

Thursday, October 5, 2017

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Okay, so I guess it could get worse. The first three losses weren't unexpected. Maybe we didn't expect them to perform as badly as they did, but Byu losing the previous three games wasn't out of the realm of expectation.

But Utah State was sitting there as the perfect get well medicine for the Cougars. After all, this is the modus operandi of the Cougars.

It's not just the loss to Utah State that was unexpected. Rivalry games have weird results.

It was the turnovers, the injuries, and the offense being flat out unprepared and inept that was so unexpected. You can't prepare for injuries, but the others can definitely be coached and prepped for.

At Least The Defense Was Solid

Congratulations to Utah State. You made the plays needed to win the game, but man that wasn't a pretty offensive game for either team. It started out really good for Utah State. First drive they just marched down the field for an opening Touchdown. Except for 3 deep bombs, that would be the last bit of good offense we'd see the rest of the night.

The rest of the game turned into Byu giving Utah State the ball and daring them to score, and Utah State saying, thanks but no thanks.

And boy, did Byu keep giving Utah State the ball. Byu would end up with 7 turnovers on the night. Two of which were Pick sixes by Jalen Davis. Davis actually ended up with a 3rd interception and was by far the most productive receiving threat for the Cougars. Too bad for them he wore an Aggie uniform.

In addition to the four interceptions, the Cougars also had 3 fumbles, two of which were by Ula Tolutau. Outside of those two fumbles, Tolutau was the only bright spot for the offense, as he continues to show he's a force of a running back.

Byu did manage to quick scoring drives thanks to a 26 yard, and 40 yard TD passes by Beau Hoge, and it looked like Byu was going to roll. Then a horrific pass led to Jalen Davis' first pick six. On the next drive, Hoge suffered a concussion, and it was all she wrote, as Koy Detmer, and Austin Kafenzis proved to be unable to get anything going.

Yet with 12 minutes to play in the game it was only a single digit lead for the Aggies, even after 6 turnovers at that point. This was because Byu's defense kept shutting the Aggies offense down, forcing them to turn 6 turnovers into only 18 points. When you consider that Utah State started 4 drives inside the Byu 40, that's not a good offensive showing.

There Went The Room For Error

Byu's front end of the schedule was always going to leave them with very little room for error in the rest of the games if they wanted to make a bowl game. With the loss last Friday, the Cougars are now playing with no room for error. Assuming they lose to Boise State, and Mississippi State, as expected, they will be sitting at 1-6, meaning they would have to win out to reach 7-6 and be bowl eligible.

Of course a win either of the next two weeks, gives them that bit of breathing room again. Enter the Boise State Broncos, who might just be that unexpected win for Byu. Much like the Cougars, the Broncos are suffering through a bit of a down year, though admittedly not as bad as Byu.

The Broncos come into this game at 2-2. Last week they were on bye after having been crushed by Bronco Mendenhall and the Virginia Cavaliers 42-23. The Broncos come into this game ranked roughly in the middle of the nation in most offensive categories, except rushing where they are truly dreadful. The shine has started to come off head coach Brian Harsin, and a loss this week to the Cougars will really cause some unrest in potato country.

Any chance for a surprise upset though relies on who the Cougars roll out at QB. Tanner was back at practice this week it seemed, but just how close is he to coming back from that high ankle sprain. I'd seriously doubt Hoge is back, as he

was really seeing stars when he was taken off the field. Rumors are that's his 2nd concussion in 3 weeks (2 games.) Considering his dad's history with concussions, I can't think he'd be rushed back too quickly.

That leaves Koy Detmer, or the Cougars to burn a redshirt off one of their 2 true freshmen. The Cougars desperately need Koy or Tanner if they're going to pull the upset.

If all else fails, I say put Jonny Linehan back there. Boise would never expect that. And at the very least, he's always funny on twitter afterwards.

Let's Hope They Lose That Love-in Feeling

Utah fresh off their bye host the Stanford Cardinal, also known as their Pac-12 twin. Much like Utah, the Cardinal play a style where they're more than comfortable grinding it out, letting their defense win an ugly game.

Of course this year, the Cardinal have Bryce Love, who has over 1000 yards rushing on the season. In only 5 games. The rest of their offense isn't very good this year, but when your running back is averaging over 200 yards a game, it can make up for a lot of offensive problems. Just ask John White, Devontae Booker, and Joe Williams.

For the Utes, they'll bring the nations 10th ranked rush defense and see if they can slow down Love. It's looking more and more like the Utes will be without Bradlee Anae or Kylie Fitts at the defense end positions, so don't be surprised if you see Mokofisi scoot out to the end, and the Utes use a bit of a hybrid 3-5 defense. I expect Chase Hansen to be brought down from his safety position to lend run support.

If the Utes can't contain Love, no one can stop him, they have no chance. If they can contain Love, I don't think it'll matter whether Huntley is back this week or if it's Williams behind center. Although if it's Williams I hope the Troy Taylor spent the bye week tailoring the game plan to him, which means getting rid of the read option, since Williams just isn't as dynamic a runner.

Another key aspect for Utah is they have to stop shooting themselves in the foot with penalties. This will be their 5th game, plenty of time to iron out the issues from the first month.

Despite the fact that the offense is drastically improved this year, I expect this game to be a throwback to the type of games Utah has specialized in the last 10 years. Lower scoring, grind it out, physical and ugly win or lose.

On A Positive Note

One good thing did happen during the bye. Utah kick Matt Gay went from a Senior to a Junior, thanks to the NCAA extending his eligibility clock because of serving a mission. That means another year without worry too much about the kicking game.

For Your Viewing Pleasure

The Broncos and Cougars will get your weekend started Friday Night with an 8:15 kickoff time on ESPN.

24 hours later, the Utes and Cardinal will get things started on Fox Sports 1 with their 8:15 Saturday night kickoff time.

Next week, though the Utes will be done before late night, as their matchup with USC has been tabbed for the Saturday Primetime ABC game. Kickoff will be 6:00 p.m. on ABC.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:49

Thursday, September 28, 2017

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Four letter word #1, four letter word #2, four letter word #3, four letter word #1 again preceded by a six letter word.

I hate playing Arizona more than any team out there right now. Since joining the Pac-12, and since they hired Rich Rod to be their coach, the Arizona wildcats are the thorn in the paw for the Utes. Even when Utah wins, Arizona screws them up. I am so glad to be done with that game. Litmus Test Results

I said last week that this Arizona game was going to be a Litmus test for the kind of year Utah would end up. Well the results are in. Utah is a very talented, very undisciplined team. It's going to cost them in a few games.

If Huntley is out long term, they might struggle to win 7 games. There is just a huge difference in the offense with Huntley back there, versus when Williams is back there.

Huntley is just quicker on his reads, and is more dynamic of a playmaker. Williams may have a better arm, but he's takes too long to make a decision and get it out. Plus with Williams back there, the Utes lose 1/4 of their gameplan because the zone read just isn't a threat.

Also can someone please tell me why Arizona is such a troublesome foe for the Utes. Look at the history

2012 - Eliminated from bowl contention

2013 - Eliminated from bowl contention

2014 - Eliminated from Pac-12 south contention.

2015 - Devontae Booker injures meniscus and is done for the season.

2016 - Utes win, but 11 first half penalties. Armand Shyne and Jordan Howard both injure there knees done for the year.

2017 - Utes win, but Tyler Huntley, Kylie Fitts, Bradlee Anae, and Kavika Luafatasanga all suffer injuries.

Seriously I hate playing Arizona.

Thankfully the Utes have a bye week this week, so they can either heal up, or give Troy Taylor a week to tailor an offense to Troy Williams' strengths.

A Conference Rivalry Showdown

Okay so it's not a conference game, but it is Conference weekend, which means it's time for the Friday night rivalry game between Byu and Utah State.

Only issue is, neither team is any good.

For Byu this is a nice change of pace, as prior to last week's bye, they had spent the previous 3 weeks getting beat up.

Byu ranks near the bottom in the country in most offensive categories, while Utah state is 103rd in the nation in scoring defense.

Utah state did manage 10 points against Wisconsin versus only 6 for Byu. Conversely Byu held Wisconsin to only 40 points compared the 59 they put up on the Aggies.

This is a match up of the movable object against a resistible force.

Short One This Week

Sorry don't have more to say this week, but With Utah on bye, and the matchup to not be the worst team in the state. I just don't have it this week.

Kickoffs and Tv Time

Blog Export: Annals of the Homestarmy, <http://www.thehomestarmy.com/s9y/>

The kickoff for Utah's game against Stanford on October has been announced. It will be an 8:15 kick.

This week's game Between Byu and Utah State kicks off at 6:00 p.m. and will be broadcast on CBS Sports Network.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:54

Wednesday, September 13, 2017

Red, Blue And Pigskin

This must be how Phil Connors felt. Every year, different pieces, same story. No matter how dominant one team is, and no matter how hapless the other team is, when it comes to the end, the game is always on the line, waiting for something strange, and crazy to happen.

Of course, I'd rather suffer through this kind of Groundhog's Day than the one Byu fans are living through.

Note: In this analogy, 2011 is the suicide montage from the movie.

The Holy War has come and gone, and while it won't be back until next November, there still enough time to look back at the good, the bad, and the ugly for both teams and see what we can learn about both teams after the rivalry clash.

But first...There's Ugly, And Then There's Horrifically, Misfigured, Better To Stay Hidden Under The Stairs, Fugly

Before we get to what happened with the two teams, I'm sure anyone who watched that broadcast can agree on one thing. The worst part of the night was that broadcast duo. I know Utah and Byu isn't usually an ESPN announcer's prime choice for assignment, and there has been plenty of time were announcers weren't fully prepared, but the duo of Mike Patrick and Tommy Tuberville took incompetence to an entirely new level. Jake Heaps aspires to be as bad at his job as they were.

Wrong names, Faulty information, flat out false information, going multiple plays without saying anything. A general lack of understanding the rules of football. It was terrible.

I knew ESPN was suffering, as evident by all those layoffs, but judging by the production quality of the telecast, and this announce team, they must have been really really hurting. I think we all heard why Tuberville is no longer a coach.

I'm also sorry to say Byu fans, that you have to suffer through that again next week. I'm sure Utah will get them again soon as well, which is a fate that shouldn't be bestowed upon anybody.

Rise And Shout

It wasn't a good game for Byu. We're starting to get enough data that we can get a feel for exactly what this year's Byu team is. It's not good overall, but there was still some good takeaways from their 7th consecutive Holy War defeat.

The Good

Red Zone Defense - There's more later on about defense between the twenties, but for the 2nd straight week, the defense did a great job of not breaking in the most important part of the field.

Byu might have finally found their running back. Ula Tolutau provided a much needed spark for an otherwise dead offense, and was the driving force for Byu's first TD. He rushed 5 times for 25 yards, and a TD. Utah struggled to adjust to his entry into the game. The big question mark is whether Tolutau can stay healthy. He's already nursing a camp injury, which is why he was limited to only 5 yards rushing.

For all his faults, one thing remains true about Mangum, he remains calm under pressure, but.....

No fake punts.

Jonah Trinnaman gave Byu a spark on their first scoring drive by breaking a long TD return, only to be taken down by a diving Mitch Wishnowsky.

Byu's run defense. They keyed on Zack Moss all night, and were not going to let Huntley give him the ball.

The Bad

We're starting to see who the real Mangum is. He may be calm under pressure, but he's struggling in this system. Even Detmer made a reference to it this week, that since he no longer has the 6'5" WR to just throw it up to, it's hurt his production.

The Offense as a whole is terrible. Outside of Tolutau, and when Utah went zone late in the game, Byu just could not sustain any forward momentum.

The WR's are unable to get separation.

Between the 20's, for the 2nd straight week, Byu defense was exposed. It's a good thing they've been able to tighten up in the red zone, but I'm not sure they want to keep playing with fire.

