even taking away the addition of Darren Carrington the WR position at Utah was a position that was poised for a breakout year with Raelon Singleton, and Demari Simpkins looking to take advantage of the style of offense that Troy Taylor likes to run. Adding in Darren Carrington though takes it to another level. Carrington is a dynamic playmaker at the WR position who is just on another level from the rest of the team. In week 1 he and Huntley had great chemistry. It's clear who opposing teams will be focusing on which will open up the rest of the field for Singleton and Simpkins.

Advantage - Utah

Tight End

Byu - Where the WR's have been an utter disappointment, Matt Bushman has found a niche as Mangum go to guy. He leads the team in receiving yards, and was about the only one who could do anything against LSU. It won't take long for teams to start doubling him to take away the option, but for now the chemistry between he and Mangum is a bright spot on the offense.

Utah - Every year we hear that Utah is going to feature the Tight End. Every year they start the season looking like that's exactly what's going to happen, and every year they eventually forget all about it. Talent wise the Utes have the advantage with Harrison Handley, and Siale Faikaloatonga. But Siale is coming back from back to back knee injuries.

Advantage - In this case, the advantage goes to the team that seems to actually use the position. Byu

Offensive Line

Byu - The OL has long been an under-performing bunch for the Cougars. Center Tejan Koroma is the anchor of the line, and is often regarded as one of the best Centers in the country. The rest of the OL is still trying to gel in order to keep Mangum clean, and open up running lanes for the Running Backs. Despite struggling against LSU, it's early to really tell how well this group will do this year. The good news for them, is that not all defensive lines will be as stout as LSU. The bad news, is that their next two opponents just might be.

Utah - A lot has been made that Utah lost 4 players from the offensive line to the draft last year. Although it's usually incorrectly reported that the Utes are only bringing back 1 starter. Truthfully they're bringing back 3 players with starting experience. The most experienced is Salesi Uhatafe who started all last year. In addition Lo Falemaka started at center after one of the many injuries the Utes suffered at that position last year, and LT Jackson Barton has earned a few starts throughout his career playing both Right and Left tackle. Overall the group is light on experience, and doesn't have much time playing together, so they'll need to gel quickly.

Advantage - Push

Defensive Line

Byu - When Byu hired Kalani Sitake as head coach, he brought with him a change in defense. Gone were the 3-4 days of Bronco, and instead he's switching to more of a 4-3 defensive scheme similar to what he learned at Utah. The anchor of his defensive line is oft-trouble Sione Takitaki who is back after missing last season with disciplinary issue. While Takitaki is supposed to be the disruptor in the middle, the Cougars are hoping Corbin Kaufusi can be the same force outside that his brother Bronson was. Outside of these two the Cougars are really hoping Handsome Tanielu can give them the production they've yet to receive from him. There is a lot of undergraduate potential with the recruits from the last two years, but the Cougars really need some of that potential to start coming through on the field.

Utah - Defensive Line has been the bread and butter of the Whittingham defense for almost 25 years now. This year, the defensive line is once again stacked. In the middle Senior Lowell Lotulelei is getting the same kind of all-American talk his brother got a few years ago, and next to him his Filipino Mokofisi. With Hunter Dimick gone to the NFL, Kylie Fitts

is return from an injury in 2016 to try and stake his claim as the next mayor of Sack Lake City. Utah likes to rotate a lot of bodies on the defensive line to keep them fresh. Some of the back ups who can still cause major issues are Leki Fotu and Maxs Tupai.

Advantage - Utah

Linebacker

Byu - This was a position that going into the season was expected to be an good advantage for the Cougars, but all that changed with the year long suspension of Francis Bernard. With Bernard gone for the year the Cougars will be relying on Fred Warner, and Butch Pau'u, both of whom have shown to have a good nose for the ball. Although Butch was suspended for the first game, so we haven't really been able to see much of him yet this year. Warner was one of the few names you kept hearing make plays against LSU.

Utah - With Bernard out for Byu, Utah looked like they might be able to swing this position to their advantage, but an injury to Kavika Luafatasanga has left it as a question mark. Utah doesn't talk about injuries unless they're season ending. They haven't said anything about Kavika's injury, but that just means he could be back sometime between this week and week 12. The other starting linebacker is Sunia Tauteoli. Tauteoli was a bit disruptive in 10 games last year proving adept both in the run and the pass. The Utes have been using less and less of a 3 linebacker set the past few years, opting instead for a 5th DB that they may sneak up to the line. Most likely Chase Hansen

Advantage - This is a close one, but just barely, because they're a little more trustworthy it goes to Byu

Defensive Backs

Byu - A position that will be weakened for the first half of the game as Micah Hannemann will be serving his 2nd targeting related suspension of the young season, after being called for a blatant targeting in the 2nd half against LSU. Hannemann is the Cougars best known commodity in the defensive backfield, and with him out the Cougars will be relying on Austin McChesney, Troy Warner, and Dayan Ghanwoloku (nee Lake). The Cougars struggle to keep up speed wise so expect them to play a lot of Cover Zone formations keeping the WR's in front of them, and the coming up to make a tackle.

Utah - Another position hit by NFL departures for the Utes, as last year's starting Free Safety, and both starting Cornerbacks are now on NFL rosters. The lone returner is Chase Hansen who after moving over from Quarterback near the end of the 2015 season has show a real adeptness at his new position, and is considered one of the best Safeties in the Pac-12. To replace all the lost talent, the Utes have a mix of highly recruited freshmen Like Jaylon Johnson, and Junior College transfers like Corriion Ballard.

Advantage - This is a hard one. We know what's there at Byu, but we don't know exact what's there for Utah. That said I trust Utah a lot more when it comes to developing defensive backs. Between that and Chase Hansen this is a Push

Kickers

Byu - Byu enters the season having seemingly settled on Junior Rhett Almond. In his career Almond is 19 of 24, but has never made a kick greater than 40 yards going 0-3 lifetime.

Utah - After 4 seasons of Automatic Andy, the Utes entered this season unsettled at the kicking position. Chayden Johnston got the first crack missing a 43 yarder. After that former Soccer player Matt Gay got the nod making all 3 of his attempts including a 49 yarder against North Dakota

Advantage - Let's be honest, no team feels comfortable here. Just go for it on 4th. Push

Punter

Byu - Senior Jonny Linehan is back. Linehan averages around 42 yards per punt in his career. Linehan is also notable for two things. 1 He's a great twitter follower, and overall has a really good personality. Last year at Rice-Eccles he was joking it up with fans on the sideline before the game. 2. He's also not very good at faking it.

Utah - Mitch Wishnowski is the best punter in the country, as last year he won the Ray Guy Award for the 3rd consecutive year by a Utah punter. Last year he averaged over 47 yards per punt, and in his lone attempt this season went 52.

Advantage - Utah

Return Game

Neither team has really shown much of anything yet this year in the return game. So it's a Push.

Coaching

Byu - Kalani Sitake has brought a new energy to the sideline in Provo that had been missing the last few years of Bronco's tenure. With him has also come a lot of excitement over what might be. Sitake had a semi successful first year. Offensive Coordinator Ty Detmer however has been a mixed bag with his offense. It seemed to be a poor match with Taysom last year, and hasn't seemed to take advantage of Tanner skill set yet this year. I know Ty is a beloved figure among those in Cougarland and is expected to be the head guy in 3 or 4 years, but I wonder how long before his dink and dunk west coast offense wears thin. Defensively Iliasi Tuiaki has been a surprise, and his defense is definitely the bright spot of the team early on in the new era. Interesting side note is that this week, Byu hired former Utah OC Aaron Roderick as an offensive consultant. He might have a few nuggets to share. But honestly Utah's defense hasn't changed much from when Sitake ran it.