The Ugly

Again the Offense....

Not to pick on a player but Aleva Hifo had a night to forget. His early offensive pass interference call was one of the most obvious and blatant offensive picks I've ever seen, and it erased a TD that would have given Byu an early lead. He also dropped a gimme pass on the first play of the last drive when Byu was angling for a miracle drive to win.

Moving On

Byu is struggling right now. Things won't be any easier this week as they welcome the Wisconsin Badgers into town. They'll be doing it without Tanner Mangum who after being beaten up the last couple weeks suffered a high ankle sprain last week and is gone for 4-6 weeks. In his place will be Beau Hoge, a sophomore, and son of former NFL running back Merrill Hoge.

Wisconsin has to be extremely giddy as they watch tape of the LSU game, because they are very much a power run game type of offense, who is currently ranked 13th in the nation in rushing yards with 295.5 yards per game. That said, Byu's defense will be better than that Fighting Lane Kiffin of FAU, and Utah State who the Badgers destroyed in week 1 by the score of 59-10

With Mangum out, and Hoge starting, this game looks to be a continuation of the previous two game, where the Offense is going to struggle to find it's footing, while the Bend but don't break mentality of the defense is going to get really, really, tested.

Who Am I, Sir

Much like with Byu, there is some things to take away from a lackluster Utah performance in the Holy War.

The Good

Tyler Huntley..... He's dynamic, he doesn't make a lot of bad decisions passing the ball. As we saw with the deep pass in the middle, he has quite the arm. This offense is made for him. It's early, obviously, but if this kid can continue to develop, continue to get comfortable, he could develop into a star in a few years. Against Byu he had nearly 400 yards of offense.

The defense did what the defense does. It smothered the Byu WR's making it impossible for them to get any room. Shut down the Byu running game, and harassed and tortured Mangum into 3 interceptions and many other rushed passes and poor decisions. It seemed that Utah could get a guy in the back field whenever they wanted.

The offense as a whole is definitely far improved from what we've seen the last few years. This offense is dynamic. Utah is using more of the field than they have in year's past and was doing a good job of getting WR's open in space. Carrington especially always seemed to find a hole in between defenders whenever Utah needed a first down.

The Defensive Backfield especially had a great night. Julian Blackmon and Jayce Johnson were locking down the BYU WR's all night long.

The Bad

Running game. Byu was keying on Moss all night, forcing Huntley to keep it on the reads, but the non QB running game

was bad this week. Utah will need more of week 1 and less of week 2, especially to help keep Huntley healthy.

Red Zone scoring. Utah officially went scoreless on 2 red zone trips, but one of those was the very end of the game when they went into victory formation. Outside of the 2 scoreless trips, the Utes had to settle for Field Goals way too many times. Utah has got to start converting red zone trips into 7 points instead of 3.

Even though everyone knew Matt Bushman was Mangum's favorite target, he still was able to get enough room to make a few plays.

The Ugly

Penalties. Far too many penalties. The Utes have been called for 11 penalties each game so far. The only thing that seemed able to stop Utah was their own stupid penalties last week. Penalties are what kept them from being a 2 or even 3 score game. Utah must get those under control.

Sunia Tauteoli. It doesn't matter if you started your tackle before the QB Slides. The second you drop your head you're being dumb.

Avoiding A Hangover

Last season, the Utes beat Byu in a tight holy war matchup. The week after they played San Jose and came out looking extremely flat for the first half, even trailing 10-6 midway through the 2nd quarter before the Utes finally put the Byu game behind them, and pulled away, eventually sacking San Jose State 10 times in 34-17 win.

San Jose State isn't a good team, but they already showed once this year they can be frisky if the opponent isn't mentally ready. The opponent that Utah is really going up against this week is Byu. For whatever reason, Utah has had a very hard time shaking off the Byu game. Since joining the Pac-12, when the game got moved from the last week of the season Utah is 1-3 in the weeks following the Byu game.

This is the last week for Utah to sharpen up their game before entering Pac-12 play.

Nice Lid

This is also the annual Ute Proud game. The game where Utah wears a uniform and/or helmet designed with the Ute Indian tribe in mind. (It's also the game where in the past the tribe has come out to perform at halftime, which is really cool.)

This year they've redesigned the helmet, to incorporate the Indian logos within the U, and I must say, Me Likey.

Honestly, I really like what the Utes, and Under Armour have done with their helmets the last few years. We've gotten some really nice designs and alternate lids.

For Your Viewing Pleasure

The Wisconsin/Byu matchup will be the early afternoon network game, kicking off at 1:30 p.m. Mountain Time, and being broadcast on ABC. This of course means a much larger audience will get to feel the pain of Mike Patrick and Tommy Tuberville. Really Byu fans, I'm sorry.

Utah vs San Jose will be a late game, kicking off at 8:00 p.m. and will be broadcast on Espn 2.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 13:58

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

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

Tuesday, October 13, 2015

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Well, that was sure a week of hoopla, and the game on the field didn't disappoint. But this week it's out of the frying pan, and into the fire, as the Utes must wrestle with demons they haven't been able to handle lately. Mangum's Mission Legs

Say what you want about Mangum, but even if he were to never play again for Byu, he's already got quite a legacy. First he fills in when Taysom goes down and gets a Hail Mary victory against Nebraska. The next week he pulls off another Hail Mary.

Apparently he thought things must have been getting stale, because he did the whole "fill in for the injured starter, and lead the team to a last minute game winning TD" thing again. Of course, big difference is he was the starter, and it was his own injury he had to come back from.

And boy did Byu need it. After doing just about everything possible to allow ECU to steal the victory, the Cougars managed to escape with a victory.

Since the Cougars actually managed to secure the victory, the big story of the game though becomes Mangum's hamstring.

Despite coming back for that 4th quarter drive, the extent of Mangum's injury is currently unknown, and his availability for this week's game is currently undecided.

Hamstrings are a funny thing. A little bit of stretching and rest could make it feel better, or it could end up being something that affects him the rest of the season. Even if he is back, you can bet that every Byu fan will be holding their breath whenever he scrambles.

Battling The Bearcats

If Mangum can't go, the Cougars might be in for a world of trouble. After all not everyone is Ohio State, or Utah State can continue to win with their 3rd string QB. Especially since when Mangum went out you could tell the entire team seem to deflate a little bit, and the offense stalled, which is something the Cougars cannot have happen against Cincinnati.

Even with Mangum, the Cougars will need their offense operating at peak to keep up with a Bearcat team that likes to score. The Bearcats score about 40 points per game and rack up nearly 600 yards of offense per game. The last couple weeks the Cougars offensive coaches seem to have started settling on RB Algernon Brown as the workhorse. Last week he responded with 134 yards and 3 TD's. He'll be needed to put in a similar performance this week to keep the Bearcat offense off the field.

Once again this will be a game of freshman QB versus freshman QB. Of course for Byu the question is which freshman QB. For Cincinnati it will be Hayden Moore who was given the full time job 2 weeks ago, and has almost 800 yards in those 2 weeks. Of course, Byu has been known to show freshmen a bunch of confusing formations and things they haven't seen before. Just ask UCLA's Josh Rosen.

Even before Mangum started to come up hobbled, this was always a game that seemed a bit scary for the Cougars. If Mangum can't go, this could easily turn into a rout for the visitors. If he plays, than it will be key for Byu to limit their own offensive mistakes, and Byu's defense to confuse the young opposing QB. The good news is, after this week, Mangum can rest for the next two weeks to prepare for the final stretch.

Trials And Tribulations

Gotta give Devon Blackmon props. When he signed with Byu he was immediately a candidate for an eventual honor code casualty. His attitude last year only helped fueled that fire. Something he alluded to with his contender for quote of the year.

From Twitter: Devon Blackmon said that he's faced trials in adjusting to Provo, but nothing like the crucifixion of Christ

or like what Tupac faced.

1 Point For Each Turnover

Saturday, the Utes finally put aside all of the Gameday circus, all of the homecoming festivities, and defeated the California Golden Bears 30-24. The margin of victory was equal to 1 point for every 1 of the 6 turnovers the Utah defense forced.

Of course the fact that the Utes required a defensive stand on the last drive of the game, despite having forced 6 turnovers might be a cause for concern. That concern, as it usually does, revolves around Travis Wilson and his consistency. Don't know if it was the bye week giving him too much time, the hoopla surrounding the game or what, but it was very clear, very early that Wilson wasn't comfortable this week.

Some of that credit goes to a tenacious, California defense who were up for the big lights. That said, Wilson never really looked comfortable all night, and it bottomed out with two really bad interceptions, on two consecutive passes for Wilson during the middle of the 2nd quarter.

This year though, the Offensive Coordinator did something that Dave Christensen never would last year. Instead of fully taking all confidence away from Travis, or leaving Wilson out to dry, Aaron Roderick did a great job over the next drive of setting Wilson up for success.

Roderick dumped the stretch hand-off the Utes had been using, in exchange for a more North and South dive type handoff that allowed Booker to burst through the line. Once Booker got going, he then used a quick play action pass to let Wilson get back into routine, that while not completed did draw a Pass Interference call. Next they let Travis air it out on a beautiful 54 yard bomb to Corey Butler-Byrd. Finally, after having restored his confidence, the offensive staff did a good job of taking pressure off of Travis that night by putting the game in the hands of a hot Booker.

Wilson was never going to make it through the season without a couple of bad games. Thanks to a masterful defensive performance that confused Jared Goff into 5 interceptions, and pressured him for 3 sacks, many hurries, and never let him get comfortable, the Utes were able to survive Wilson's first bad game of the year. Now it's up to Wilson to continue the growth he's shown early on this year, and not let 1 bad game, turn into 2. Especially with Utah's own personal Devils up next.

The Devils You Know, And The Devils You Don't

More than any game on this year's schedule, this is the one that scared me the most. I can't decide if it's good or bad that I won't be in attendance, but either way I'll be a nervous wreck.

During the first 4 seasons in the Pac-12 no team has given Utah more problems than the Arizona State Sun Devils. Not Oregon who Utah played pretty well in losing efforts. Not USC. The only other team that could make a claim really are the Arizona Wildcats. For some reason, the Utes have had massive problems with the Arizona based team.

The first 2 meetings against the Sun Devils were miserable, embarrassing shellackings that truly showcased just how out matched the Utes were those first 2 years, and really emphasized the difference between a Power 5 school, and everyone else.

The next 2 meetings Utah was no longer outmatched, and instead were 2 of the more gut wrenching, heart breaking losses. First in 2013 in a game that set passing offenses back a few years as Taylor Kelly, and a hampered by a hand injury Travis Wilson combined to go 25/52 for 265 yards, 3 TD's and 2 Interceptions. Numbers that are mediocre for 1 QB, and really bad for 2. This was a game that Utah led until a TD with just under 2 minutes left put ASU up by 1 point, before the next two drives ended in Interceptions. This would also be the last game Wilson would play before they discovered the aterior injury that almost sidelined his career.

If the 2013 game was difficult to stomach, last year's affair took it up another notch. Once again, Travis Wilson did not have a good game as he managed to get only 57 yards passing, yet still manage to have the Utes up 3 late in the game before an ASU field goal sent it into overtime. In overtime, rather than push it with an ineffective offense, the Utes decided to rely on their dependable kicker, only to see Andy Phillips miss the kick. Then to make matters worse, Utah DB Dominique Hatfield just barely missed an interception on the ASU possession, as the Devils kicked the game winner a couple plays later.

And That's the Devils the Utes know, the one that seems to have their number.

The Devils the Utes don't know, are this year's team. This year the Sun Devils struggled early in the season in losses to Texas A&M to open the season, and seemed to have bottomed out when they were destroyed by USC 42-14. Since that point they managed to save their season with an upset of top 10 UCLA in the Rose Bowl and then did to Colorado what teams do to Colorado. The Sun Devils seem to have righted the ship, and come into Rice-Eccles with a renewed confidence.

Last week the Utes showed they could handle the hype. This week the Utes have an entirely different battle in front of them. The Utes haven't beat ASU since 1976, a streak of 10 games, and most of those games haven't been close. Before Ute fans can really begin thinking of any of the hype that's surrounded this team, they first must exorcise some demons that have haunted them for a long, long, long time.

View From The Redzone

Rice-Eccles was amped this week. Between College Gameday being in town, and a kickoff that got moved from 8 to 8:30, a fan base that doesn't usually arrive until middle of the first quarter, had packed the stadium prior to kickoff. As such the stadium was loud and into the game. At times the stadium was more electric, and louder than it's been since Freddie Brown caught a touchdown from Brian Johnson in 2008 against TCU.

Kudos to the crowd. In the past they've been known to get down on Quarterbacks, and especially Travis Wilson when they've struggled. Last weekend though, after he had thrown his second consecutive interception, Wilson was greeted with a round of applause when he came back on the field for the next possession. It was nice to see the crowd pick him up.

The hit that Gionni Paul laid on the running back near the North End Zone was nasty.

Boobie Hobbs completely got away with pass interference on Cal's last play.

The new turf looks really cool. The red is really vibrant and stands out quite a bit.

No Drive This Week

With both Oregon State, and Utah on bye last week there was no drive this week.

Next Week On RB&P

The Sideshow family will be visiting the Happiest Place On Earth next week, and therefore there probably won't be much of a Red, Blue And Pigskin that week.

Television Preferences

This week BYU gets another weekday game which takes a day of recovery away from Mangum. Fortunately for fans the game should be over before Saturday Morning as it will be a 6 p.m. mountain time kickoff, and will be broadcast on ESPN.

The Utes meanwhile will once again be part of #Pac12AfterDark with a kickoff that (currently starts at 8 p.m. mountain time, and will also be broadcast on ESPN.

Kickoff times for the following week have been announced. If anyone wants to bother watching the 3rd and 4th strings get plenty of reps against Wagner, good for you. It'll be a 1 p.m. mountain time kickoff and is the annual BYU TV scrub game.

Utah that week will once again be on broadcast television as they take on the USC Trojans at 5:30 p.m. mountain time, and will be broadcast on Fox 13.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 16:14

Wednesday, October 7, 2015

Red, Blue And Pigskin

You know the joke we sometimes make about winning or losing a bye week. Well as much as it's possible the Utes completely won their bye week this year, and I couldn't be more nervous. The Game Summed Up In One Play

This week the BYU Cougars defeated the UConn Huskies 30 - 13 in a game summed up best by 1 single play.

The play came at the end of the first BYU drive of the 2nd half. The Cougars had taken the opening kickoff of the 2nd half, and had moved the ball from their own 28, to the Husky 34 yard line, and looked like they were driving for an opening half score. Suddenly the drive stalled after a few too many running plays, and the Cougars faced 4th and 1. A quick out pass was called, and having not noticed the defender sitting on the play, Mangum threw the pass. The Husky defender jumped the route, snagged the interception and streaked down the sideline with only Mangum between him and a pick six. Yet for some reason, rather than try to challenge Mangum, the defender jumped out of bounds to avoid even a touch by Mangum and the Cougar 37 yard line.

You see, the Cougars had thoroughly dominated the game statistically in the first half. Which was the first 8 plays of the drive moving the ball 41 yards. But questionable play calls, and a RB rotation that failed to recognize the hot hand, (The drive stalling, resulting in 4th and 1), as well as just sloppy play and dumb mistakes by the Cougars (the Mangum interception) had allowed the score to be much closer than it should have been.

But despite the fact that the score was 7-7 at that time, in no way did it ever feel like the Cougars were going to lose this game. The Cougars clearly outmatched the Huskies. And this was never more obvious, than when the pansy Husky DB didn't even try to challenge Mangum. When he weakly tried to juke, and then hopped out of bounds, instead of even letting Mangum put a finger on him, it was clear, the Huskies weren't ever a match for the Cougars, and BYU would eventually just continue to physically, and mentally wear them down, and put the game away.

I Need Another Word For Trap Game

It's not that I think the game this week for the Cougars against East Carolina is a trap game per se. Instead I think this next game is the first of two in a row that would be a good spot for the annual Bronco egg laying game. The Pirates are one of those teams that BYU honestly should beat, but are just good enough to take advantage of mistakes and squeak out the victory.

East Carolina isn't really good at any one thing. They're unsettled at the QB position, employing a 2 QB system. It's not a 2 QB System where both options are really poor, it's more the epitome of the old saying "If you have 2 QB's, you have none" as neither has really taken a hold of the job. However that hasn't stopped the Pirates from scoring 49, and 35 the last two weeks.

East Carolina has also been there before. They're often one of the Group of 5 teams in the conversation to play BCS Spoiler, or (last year) make the NY6 game, though they're never actually able to pull it off. This year alone they've already beaten Virginia Tech, and gave Florida quite the scare in the game where Florida Head Coach Jim McElwain could be seen laying into Rb Kelvin Taylor.

Defensively, the Pirates aren't quite so good. The Pirates give up about 402 yards and 29 points per game.

Statistically speaking, the Pirates are essentially a poor man's version of BYU. All very similar stats, with ECU being better offensively, but just a little bit worse defensively. Though it's cliché, this will be a game that will be won, by whichever team can keep from hurting themselves the most.

Utes 1, Bye 0

So how does a team win while on bye? Well first you have to make a big impression the week before, like the Utes did in their duck dismantling. After that, you have to have everyone else work for you. Such as.

Week 1 opponent Michigan shut out their second straight opponent, meaning not only are the Utes the only team to beat the Harbaughs, but the Utes 24 points, is more than the next 4 Khaki opponents scored combined. Actually the 17

points the Utes scored in the first 3 quarters, is more than the next 4 opponents combined.

Next it helps to have a crazy week in the polls. Something along the lines of 4 unbeaten top 10 teams losing, with 3 of those teams losing by double digits. If one of those losses is to the only other undefeated team in your division, that's a bonus. The losses in front of you, combined with Michigan's performance, and the goodwill of the duck hunt, allows you to, incredibly, move up to #5 in the polls.

Finally you need your next opponent to win, causing them to stay unbeaten, setting up 1 of only 2 matchups versus ranked teams this week, and the only one involving a now top 10 team, which gets the attention of College Gameday to come to your school.

So yea, for a week where the Utes didn't actually do anything, except rest on their laurels, it turned out to be a pretty good week. It also means, break time is now over, and while the Utes are a little bit overrated, it's time to go out and earn the attention they've received so far.

The Unexpected Spotlight Bears Down

Nobody expected the Cal Bears trip to Rice-Eccles Stadium for the Utah Homecoming week to be the spotlight of College Football, but somehow that's exactly what it's become. In the 3rd year of Head Coach Sonny Dykes system, the Bears have already manage to match last year's entire win total.

The Bears just happen to be led by Jr QB Jared Goff. Goff is by far the best QB in the nation, and will be the #1 overall draft pick in next year's draft once he declares. While Goff's numbers are aided greatly by Sonny Dykes Bear Raid offense that likes throw a lot to 5 and 6 WR sets that spread out the field, Goff isn't simply a system QB. Goff has a quick release, and is the type of QB who has great footwork to move around in the pocket. Goff is also a smart QB who doesn't throw many interceptions. Despite starting as a true freshman, Goff only threw 10 interceptions his freshman year. A number that dipped to 7 last year. Though he is on pace for more this season with 4 already. On the year Goff has 1630 yards, and 15 TD's. That's over 3 times as many yards as Utah's Travis Wilson.

Goff, and the Bears offense will get not only their yards, but also their points. Even if Utah's defense is drastic increase from anything the Bears have faced this year. For the Utes, the key will be not to let those plays happen to often, and to not let Goff get into, or stay in a rhythm. The Utes defensive backfield, will need to grow up in a hurry as Goff will test a group that has shown a tendency to let the WR's get behind them. To help them out, the front 7 will need to make Goff uncomfortable. Defensive coordinator John Pease will need to come up with a variety of looks and schemes to pressure Goff, hopefully without the need to send extra rushers. A big key to the game will be Jared Norris, who will probably be green-lighted to go after the QB on any play where he doesn't have an obvious coverage assignment.

The biggest change for Cal this year is that they no longer have to score 50 points to win games. That's not to say their defense is all that good. The Bears now only need to score 35 points to win games. This means that the Utes offense will have an opportunity to show some consistency. In the past few years, we've seen Travis Wilson have a good game similar to what he did two weeks ago (although we've never seen him look that good.) Where Wilson has struggled is being consistent, and having 2, 3 or more good weeks in a row. The Utes won't need him to be as good as he was in Autzen stadium, but if the Utes are going to be able to withstand this Bear offensive attack, they will need a good game from Wilson and the rest of the offensive players. This is not the kind of game where Utah can just hand the ball off to Booker and stay in it. This week will be the week where we start to see if the visible difference in Wilson's demeanor this year is simply a mirage.

All This For A Football Game

It's funny how schedules sometimes work out. There is a lot going on off the field this week for Utes. As mentioned above, this is the Homecoming week for the Utes, which already comes with a lot of off the field festivities surrounding the week. Additionally, the Utes announced during the offseason that they were going to sport throwback uniforms during this year's homecoming game.

After the Michigan game, the people in charge of Rice-Eccles stadium decided that the quality of the field wasn't as good as they expected and decided to move up a project to replace the field that was previously scheduled to occur during the offseason. Instead management decided the nearly month long span between the Utah State game, and this week's game would be the perfect time to get a new field installed. As such, the Utes will also be unveiling a new turf this week.

Then there's that other thing you might have heard about? My daughter's favorite Saturday Morning program will be broadcasting from the University. In addition to the main College Gameday taping, which will begin about 5 a.m.

Saturday Morning and the President's Circle, the College Gameday crew will also be filming other segments on Friday.

This will be Gameday's 3rd visit to Rice-Eccles stadium. They were previously here for the 2004 Holy War when Utah's victory made them the first ever BCS Buster. The 2nd trip wasn't so sweet for the Utes as the Gameday trip for the 2010 matchup against TCU saw Utah get routed. It was an extremely ugly loss, but it still wasn't as ugly as those Digi-Camo uniforms the Utes wore that day.

For the record Corso picked the Utes in 2004, and the Horned Frogs in 2010. Combined with picking TCU when Gameday was in Provo, Corso is undefeated with headgear picks in the state of Utah.

Chronicling The Drive

This week's episode of the Drive featured the Utes matchup in Eugene, and Oregon State's loss to Stanford. The star of the episode was Utah Coach Kyle Whittingham during his two locker room segments.

The first segment was pre-game and showed just how much the mentality of Utah is changing. Utah has gone from the fly in the ointment to being a P5 school, but sometimes it seems the mentality is still that of David versus Goliath. Whittingham was having nothing of it, feeling that after some of the giant slayings of the past few years, this was now a battle of "Goliath versus Goliath".

The second segment came during halftime. With the Utes up, and in control, Whittingham didn't want his team to go complacent, instead affirming that it's a 0-0 game, and they had 30 minutes to go out there and take it. Granted the 30 minutes, it's right there in front of you, you just need to go take it mentality isn't anything new, but it's the type of comments that are usually made when you're in a close game, but behind. It's the foot on the gas mentality man have claimed Whittingham has lacked recently.

When To Watch

This week, the Cougars will start our Saturdays by kicking off at 5:30 p.m. mountain time and will be televised on ESPN U.

As that game winds down, you can then switch over to ESPN at 8:30 p.m mountain time, for a little #Pac12AfterDark as the Utes and the Bears will get ready to close out the college football night.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 14:10

Wednesday, September 30, 2015

Red, Blue And Pigskin

So before I start talking about what was truly a shocking weekend of College Football, I ask for a moment of silence and reflection as we sit back and realize that we are already 1/3rd of the way through the College Football Regular Season. These moments are fleeting.