Utah - Kyle Whittingham will be at Utah as long as he wants to be. And while some grumble about the ever changing Offensive Coordinators, the November meltdowns, the ball control offense, and other things, the truth is he's helped Utah transition from a G5 to a P5 team with minimal side effects. This year he's given the offense to Troy Taylor, and while it's only 1 game, the outcome so far has been nice. Not necessarily in productivity, but mainly in play calling and options shown during the North Dakota game. Defensively the Utes are the Utes. 2nd year defensive coordinator Morgan Scalley will start to put his own spin on things, but in the end it's a Whittingham defense.

Advantage - Utah

X Factors

It's a rivalry game so there will certainly be a lot of x factors involved. Utah of course is trying to get their 7th straight win in the series. It's the first game back at Rice-Eccles SouthLaVell Edwards Stadium since a 2 1 year hiatus after the 2013 game. The crowd will be amped up early as the game goes on, but will they also just be waiting for the next shoe to drop.

After last week's performance by Byu, expect them to come out wanting desperately to prove they aren't the disaster that we saw in the Superdome. There is the old cliché about nothing more dangerous than a wounded animal, and the Cougars will be extremely wounded.

It's also extremely hard in a situation like this to beat a team 7 straight times. But this could go both ways as Utah could just expect to win, especially being the more talented team, and get caught snoozing. The prevailing thought all offseason was that with all Utah lost this had to be the year the Cougars broke through, because if not this year, then when?

Also as history has shown, this game always comes down to something fluky. Harline still open, Magic Happens, Burton's Block. 3 Rushing the fields. Going back even further in history is Kaneshiro doink. LaVell's final miracle. Very rarely is the game just normal.

Advantage - Push

So What About Game Plans

Utah Defense Versus Byu Offense

Byu needs to put out an APB for it's missing run game. Utah will happily force Mangum to try and beat them through the air, feeling that they can matchup 1 on 1 on the outside. The Utes play a Man coverage scheme, and this will be the first semi test of the year for the rebuilt secondary. Look for Chase Hansen to spy Matt Bushman who is Mangum's early favorite target.

It will be key that Byu is able to find some early running room, and take pressure of the WR's . If Byu is able to run the ball, that will make Hansen have to keep his eyes in the backfield a little more, which will open up Bushman as an outlet for Mangum.

Utah Offense Versus Byu Defense

At this point I'm really not all that sure what Utah's gameplan will be. They ran the ball more than I expected in week 1 but when you are getting 5-6 yards per pop that's what you do. In the passing, the Utes seem to favor quick hitting underneath routes and then let their WR's make plays.

For Byu they will must stop Carrington. Carrington will be Huntley's go to guy, and is a player capable of taking over a game. This rivalry has not had a playmaker like Carrington involved offensively since probably Austin Collie, and in all honesty Carrington is a better WR than Collie was. Look for a safety to constantly be cheating over to Carrington's side of the field.

The big key to this game, will be Huntley and his scrambling ability. If Byu can get pressure and make Huntley a runner who can't get comfortable, the Utah offense will struggle. If however Huntley is able to scramble and relocate the pocket, prior to setting up and making passes it will cause the Cougar defense fits, as that will also open up the zone/read run for Huntley.

Finally

I don't have a prediction. Mainly I can't get my heart and my head to come to an agreement. I will say this though, after last week's performance, I am very tempted to see Byu's temperament as they come out. I expect them to come out fast. In fact I wouldn't be surprised to see them get the first score, and maybe even have an early 10-0 lead. The question is whether they can maintain that early emotional storm, or if when they run into some troubles, do they fall back into a "here we go again mentality."

Where To Watch

It's a late one this week with kickoff scheduled for 8:15 p.m. That of course will mean that as the game comes to the end, especially if it's a tight game, you can bet you will hear the ESPN 2 announcers make the "what happens if this game goes into Sunday?" joke that is beyond tired out at this point.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 09:47