Okay onto last weekend, to which I offer a single piece of advice to both Utah and Byu.....

Burn the Tape. Don't watch it, don't study it, just burn it. After you've burnt the tape, take the ashes and throw it in a dirt pile (similar to the way De'Veon Smith threw Michael Davis off his back) and bury it. Whatever you do don't watch it. No good can come of it.

Obviously, the reasons are very different for each team, but the advice is the same. Burn the tape. Burn The Tape - Big House Edition

The Cougars grind of a September finished up last weekend in Michigan against the Wolverines. Of course, based on the way they played, one could make the argument that the Cougars actually finished their September in Los Angeles, because they sure didn't show up in Michigan. In a truly putrid performance the Cougars got dominated on all sides of the ball while being shut out 31-0.

Offensively the Cougars gained a grand total of 105 yards. Tanner Mangum went 11 minutes before completing a pass. The Wolverine defensive line pushed the Cougar offensive line around all day getting tons of pressure on Mangum. Even when he wasn't pressured, it was clear he and his WR's were not on the same page, as he'd frequently throw a pass expecting a zig, but getting a zag.

Defensively it wasn't any better and the Cougars couldn't stop the Wolverines especially on the ground, with the standout play being the long run by De'Veon Smith.

It was a performance, so bad, and so outside the norm, that there really isn't anything that can be taken away from the game. The Cougars aren't nearly as bad as they seemed there. While struggles for Mangum are to be expected, he'll never look like a High School freshman again like he did in the Big House.

This was an outlier game of massive proportions. One of those games where it's just not your night. It really would not do the players any good to watch the tape for mistakes. It's best to move on beyond this game.

The Good News

Fortunately for the Cougars their September, which was the toughest September schedule in the nation, is over. They now enter a stretch of 5 games where they will be the clear cut favorite to win. That's not to say they won't lose one of those games. Given Bronco Mendenhall's history it would not only shock me to see them lose one of the next 5 games, but I would expect it to happen. I just wouldn't be able to predict it happening.

It starts this weekend with the UConn Huskies coming to town. UConn is 2-2 on the season and two weeks ago gave two time SEC East champion Missouri all it could handle in a 9-6 slugfest. UConn does just enough on Offense to keep it in it's games. Defensively the Huskies have spent 2 of the last three weeks playing option teams in Navy and Army. While Navy was able to tune them up for 300 yards, Army was held to a more pedestrian 150.

After 4 straight weeks of stiff competition, especially on the defensive side of the ball, UConn is the perfect time for the Cougars to start to get healthy, and right the ship. This will be the perfect game to rebound for Mangum, and allow the Cougars to help rebuild some of his confidence. Though if we've seen anything the first 4 weeks, it's that Mangum doesn't lack for confidence.

Burn The Tape - Autzen Edition

5 days later and I still don't know what to say. Even The Dog (not the bounty hunter) would be pleased with this performance. I thought that if Travis Wilson played, and the Utes front 7 were able to ugly the game up, Utah would be

able to keep it close. But this, never expected this. Where nothing went right for Byu and Michigan, absolutely everything went right for Utah at Autzen.

Even when they did get stopped and were forced to punt, something would go right, like the punt hitting the overhead sky cam wire, forcing a re-kick, only Whittingham noticing that the ducks were biting on the rugby run to the right, so they call a fake punt left and get a 33 yard game.

Yea it was that kind of night. Or it was this kind of night. Either way, memorable, weird stuff seems to happen when the Ducks and the Utes play.

When it was all said and done the Utes had steamrolled the Ducks by a score of 62-20. 62 being the most points Oregon had ever allowed at Autzen stadium. The Utes outscored the Ducks 21-7 in the 2nd quarter, only to top that with a 28-0 3rd quarter. The pedestrian Utah offense showed up with 530 yards of total offense. Not counting the 1 play drive with 15 seconds to go in the first half, the Utes scored on 8 consecutive drives, including 6 straight Touchdown drives. Defensively the Utes forced 3 Turnovers, and sacked 3 different Oregon QB's a total of 5 times.

The performance was just stunning. It was a case where everything that could go right for Utah did go right. The Utes will rarely if ever have this many things go right, and play this well again. It's such an outlier performance, that it's best to just Burn the tape, and instead put in the Fresno State, or Utah State tapes where there were plenty of mistakes to be corrected.

Did You Know?

Did you know The Dog from duck hunt, actually has a name? It's Mr. Peepers. But yea I think I'll stick with The Dog.

Much Maligned Travis Wilson - Giant Slayer

One person on the Utes squad who should watch the tape though, and deservedly so, is Travis Wilson. The Sr. QB, playing through the pain of his sprained left shoulder only happened to have his best game of his career. Wilson was 18/30 for 227 yards and 4 TD's. He added another 6 rushes, for 100 yards and a TD. On the rushes you could see he was really hurting after the tackles.

While Wilson's funky delivery will never look crisp, he's never looked more confident in the pocket, and was clearly seeing the whole field. His reads, whether they were which pass to make, or whether to hand off to Booker, or keep the ball on the read were spot on all night. This is the type of game that Wilson has shown he was capable of, but never really put together completely.

This means that Wilson, who spent most of last year having his head and confidence jacked with by Dave Christensen to the point where Kendal Thompson seemed like a viable alternative, has overcome injuries (intracranial artery, hand, shoulder), and constant calls for his benching, to put up a resume of huge wins unlike any ever seen by a Utah QB. Wilson now has 2 wins over Michigan, 1 of which was at the Big House, 2 wins over Stanford, including 1 when they were ranked #5 in the nation, A win over Usc, and a win over Oregon at Autzen stadium. Technically he's credited with a win over Ucla at the Rose Bowl, but that was mostly Thompson in relief after Wilson was pulled. While some Utah QB's may have bigger wins nobody has as many big wins as Travis.

Of course, since Wilson has had big wins before, we've also seen Travis, through injury or fault of his own, then revert back to bad Travis, so now we need to see consistency, and how about a win versus a team from Arizona. Especially since despite being the nation's leader in QBR, he didn't even have his own teams best QBR for the night. That went to DeVontae Booker who went 1/1 for a 35 yard TD to Britain Covey, so Wilson still has work to do.

Utah's Next Opponent: The Utes

This week the Utes are on bye, so while they won't actually play an opponent on the field, the coaching staff will definitely have an opponent off the field to deal with. They have been

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:04

Wednesday, September 23, 2015

Red, Blue And Pigskin

In the words of the great boxer Roberto Duran: No más.

Please Chuckie, No más.

It's been a great 5 years. You've had some spectacular moments. I know you'll always have regrets because you were so close to the brass ring. Your entire career will be defined by being oh so close, but please No más.

With the news that Chuckie Keeton will be out at least 4-6 weeks with a sprained knee I have to say No más.

Had Them Right Where They Wanted Them

Down 1, 3 plus minutes to go, 1 timeout, the ball in Tanner Mangum's hand. The whole football world had to be thinking the same thing. UCLA was screwed.

Then came 4th and 7, and the world knew the Bruins were done.

Alas, the Mangum Magic ran out this week, but unlike the last couple weeks, there's a lot for BYU to be happy about. At least offensively.

The battle between the two freshman QB's went exactly like I said it would. One of the QB's seemed poised and confident, and played more like an established player in his 2nd or 3rd year. While the other spent most of the game seeming flustered, and confused. 1 QB consistently kept command of the field, limited damage he did to his team, and kept putting his team in positions to be successful. The other played like a freshman and made some crucial mistakes that made the day harder on his team than needed to be.

Of course, I figured the roles would be reversed, as for the first time in 3 games Josh Rosen looked like a true freshman, and for the first time in his 2 1/2 games, Mangum looked calm and in control.

That said though, credit the Bruin defense for realizing that Mangum's security blanket is rolling right (Both Hail Mary's and Jeurgens 87 yard td all came with Mangum rolling right), and refused to let him get there all night. UCLA also came to realize that when Mangum rolls right, he's not going to take off running, and stayed solid on defense. As such on 4th and 7, Mangum rolled right. Threw a less than advised pass, and Myles Jack stepped in front of it to end the game. A play which will end up being Jack's last of the season.

This isn't to take anything away from Mangum. He played a good game and wasn't bothered by starting his first road game. Especially when his defense did him no favors all night as they allowed UCLA run all over them. Paul Perkins rushed for 219 yards, while Nate Starks added another 89. In a game where the QB was mostly ineffective for the Bruins, BYU's inability to stop the run kept UCLA in the game, allowing them to ultimately win.

Taking September's Stock

This week's matchup is about two teams whose first month was about testing themselves to see where they were at. For Michigan, it was the beginning of a new era, and ridding themselves of the last one. For BYU it was a gauntlet of a schedule made worse by injuries. Both enter the game sitting at 2-1. 3-1 would obviously be a success for either side. For one side 2-2 would be considered a small success, while the other would probably consider it mostly a failure.

After an opening night loss to the Utes, Michigan has gone back to the confines of the Big House and won each of their last two games quite comfortably, although both against lesser opponents. After allowing an early touchdown against Oregon State, Michigan then proceeded to go on a streak of 6 scoreless quarters defensively, and 63 unanswered points offensively against the Beavers, and UNLV.

Of course, BYU isn't Oregon State, or UNLV.

The key for this game will be whether BYU can get their porous run defense figured out. This has been a problem for

Byu going back to last year. Of course with last week being the worst example, it might be just what Byu needed to focus on it. In a day of spread it out football, Harbaugh is a throw back to the old Power Running days of the past. Michigan is going to want to line up with it's big uglies and pound the ball all day. Byu must stop the run, therefore putting the onus on QB Jake Rudock, who hasn't been as steady at Michigan as he was the previous two seasons at Iowa.

Outside of the running game, the man that Byu must stop defensively is Jabrill Peppers. Peppers was the #1 rated recruit two years ago, and after missing last season with an injury, has shown exactly why through the first three weeks this year. In week 1 against the Utes, Peppers made plays that kept Utah from busting the game open earlier in the game. Against lesser opponents, Peppers has wreaked havoc. Going up against an offensive line that is undisciplined, look for Harbaugh to move Peppers around, and try to introduce him to Mangum early and often.

A Clear Cut Difference

This week, Utah finished an undefeated non conference slate by rolling an unprepared Fresno State. Everything of value about this game was made clear by the end of the 2nd Utah drive. That value was simply this: Utah will not win a single conference game this season if Kendall Thompson is their QB. It just won't happen. Last week I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt until we saw what happened when the offense was planned around Thompson. We saw it, he was actually worse. Thompson struggles to be able to read the defense, causing him to be unsure of where to make the throw. When he finally does figure out the throw, his elongated release takes so long, that by the time he actually releases the ball, the read is no longer valid. Thompson is the football gods giving me Karmic payback for 5 years of Running back playing Quarterback jokes about Taysom Hill and Riley Nelson. Only I'd rather have Riley Nelson, because at least his wasn't slow on making his one read before hucking up the pass, and this year Thompson seems to have lost a step when running.

Utah has about as much chance of success with Thompson at QB this year, as Chip Kelly does relying on Sammy Checkdown to run his offense in Philadelphia.

It makes me wonder, how much did Dave Christensen screw with Travis Wilson's head last year, that Thompson was a viable alternative. Fortunately, Wilson should be back this week.

Duck Hunting Or Duck Food

The irony about the clear distinction between Wilson and Thompson being so evident this week is that it was the Oregon game last year where we briefly saw the dynamics that Thompson could bring to the offense. Last year going into the Oregon name, Wilson has lost the starting job, and it seemed as though it was going to stick this time. Thompson came in led the Utes to a quick 7 point lead on the first drive. Oregon could do nothing to stop Thompson as he was leading Utah on his second drive before he planted wrong and blew out his knee on a non contact injury.

We can't forget what happened next. Wilson connected with Clay on a beautiful 78 yard pass, that needed to be 79 before Clay spiked the ball. Oregon recovered ran it back for a TD, and instead of being up 14-0 with all the momentum, the Utes were shell shocked at 7-7. They'd eventually make it a 3 point game with 12 minutes to play, but the Ducks would pull away.

This year the Ducks will be have a new QB in Eastern Washington transfer Vernon Adams. Adams is playing with a broken index finger that severely effected his ability to pass downfield against Michigan State. The index finger is the last finger to come off of the ball, and greatly assists in getting a pass the proper rotation and velocity it needs. Against the Spartans, any pass greater than 20 yards really seemed to be hampered like a lame duck (no pun intended.)

Utah remembers first hand how a jacked up hand can affect a QB after Wilson hurt his hand late in the Stanford upset two years ago. If Adams is compromised, Utah's defense is the type of defense that can keep things close. In a game when there doesn't seem to be much optimism around the fan base, most of the hope seems to rely on Adams being hampered.

If Adams isn't hampered by his finger, this could be the first of several big tests for a Utah defensive backfield that has shown a tendency to let the defender get behind them. While the Db's have made less, and less mistakes each week, they're still managing to let wide receivers get behind them for huge chunk plays. Against Michigan there were three passes that would have been touchdowns if Rudock could have connected. Utah State stayed in the game because of missed DB assignments, and Fresno State actually managed to make a dominant blowout look like a normal blowout because of garbage time 2nd string missed DB assignments. Against Oregon, those missed assignments will be all the more costly.

If Adams isn't effective in the air, the Utes stout defensive front 7 will be tested by RB Royce Freeman. Through three games Freeman is averaging 125 yards per game, and has 5 TD's. He's also averaging almost 7 yards per carry. Of course two of those games were against 1-AA Eastern Washington, and Georgia Southern. Against Michigan State, Freeman found it a little bit tougher sledding with only 3.8 yards per carry and 92 yards rushing. The Utes must keep Freeman closer to those totals than to the totals of the other two games.

Familiar Territory

The Utes are now 14-1 (Utah State 2012 being the only loss) in non conference play since joining the Pac-12. This means it's the the 3rd time they've entered the season halfway to a bowl game. Only in one of those season did they manage to earn a winning conference record, and only twice did they secure a bowl game after entering conference play 3-0.

Utah has also never won it's Pac-12 opener. Utah has also not beaten Oregon since 2003, or Arizona State in 30 years. I think they haven't ever beaten the Huskies.

Basically this means just because Utah's sitting pretty now, the precarious nature and difficulty of Conference play can mean it's all for naught come postseason time.

In case you were wondering here is how Utah has fared against each team since joining the Pac-12.

Arizona State: 0-4, 0 and the lad 30 years.

Arizona: 1-3, with Arizona winning the last three.... handily.

Cal: 1-1

Colorado: 3-1, that 1 is the Colorado high point since joining the Pac-12, snapping a two year road losing streak.... sigh!

Oregon: 0-2

Oregon State: 2-2

Ucla: 2-2

Usc: 1-3

Stanford: 2-0

Washington: 0-2, actually 0 and Forever.

Washington State: 2-2, Some Cougars can beat the Utes, having won the last 2.

Who Needs Cable

For the first time since, well since I'm not sure when, both Utah, and Byu will be available on over the air channels.

Byu will kickoff at the Big House at 10:00 Mountain time, and will be televised on ABC Channel 4.

Utah meanwhile with kickoff at 6:30 Mountain time and will be on Fox 13. Judging by having lost all the coin tosses this year, they'll probably be the ones kicking off as well.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 15:27

Wednesday, September 16, 2015

Red, Blue And Pigskin

I went to bed Saturday night thinking that the worst thing I was going to have to hear about the next day was Cougar fans talking about their latest miracle. Instead I woke up Sunday and started hearing about the two Utah players who were shot.

Fortunately both are okay and expected to make a full recovery, but talk about putting a damper on things. But it does remind you that not only are these real people we obsess about but their just young kids as well. Best wishes to them as they continue on their road to recovery.

I hate when the real world interferes with my sports. Some times it feels like a real shot to the nuts. So Nice He Did It Twice

Last week during the national fawning over Mangum's Nebraska Hail Mary, former Washington Husky QB, and current Pac-12 analyst Brock Huard was on the radio and mentioned that he had never completed a Hail Mary in his football playing life.

Well Mr Huard, Tanner Mangum thinks you failed at life, because not only has he completed a Hail Mary he's done it twice. With an 84 yard bomb mixed in for good measurement, and once again, Mangum pulled Byu's butt out of the fire of defeat in a game where Byu spent the majority of it flailing around like a fish out of water.

While Mangum was the man who hucked up pass, and this week it was Mitch Jeurgens who came down with it, the man responsible for the Byu victory is a man that most Cougar fans love to hate. None other than Offensive Coordinator Robert Anae. After all it was Anae's decision to stick with the run in the 2nd half, despite the fact that it had been entirely stuffed in the first half, that allowed Byu to wear down the Boise State defensive line, and kept the game close as the Byu passing game sputtered and stalled behind a true freshman who, outside of two passes, played like a true freshman. Anae insistence on running the ball, even after a -14 yard first half, allowed the pressure to be taken off of Mangum.

In doing so, the Cougars may have also settled on their main back for the year and it was Adam Hine who toted 19 of the teams 39 rushes, falling just short of 100 yards on the day.

Defensively, the Cougars were happy to see the return of Safety Kai Nacua whose 3 interceptions, including a game ending pick 6, must have seemed like a sucker punch to a Boise State offense that just couldn't seem to get out of their own way. Despite finding great success early on with RB Jeremy McNichols as Boise twice gained 10 point leads, the Broncos seemed intent to put the game in the hands of their QB Ryan Finley. As such, after scoring to make the game 24-14 in the 3rd quarter, the Broncos only managed a total of 12 plays on their final 5 drives of the game, for a grand total of -8 yards, including two of Nacua's interceptions.

Two Sides Of The Same Coin

This week the Cougars take on the UCLA Bruins, another team currently being led by a true freshman QB. There are some pretty big differences between the two teams though.

The first difference is that while the Bruins have the talent, experience and depth that for the most part they are a team that won't need to rely heavily on their true freshman QB, while the Cougars really don't. There is definitely some talent on the Cougars, but the Bruins are a team that return most of their skill position players from last year, including the Pac-12's leading rusher. This is a team that has the depth to be able to withstand the growing pains of a freshman QB and still win most of their games.

The other big difference is that while outside of about three throws, Mangum has looked like a true freshman, Rosen hasn't. During the normal offense of his game against Boise State, Mangum struggled. He was slow to make his reads, struggled to properly read coverages, would hold onto the ball too long, and had a hard time putting the right touch on his passes, often launching rockets for short passes. Many times he'd throw an ill advised pass, hoping his tall receivers would bail him out. Of course, this is everything you would expect from a qb making his first start, and will all be resolved as he gets more playing time.

Where Mangum truly excelled is he never seemed to panic, and always was in control. Most importantly, Mangum has something that has been lacking from the Byu QB position for many years. Well founded confidence in his arm. Which is what allowed him to make the big plays. So far, he's truly been Feast or Famine Mangum. As long as his famine stage doesn't go too long, the occasional feast will be enough.

Rosen on the other hand looked absolutely stellar in his debut, and while he was a bit more pedestrian in week 2, still looked like a QB in his 2nd year, not his 2nd start. As the #1 overall QB recruit, his home debut against a tough Virginia defense saw him shred them for 351 yards, and 3 TD's. It's not just his numbers that looked good, but also his ball placement on throws, leaving them in just the right place for his WR's to make a play, and not have to have his WR's make a play to save the pass. On the road in week 2, Rosen came back to earth a little bit more, hitting only just over 50% of his passes, with 1 TD and 1 Int, but it was a game that illustrated how the rest of Rosen's offense will put UCLA in a great position to be able to withstand freshman growing pains as RB Paul Perkins ran for 151 of Ucla's 273 rushing yards.

This week will be a step up in defensive opponent for Rosen though. Not necessarily because the Cougars are all that much better than Virginia, but because Bronco is a great defensive play caller, who is really good at disguising what he's doing. The key for both teams will be which team is able to get their RB game going, and take pressure off their young QB.

Of course if it's only a 1 score game with under a minute to go, that means the Cougars will have the Bruins right where they want them. Just beware when Mangum rolls to his right because that means he's cooking up a feast.

The Return Of Chuckie

Much like the doll, just when you think he's done, Chuckie Keeton returns, bringing fear and havoc with him. Late in the first quarter, Utah LB Sunia Tauteoli lost his footing after jumping over an Aggie blocker and came crashing down into Keeton's twice surgically repaired lower leg. Keeton immediately dropped to the ground holding his knee.

Keeton didn't stay down long however, and jumped up a second or two later in serious pain, as he jumped around trying to shake the pain out of his leg. Keeton would end up staying in the game and missing no time.

Last week I said the only way the Aggies stay in this game was if the Keeton of old shows up. Seemingly bolstered by surviving the scare on his leg, Keeton played like the Chuckie Keeton of old, for the first time in almost 3 years as he led the Aggies to a 14-14 tie at halftime. For the Aggies though it wouldn't be enough as the Utes made half time adjustments, and while Keeton would still find success moving the ball down the field later in the game, the stout Utah defense would finally get to Keeton and welcome him to Sack Lake City. Two 4th quarter turnovers would eventually end any last Aggie threat.

Much like the horror movies of Keeton's doll namesake, near success was caused do to key casualties. In the case of the Utes it came late in the first half. Travis Wilson once again was showing command of the offense, and had the Utes moving well during the first half. The offensive success had even seen Booker start to break free. But that all changed when late in the first half Travis Wilson remained on the field. They took him off the field, and when next we saw him, his arm was in a sling, and early reports said it was a broken collarbone, meaning it was now time for fans to see Kendall Thompson.

Be Careful What You Wish For

As Utah fall camp was ongoing, there was a big portion of the Ute fan base, having been worn down by Wilson's inconsistency last year, who were clamoring for the job to be given over to Kendall Thompson. With Wilson out, and it looking like it might be a long term thing, this group was about to get their wish.

It wouldn't take long for them to change their mind. When Thompson came in, the offense went out.

Remember when I mentioned how Mangum struggled and was slow making his reads and deciding when to throw, and how it's typical for a freshman. For a Senior, not so good. Add in Thompson's elongated throwing motion and that means Thompson was a half step slow on the read, and then a half step slow on the throw. These are not good things for a passing game. As the game went on, the few times Thompson did throw you could tell his was just a little bit behind his WR's pace. On one occasion his double delay actually saved an Interception as he missed the defender jump the route, but the defender was anticipating a quicker throw and overshot the interception (and probably pick 6.)

With a threat of a passing game mainly neutralized, the Utes went into a run protect offense. The Aggies loaded 9 in the box, and despite the win, the season hopes of the sold out Rice-Eccles stadium drained away.

Fortunately as the weekend progressed, the outlook got a bit better for Utah. Turns out it wasn't a broken collarbone, but instead an AC sprain in his non-throwing shoulder for Wilson. Next came the news that depending on how he handles the pain, worst case scenario for a return would be the Cal game, and best case would be either the Oregon or Fresno State game. Finally came video of Wilson passing in practice on Tuesday.

The key will be how well can he withstand the hits, as the injury happened to his non throwing shoulder. This is the same injury Byu inflicted upon Oklahoma QB Sam Bradford. Bradford missed a few weeks, before coming back. Two games later he re-injured it on another hit and didn't play again until he was busy sabotaging the St. Louis Rams with check down after check down. The big concern is making sure that when Wilson comes back, it has healed enough to not be reinjured in normal play.

Until then, Utah will need to seriously tweak their offensive gameplan, as it was clear the plan they had set up for Wilson, won't work with Thompson. Thompson, while limited as a passer, does have his strengths, and most of them revolve around the use of his legs. Utah needs to take advantage of that. A heavier dose of the zone read needs to be implemented. It would also be nice to see some of that triple option style attack that puts a runner to the outside, an H back to the inside, and gives Thompson the ability to pitch, or shovel pass. Essentially, after spending the majority of the last 4 years making fun of Byu and the RB playing QB based offense, karma now has me advocating for just exactly that kind of gameplan for however long Wilson can't go.

Also, and this can't be overstated enough. Utah really, really, really, really needs to take the top off the defense. Even if it's incomplete, Utah must throw deep at least two or three times this game, just to establish the threat.

Perfect Place For A Tuneup

One thing I really hate about Utah typically having their cupcake game as the season opener, as they've done in the past (and has just been announced, they will do in 2019, 2020) is that you don't get anything of value out of that game. I've always thought, that if Utah insisted on the cupcake game, it should always be the week before conference play. That way you get two good games of data to use, and week to tune up.

In the past Fresno State wouldn't typically be considered a tune up game, or a cupcake. This year, they would be. Fresno is bad. Fresno just got done getting thrashed by Ole Miss 73-21 in a game that wasn't even that close. That being said factor in having to bring Thompson up to speed, there is a slight Ackbar Alert factor to this game.

Utah isn't as good as Ole Miss to put up 73 on Fresno (Ole Miss isn't as good as they looked either, but that's a different argument) but Utah's defense is stout enough to limit Fresno into making some crucial mistakes. Even if Thompson struggles a bit, this should be a perfect opportunity for Booker to get back on track.

In regards to Wilson, there are some who think if he's healthy, he should play. Personally I'm of the belief of giving him the extra week to heal before a hugely important Oregon game. After all, it's not like we can trust Wilson to be careful with his body.

View From The Redzone

When Chuckie Keeton was on the ground holding his knee, it sucked the air out of the stadium. Usually when an opposing player gets hurt, the crowd typically waits and talks amongst themselves. When it's a Utah player, the crowd is usually silent waiting to see how bad. Keeton's injury was the first time I can remember an opposing player getting a home player reaction to an injury. Of course, as I said Keeton managed to get up, and suck the air out of the stadium again going into halftime 14-14, and cause a very tense stadium to worry.

Sorry, but nope. First Quarter, 3rd Quarter. I don't care when. Corporate sponsored waves are wrong. Even though this one actually succeeded in getting started, I refused to stand up for it, and I will continue to refuse all season long. I will not allow ISIS to win.

One more thing. To the rest of the Mountain West Conference, on behalf of the Utes, sorry about that whole waking Chuckie Keeton up, and now you have to deal with him thing.

New Information Means Time To Re-evaluate

Before the season I made my usual predictions. As the season goes along and we get more information, I am going to occasionally revisit and re-evaluate them.

I'll start with Utah State who I originally predicted a 8-4 season with losses to Utah, Fresno, Boise State, and Air Force. So far the only one of those I'd for sure change would be that the Aggies shouldn't have any problem with Fresno State. I'm not ready to pull the plug on Air Force or Boise State game, but I will say that the Air Force game might be the more difficult of those two.

Next up is the Cougars who I said would go 7-5. Obviously I'm already off by 1 as Mangum Miracle #2 meant I missed last week's prediction. At this point, that's all I would change.

For Utah the first thing I would change was that prediction about Utah taking advantage of freshman mistakes by Josh Rosen. Yea that's not happening. There's two other predictions I'm not ready to change, but will admit might be different than expected. First up the Cal Bears. In both games our defensive backs have shown a propensity for letting the WR get behind them. If that doesn't get fixed, it could be a long day. Secondly the Oregon game, and news that QB Vernon Adams has a broken index finger. Watching his game against Michigan State, he struggled down the field, and his accuracy just wasn't there. Utah has the right type of defense to keep games against Oregon close, and Utah knows first hand from a couple years ago, just how badly a jacked up throwing hand can hurt a qb.

Get Your DVR's Ready

This week, if you want to watch both Byu and Utah, you must either get your channel changing game up to mid season form, or record one, as both teams kickoff Saturday at 8:30 p.m. mountain time. The Byu/Ucla game will be on Fox Sports 1, while Utah gets to relive their Mountain West days on Cbs Sports Network.

The Aggies meanwhile will face off against Washington at 5:00 p.m. on the Pac-12 Network.

Yet Another Reminder...

...that early season polls are stupid. And no, despite the fact that I think Byu jumping 8 spots is a bit ridiculous, their two impressive, and newsmaking wins means they should be ranked, so they aren't who I'm referring to.

Instead I'm referring to the idiotic Coaches Poll, who somehow equate the #7 team in the nation losing a 3 point game to the #5 team in the nation equivalent to the #6 team in the nation, getting completely outplayed and needing Overtime to beat a Division 1-AA team.

That's right despite the fact that the by the logic of the polls Michigan State (at home) was expected to win a close game against Oregon, the ducks were punished by dropping 8 spots. Meanwhile Auburn, who struggled against 1-AA Jacksonville State, and needed essentially a botched punt to allow them to force overtime also dropped 8 spots. Although let's be honest, we're all kind of shocked that Auburn dropped at all, usually winning teams, even when winning ugly don't drop.

The polls make me so happy that we have a committee that can actually discuss these games. At least the AP only dropped Oregon 5 spots, but that's still about 3 or 4 spots too many, and dropped Auburn 12 spots.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:32

Friday, September 11, 2015

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Wow! It's amazing one what 1 second can do. After 59 minutes and 59 seconds in Lincoln the Byu Cougars were looking at not only a season opening loss, but a season opening loss where Taysom Hill got hurt (though the extent wasn't known yet.)

1 second of playtime later (about 10 seconds of real time) and Cougar nation is in pure ecstatic joy.

That play is why we love sports.1 Second Brings Glory

The last second of Saturday's game was thrilling. It's everything we love about sports, all the way down to the pure excitement of Bronco running around like a gleeful little child on Christmas Day, and Byu WR Terrance Houk hugging the referee because he was so happy. That 1 second is the dream we all have in our back yards of winning the big game. All the nonsense that has been circling the sport of football the last few years didn't matter. What mattered was the pure glory for the victors, and the soul crushing despair of defeat for the losers.

The first 59 minutes and 59 seconds though showed something else.

Through the majority of the game, the Byu defense looked to still be the same defense that was such a problem last year. Offensively it wasn't so much about Byu being able to stop Nebraska, but about Nebraska making silly mistakes to throw off their own rhythm. Outside of Bronson Kaufusi the Byu defense was dreadful. Nebraska's offensive line was able to control the line of scrimmage, giving Nebraska's QB plenty of time to make decisions. Of course, that may very well have been the best strategy defensively for the Cougars, because when Nebraska's QB ran timing plays, they moved the ball well, but when he was left back their to his own decision making, it usually didn't come out well.

Offensively, the absolutely best thing of the game was Byu's decision to dump Go Fast, Go Hard. Instead it was Go Normal, Go Hard. Gone was the break neck 120+ plays per game pace of the last couple years. The pace that would cause Byu's own players to suck wind. The play that wouldn't allow the offense to get into a rhythm because the focus was on speed, speed, speed, at the expense of execution. While Byu's running game struggled mightily, the passing game was in as best of form as I've seen in a while.

The star offensively of the game isn't anyone involved in that final play, but it was WR Nick Kurtz. Kurtz showed a little bit of everything during the game. He was able to get behind the defense. He was also able to use his size to outjump the Nebraska defense. Kurtz is setup to be a star this year for the Cougars.

With the running game grounded, the passing game was enough to keep Byu down by only 1 point with 1 second to go. And then the Sports Gods giveth.

The Sports Gods Also Taketh

Unfortunately once the euphoria of the moment surpassed, reality set in. The news came out this week that Sr. QB Taysom Hill suffered a Lisfranc injury to his ankle, effectively ending his season, for the 3rd time in 4 years, as well as probably not only his Byu career, but his football career completely. It's too bad though, because even though Taysom seemed a bit off even before the injury in the first quarter, he was having his best game as a QB he's had his entire career. Gone was the one read and run Taysom of the last few years. This Taysom was not only confident staying in the pocket, but he seemed to be comfortable being in there, and only taking off when needed. It would have really been interesting to see what this Taysom could have done. Especially with these tall WR's Byu has.

Tanner Mangum, who performed admirably in relief, including throwing the aforementioned hail mary, isn't your typical "true" freshman. Mangum was the Elite 11 co-Mvp 3 years ago with Jameis Winston, before going on a mission to Chile. This means, unlike most true freshman he isn't a 18 or 19 year old kid fresh out of high school. He'll have a maturity that most freshman don't have. That said being so fresh off a mission has issues of it's own.

Football wise though, Mangum is still a freshman. His first division 1 action was acquired last week. Now it's his team the rest of this year. There is a big difference between coming in for relief, and going through the entire week knowing you are the guy. It's a whole new set of butterflies he'll have to deal with.

Bronco Must Bust The Broncos

First up for young Mangum is the Boise State Broncos. The Broncos managed to play two games last week. At least that's what it seemed. In the first half, they were having their way against Washington. Especially on the ground. The second half they seemed to get into a shell and almost blew the game before holding on late for the victory.

Byu needs to put all the emotion of this week away, and focus on the task at hand. Offensively, the Byu must contain a defense that returns essentially its entire starting defensive line. A defensive line that is ranked 8th in the nation by people like Phil Steele. A defensive line that likes to wreak havoc if it can get into the backfield, and one that will want to come after and attempt to rattle Mangum. One plus the Cougars have is their WR corps are a tall group of guys, who displayed a knack for battling for the ball last week.

Defensively, the Cougars need to drastically improve from last week, in basically every facet of defense. Keep in mind though, this isn't the pass crazy Boise State of old, this is a high powered running game who seemed to replace Jay Ajayi pretty effectively last week. Against Nebraska, Byu was sloppy, out of position, and pushed around. This week they'll need more than just Bronson Kaufusi to show up defensively.

Who-Baugh?

After months of never ending focus on a guy on the sidelines, Utah and Michigan players finally got to play the long awaited matchup. The Utes ultimately prevailed 24-17, thanks to a garbage time prevent defense by Utah. This was a game that wasn't as close as that final score, but was very precarious going into the 4th quarter.

Defensively, the Utes were never able to take Michigan to Sack Lake City, but they still managed to control the line of scrimmage, and held the Wolverine rushing attack to 2.7 yards per carry average. The Wolverines were keeping multiple tight ends back at the line of scrimmage in order to deal with the Utah pass rush, and while QB Jake Rudock took quite a few shots, was able to use the max protect, and a quick release to avoid taking a sack all night.

Through the air was a different story for the Utah defense though. The Utes were hit and miss all night. The high point was taking advantage of mistakes by Rudock for three interceptions, including the game clinching pick six by Justin Thomas in the fourth quarter. The bad though was the youth on the back side biting a few times on double moves allowing Wolverine WR Jehu Chesson get behind them, only to be bailed out by overthrows by the QB's.

When the Utes were on offense, the Wolverines keyed on Devontae Booker, and made it tough sledding for him. The rebuilt offensive line struggled at times as the Wolverines were able to keep Booker to just 69 yards on 22 carries. Of course this shouldn't be too much of a shock, as there is a strong possibility the Michigan defense is the best defense the Utes will face all year, and they were the team to shut down Booker the most last season.

With the running game stuck in neutral it fell on Travis Wilson to lead the team through the air. While his numbers aren't all that amazing, what was really impressive was he showed a poise and presence in the pocket that had been missing. Last year at the first sign of pressure Wilson would either try to run, or simply just take the sack. This year, while he did take 1 sack, Wilson had a much better awareness in the pocket and would step up and keep his eyes down field as he led the Utes to victory.

It's only 1 week, but if this is the Wilson the Utes are going to get week in and week out, it's a Wilson that they and the fans should be happy with. It's a Wilson that can get those extra 15 yards per quarter the team needs to move up in efficiency.

While Wilson had a good week 1, new play caller Aaron Roderick struggled to adjust. I swear if I see one more bubble screen this entire season it'll be 2 too many. There's been a lot of calls for our WR's to create separation on the edges, but it's awfully hard for them to do it, if we're not calling routes that go deeper than 5 yards.

Battle Of The Brothers

Quick, what is the longest running in state rivalry? Did you know it's Utah and Utah State? Did you know that Utah's very first game was against Utah State. This week the rivalry continues when the Utes and the Aggies meet up at Rice-Eccles Stadium. I've vacillated all week trying to decide if Utah State's dismal performance, and the emotion of the hype from last week for the Utes has turned this game into our first Ackbar Alert game of the year, or if the fact that it's a bit of a rivalry game means no way would it be overlooked.

The Aggies are coming off of a 12-9 victory where they were shut out offensively from the end zone. Common refrain would say the Aggies were trying to stay vanilla against such lower competition, and they'll have new wrinkles ready for this week. I'd agree with that except for one thing. Last year, before he got hurt again, Chuckie Keeton was playing with a sense of hesitancy, as if he didn't trust his body. All accounts say that's how Keeton looked last week. I almost wonder if Keeton's injuries at this point have affected him too much mentally.

The Utes will look to get Booker going on the ground, and will have to handle the Aggies two great linebackers Kyle Fackrell and Nick Virgil. The Utes also announced this week that defensive back Dominique Hatfield has been reinstated to the team. Since he missed fall camp, he may not quite be ready for football, but look for the Utes to use the next couple weeks to get him ready for Pac-12 play.

Ultimately though this game comes down to Keeton. Keeton is the reason the Aggies won 3 years ago, and is the reason the game was so close 2 years ago. The only way this game will be close is if Keeton is able to overcome his mental hurdles. If Keeton shows up mentally, this game could be closer than Utah fans, coming off of last week's emotional victory, would like. If the Keeton of the last two years shows up, the one who's hesitant, than this game could get away from the Aggies.

View From The Redzone

Last week Rice-Eccles had it's largest crowd in history, and to be quite honest, there wasn't as many Michigan fans as I thought there would be. Don't get me wrong, there were quite a bit of Maize and Blue in the stands, but I still expected more.

The Utes were very loose during this game. There were times last year when during timeouts and stoppages of play you could see how tight the Utes were on the sideline. A big example is during the Washington State comeback last year, the Utes would be in the huddle during a timeout, while the Cougars sideline would be dancing to the music, and generally full of energy. Last week was the exact opposite for the Utes. During stoppages of play, it was Utah who was dancing and being loose on the sideline. At one point late in the game, TE Harrison Handley caught a big pass between Michigan defenders to give the Utes first down in the red zone. When play was stopped for a minute, LB Jared Norris came running from off the sideline directly to Handley, gave him a congratulatory smack on the helmet, and sprinted back for the sideline. It's a camaraderie and looseness that's been missing from the Utes for a few years, and it was nice to see.

I liked the new clapping routine for the Taiko drum in the 3rd quarter, but man those speakers were terrible.

I'm not one of those people who absolutely hate the wave. I like the wave, but it has a time and a place. The wave is best when it's organically started by the crowd during a game that's gotten out of hand, and are just trying to keep themselves entertained. You want to know what isn't the time and place? Any time it's corporate sponsored is not the time and place. Also not 7 minutes into the first quarter of the game. Fortunately the North End Zone was having none of the "Costa Vida Wave", and it died a miserable death. Hopefully the idea suffers the same fate altogether.

What To Watch And When

Well fortunately none of the games are on KSL since they're being pills with Direct TV, so unlike the Patriots/Steelers game it can actually be viewed.

The Utes and Aggies kickoff Friday night at 7:00 p.m. Mountain Time and can be viewed on ESPN 2.

ESPN 2 will also be showing the Boise State at Byu game, but it won't kick off till Saturday night at 8:15 p.m. Mountain Time, which means you better start working on your excuses to get out of those early morning church meetings Sunday.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 11:40

Wednesday, September 2, 2015

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Finally, we've made it. We have survived the wasteland. We have suffered, and been tormented. At long last we are coming out of the wilderness after our proverbial 40 years (or 30ish weeks). Finally we can see the light at the end of the tunnel that is the offseason. Of course in this case that light is the headlights of a Khaki dressed bus.

The More Things Change....

As we prepare to enter the 2015 season of Beehive State College Football, it's amusing how many of the story lines are carry overs from last season. Stop me if you've heard these before.

Utah State welcomes back QB Chuckie Keeton from the knee injury that knocked him out of last season. The Aggies managed to cobble together a respectable season last year without him (and eventually without their 2nd string QB as well.) The Aggies hope that Keeton is able to return to at least a portion of his former self. If last year showed us anything though, it's that Keeton may have a hard time overcoming the mental aspect of his comeback, moreso than the physical.

Of course, Keeton has now been around long enough that he was the subject of a players who have been around forever article by grantland.com. My two favorite parts of the article was Grantland mentioning that Keeton was already the subject of his own comeback article on their site the previous year, as well as Grantland reminding us that the coach who recruited Keeton is now at his 2nd school after leaving Utah State.

Speaking of QB's, leg injuries, and health, the Cougars are once again hoping that Taysom Hill can stay healthy throughout the entire season. For as Taysom goes, so goes the Cougars. Sure last year, the Cougars survived Taysom's injury to post a respectable 8 win season. This year though they don't have the best passing QB they've had since Max Hall waiting as a forgotten backup, and they're playing a much more difficult schedule. So once again Cougar fans are going to be holding their breath with every Taysom run, trying to walk the fine line between wishing he'd stop running it so much, and hoping for some more of his amazing plays he generates with his legs.

Finally while talking about QB's, it wouldn't be a new season of Football up on the hill without the question marks once again around the Utah offense, the Utah offensive coordinators, and how is going to step up in the QB Position. Much like last year, the battle this year is between returning incumbent Travis Wilson, and backup Kendall Thompson. Unlike last year, we've seen what Thompson can do, and yet still aren't really sure what either QB can do. Well at least this year, the Utes don't have to worry about the Offensive Coordinator changing again.

Oh Wait... that's right...

Once again, the Utes will have a new offensive coordinator, in this case 2. That means in the last 7 season, the Utes have had a change at that very important position. This year, Andy Roderick returns to offensive coordinator/play calling duties. Once again the Utes are going the Co-Offensive Coordinator route, by also promoting OL Coach Jim Harding. Supposedly the dynamic is that Roderick will be in charge of calling the every down plays, while Harding is in charge of the overall gameplan, and major decisions (such as whether to go for it on 4th, etc.) Well at least this year they didn't bring in anyone from outside the program.

Previewing the Aggies

The Aggies managed to withstand QB injuries better than anyone outside the city of Columbus would ever be expected to. Down to their 3rd string (and for a few plays their 4th string) QB, the Aggies put together a 10 win season. This year they come into the season with the confidence that should the worst possible luck ever fall on Chuckie Keeton, they can survive at the QB position.

Perhaps an even bigger return from injury would be that of Linebacker Kyle Fackrell. Fackrell is the heart and soul of the Aggie Defense, and along with Nick Vigil are key cogs in a stout Aggie defense.

The Aggies have a rough start to the season. After opening up with a prostitution game against the Southern Utah Thunderbirds (At least it's an in-state team.... and not Wagner or Idaho State), the next 6 games are against either

Power 5 foes, or the expected leaders in their conference. It starts with an in state trip to Rice-Eccles, followed by a trip to the North West to face off against the enigma that is the Chris Petersen led Washington Huskies. Once they get into conference play, they have to hit the ground running by first playing Colorado State, followed by a matchup against the West division winners for the last 3 years, the Fresno State Bulldogs. Next up is expected Big 5 Conference representative on New Year's Day, Boise State on the smurf turf. After what's sure to be an emotional game against the Broncos, the Aggies next take the last of the Conference top dogs, in the San Diego Aztecs. It's a 6 game stretch that could see the Aggies be set up nicely for a New Year's Day run, or desperately trying to salvage their season. Which means the season ending rivalry game against the Cougars could have a lot of wait for the Aggies, moreso than just emotionally.

Meanwhile Down South

When last we saw the Cougars, their head coach was busy icing a kicker on a PAT Attempt, not once, but twice. The Same kicker then booting a long figgie to ice the game in overtime, immediately followed by a lousy baseball stadium layout leading to an ugly brawl full of beat downs, helmets as weapons, and ugly sucker punch and runs. (No seriously, who thought that having both teams family one one side of the field, causing players from both teams going to one side of the field to greet them post game, was a good idea?)

I bring up the brawl not to take a shot at the Cougars (that's what the comment about icing the PAT was for) but because it's repercussions will extend into this season, as Bronco has said there will be suspensions, even if they won't be officially made known who, and how long until after the Nebraska game starts. Rumors state there could be up to 10 suspensions for at least part of the Nebraska game. Of course it's all conjecture at this point, as the only suspension we know of is LB Sione Takitaki being suspended for the Nebraska game after being charged with 2 counts of theft. Based on Bronco's history I would guess Kai Nacua gets 2 games for the sucker punch, Harvey Langi And Trey Dye get 1/2 a game for having their wild punches caught on camera, and everyone else receives the "handled internally" slap on the wrist.

Offensively, the conversation begins and ends with QB Taysom Hill. Hill, as we know, is returning from his second major lower leg injury in the last three years. When healthy there's not a more dynamic QB in college football with his legs. Hill is a player who has the ability to take a broken down play and run it for a big game, leaving even the biggest, and baddest out there diving at air. Hill is as confident with his legs, and Peyton Manning is with his arm (before neck surgery.) Of course, it's exactly that confidence that gives Cougar fans the biggest concern, as Hill tends to bail on plays too early, and take off. Which is why the biggest offensive missing piece will not be because of a brawl suspension, but it will be the loss of RB Jamaal Williams who left the school for personal reasons during the summer. With Williams back there, the Cougars had another legitimate running threat for which to work the zone read. Unless Adam Hine, and Algernon Brown can prove they are reliable every down (even if as a committee) teams will have one less thing to take away their attention from Taysom.

In the air, the Cougars are excited to finally see the promise that WR Nick Kurtz was showing before offseason injury forced him to miss all of last years. In addition the Cougars are hoping returning WR Devon Blackmon has finally matured enough to be a factor. Mitch Matthews is the leading returner and was a major reason Christian Stewart was able to get comfortable last year.

The Cougar offense is in a tough spot, as we saw last year with Stewart just how effective the offense could be if it slowed down just a bit, and had a QB who was willing to make the reads, and not just run. On the other hand Taysom dynamic abilities are enough to overcome so many mistakes by the rest of the team, assuming he stays health, and Go Fast, Go Hard, doesn't run him into the ground.

Defensively the Cougars were absolutely dreadful last season. When Taysom went down, we saw just how much of a factor Taysom was. Hill's ability on the offensive end, was able to put up enough points to save the dreadful defense, and when he went down, the Cougars suffered drastically as they waited for Stewart to come up to speed.

Supposedly last year's Defensive Coordinator remains in the job, but with Head Coach Bronco Mendenhall managing the play calls. While we've seen how effective his defenses can be when Mendenhall calls the plays, we've also got plenty of evidence that tells us Mendenhall really struggles managing the rest of the game and duties as Head Coach when he does. Mendenhall even admitted as much after a 55-30 shellacking by Boise State last year.

The Cougars will be tested early and often, as they play arguably the toughest September slate of games. They have 3 games on the road, going to Lincoln to face Nebraska, the Rose Bowl to play UCLA, and end September at the Big House against the Michigan John Harbaugh's Wolverines. The lone home game isn't a treat either, as it's a rematch of the aforementioned Bronco beatdown versus Boise State.

And Up On The Hill

After a few years of struggling to adjust, the Utes finally broke through in 2014 and posted a 9 win season. A 9 win season that Ute fans could legitimately say was 2 plays (Dres' drop versus Washington State, Dominique Hatfield's missed interception vs. Arizona State) from being an 11 win season. One would think that finally all would be calm in the offseason for Utah.

Think again.

Shortly after the season, media took hold of the fact that Utah Athletic director Chris Hill didn't want to extend coordinators for more than the next season. A not all that crazy notion, considering after 2 consecutive 5 win campaigns, Whittingham entered 2014 on the hot seat, and the Utes were honestly as close to 6 wins in 2014 as Kaelin Clay was to crossing the goal line against Oregon. One can't be entirely sure that the Utes have turned it around after one season. Hill understandably wants to see a repeat performance, and doesn't want to be on the hook for contract buyouts should it not work.

Matters were only made worse when Dave Christensen did what all Utah offensive coordinators do, and change positions or leave after one year. The cherry on top was when former Utah Defensive Coordinator, former Utah State Head Coach, former Wisconsin Head Coach, and new Oregon State Head Coach decided that screwing Bronco over during a call for references wasn't enough, and offered Kalani Sitake a chance to prove his mettle outside of Kyle's system by joining him in Corvallis.

Now the Utes needed a new Offensive, and Defensive Coordinator and the calendar hadn't even changed to 2015.

This time though Kyle went with continuity and promoted from within on the offensive side, returning Aaron Roderick to play calling duties, and promoting Jim Harding to Offensive Coordinator, and reached out to long time defensive Assistant John Pease to take over the defense.

On the field the Utes had an amazing defense in 2014. A defense that led the nation in Sacks. A defense that saw standouts Eric Rowe and Nate Orchard go to the NFL, and saw it's second best defensive back Dominique Hatfield get kicked out of school for a couple of off the field legal issues. While charges for Hatfield are dropped in one case, and soon to be dropped in another, and he's been allowed back in school, don't expect to see him on the field as he'll likely be forced to Redshirt.

Despite all the losses, there is a solid chance that 2015's defense might be even better. The Utes will see the return of Tevin Carter, who despite playing on a few games in 2014, made more impact in those few games, than some players do their entire career. The front seven will see Hunter Dimick move over and take over Orchard's spot as the main pass rusher, while the middle will be occupied by Lowell Lotulelei, younger brother of Star. As a freshman in 2014, Lowell was giving Offensive lines fits.

The linebackers will be led by Jason Whittingham, Jared Norris, and Gionni Paul. It's clear that this defense will be the hallmark of the 2015 team, and will be what Whittingham relies on. There's a reason Steve Sarkisian, David Shaw, and Jim Mora all said that Utah is the team they hate playing the most, because they know win or lose, they are going to get beat up.

And the Utes need that defense to be sharp because the offense is just as questionable as ever. The highlight of the offense is Devontae Booker, and he'll be the main focal point. Booker had the most yards by a running back in Pac-12 conference play in 2014, and despite not starting until the 4th game of the year, came up just 7 yards short of breaking the Utah single season rushing mark. Booker will be the undisputed starter from week 1.

Problem is if the passing game doesn't get itself sorted out, Booker will be going up against a lot of 8 and 9 men fronts. Defense and a ground game will always be Whittingham's preference and calling card at Utah. However, if Utah is going to succeed and build off of 2014 instead of reverting back to 2012 and 2013, the passing game cannot be the bottom of the Pac-12 again. The Utes don't need an Oregon, or Baylor like firework show either. Simply put, if the passing game can simply be an average unit in the Pac-12, the defense and Booker are good enough to see this team succeed. So what does that mean?

60 yards. 60 extra yards a game moves the Utes from last, to 6th in the Pac-12 in passing efficiency last year. 15 extra yards per quarter. 1 extra first down per quarter. It's not a lot. It just means more consistency.

More consistency from a WR group that couldn't seem to get open last year, especially when Dres Anderson went out for the year. Kenneth Scott is the leader of this unit, and has a knack for making great catches, but he's not a field stretcher. The Utes need somebody to stretch the defense out. This big name out of camp this year was true freshman Britain Covey. There wasn't a practice that went by where the coaches weren't singing his praises, but can you really rely on a 5'9" 165 pound true freshman to stretch the field? Bubba Poole who started the season last year as a running back was moved to WR. It's a move that could benefit him, as he has some speed, but was always a little indecisive in the back field. As a receiver he can (hopefully) just catch it and run.

Of course it a WR can only catch what is thrown his way, and this year doing the throwing will likely be Travis Wilson. Last year the Dave Christensen did everything he possibly could to undermine the QB position. Refusing to make a choice, flip flopping back and forth between Wilson, and Kendall Thompson, and not calling plays suited to either's style. Just as Thompson looked like he was getting a grasp on the job against Oregon, he blew out his knee. But it was clear the rest of the year that Wilson's confidence had been shot.

This year Wilson once again enters the season as the starter after showing the most consistency during camp. But which Wilson are we going to get? Is going to be the Bulldog who tried to detach his nose against Michigan, and confidently led the offense down the field to beat Usc. Or will we get the Travis Wilson that is suffering from PCSD (Post Christensen Stress Disorder). If a change has to be made will Thompson be able to actually hold onto the job, or will his lackadaisical attitude with ball security never fully earn him the trust of the coaches.

I guess it's a good thing the Utes have the best set of kickers in the nation with Andy Phillips, and returning Ray Guy award winner Tom "Bacon" Hackett. Hopefully the Utes won't have to be as reliant on them and can get those extra 15 yards per quarter.

How's It Going To Play Out

Thankfully, for all of our sanity, the many questions around the teams are going to start to be answered in just a few short days. All three teams have a wide variance between their floors and ceilings. I wouldn't be shocked to see any of the teams win 10 games, or struggle to make the postseason. With that said, here's how this season is going to play out. Guaranteed or Curtis will give you your money back.

Week 1

Utah State (0-0) vs. Southern Utah - The Thunderbirds have won games against Div 1-A teams twice in the last 5 years. They won't make it three. Outcome: A rusty Aggies team pulls away midway through the 2nd quarter.

Byu (0-0) @ Nebraska - This is an interesting game because both teams will be having players suspended, which makes it difficult to know what we'll get. Nebraska's new head coach Mike Riley has said 5 players will be suspended, but we don't know who. Rumors say up to 10 players could be suspended for portions of the game for Byu. Beyond that though, we at least have a better idea of who the Cougars are. We're not really sure about Nebraska. They have a new Head Coach, and a new system in 2015. Not to mention that Mike Riley's teams are historically slow to start the season. Riley has often been a thorn in the side of the Cougars, but there's just too much unknown. This is the best chance out of the first four for the Cougars to make national noise with an upset. Outcome: The Cougars do just that, as eventually Taysom and the frenetic pace is just too much for a rebuilding Cornhusker defense, and Byu pulls away from a small deficit in the 3rd quarter and get a multi score victory.

Utah (0-0) vs. Michigan - The College Football season kicks off with the biggest non conference game ever in Rice-Eccles stadium, and the Utes have very very little to do with it. On the field though not a lot is known about the Michigan Khakis Wolverines as Harbaugh has locked down all access completely. Last year the Utes went into the Big House and dominated the game, but Harbaugh has a history of rebuilding. Last year's it was Michigan's offense that was a large part of their woes, and their two most talented players have moved on from the program. The Quarterback position hasn't even been decided (as far as we know) as there is a competition between Shane Morris and newcomer, and 4 year players and 2 year starter at Iowa Jake Rudock. Outcome: The game is a defensive battle early as both offenses try to find their way against what will possibly be the toughest defense either will face the rest of the year. Before the game the name everyone has been and will continue to talk about is John Harbaugh. But the name that will end the night will be the loud chant of "AL-EX SMI-ITH, AL-EX SMI-ITH" Harbaugh was serenaded with as he left the field. Interesting note, Harbaugh is the 2nd of the last three Utah coaches to start their Michigan careers against Utah. He'll be the 2nd to start his Michigan career 0-1.

Week 2

Byu (1-0) vs. Boise State - When it comes to Bronco Mendenhall struggling to call the defensive plays and manage the overall team as head coach, there is no better reminder of just how much he struggles than Boise State. Whether it's the beat down last year, or the 2 point conversion attempt at the end of one of the all time boringest games a few years ago, Mendenhall really struggles to multi task against the Broncos. To be fair though Boise State has some weird voodoo over the state of Utah as a whole. This year the game is much more competitive, and comes down to the end. Outcome: The game is a close affair going down to the end, but sloppy mistakes and a young defense allows the Broncos to escape with a victory.

Utah State (1-0) @ Utah

Week 2 (1-0) @ Utah Utes - The last time the Aggies played Utah was the last really good game for Chuckie Keeton. This time around Keeton just may not have enough weapons, and the Utah defense is a bit faster than it was. For the Utes, the offense will have spent a good chunk of the previous week getting beat up, and probably won't have much of a rhythm yet, and hope that this week they can begin to find themselves. Outcome: As with all in state games lately it's a hard hitting affair, but the Utes start to find some semblance of consistency in the second half as they put away the victory.

Week 3

Utah State (1-1) @ Washington - The Aggies fortunately have an extra day to put the in state battle behind them and travel to play the Washington Huskies. The Huskies under Chris Petersen have been a bit of an enigma. The Washington Defense has 2 first round draft picks on their team last year, despite being a very poor unit. Petersen has struggled to introduce his system and find the same success he had at Boise, as he's had to undo a bit of the culture left behind by Steve Sarkisian. Outcome: The Aggies rebound after the previous week against as Husky fans begin to get uneasy with Chris Petersen.

Byu (1-1) @ Ucla - Brett Hundley may no longer be the QB, but all signs point to true freshman Josh Rosen being something special. Of course he is still a true freshman. Want to know what helps a true freshman QB find his way? A loaded defense, led by Myles Jack, and the Pac-12 leading rusher from the previous season in Paul Perkins. Outcome: For being the leading returning rusher in a Power 5 conference, very few people know of Paul Perkins. After this game Byu fans know him all too well as he runs over the Cougar defense. We

Utah (2-0) @ Fresno State - Last year when these two teams played the Bulldogs were still trying to figure out how to replace Derek Carr before ultimately turning their season around. This year, they won't be quite the pushover they were in 2014. The Utes meanwhile will be trying to use one last non conference game to tune up their offense before entering the grind of conference play. Outcome: The Bulldogs are frisky this year and the outcome is way too close for Utah fans liking.

Week 4

Utah State on Bye

Byu (1-2) @ Michigan - The Cougars September of doom wraps up with a trip to the Big House. Despite being only three weeks later, expect a Michigan team much different in both looks and execution than the one that starts the season at Rice-Eccles Stadium. Outcome: If this game were at the start of the season like it was for the Utes I'd predict of Byu victory. If the Utes were playing Michigan in the 4th week as opposed to the first week, they too would lose like Byu does here.

Utah (3-0) @ Oregon - The Ducks are in a rebuilding year. History tells us the Ducks do miss a beat during rebuilding but it's not a big one. This time though it will be interesting to see how well QB Vernon Adams is handling the transition for Division 1-AA. That said you can always count on two things from Oregon. Multiple uniform combinations and speed. Utah fans can expect lots of reminders about Kaelin Clay from their Byu fans in the lead up to this one. Oregon is one of 3 team the Utes have yet to beat since entering the conference. Outcome:(Not so)Fun fact for Utah fans. They've yet to win their conference opener in the Pac-12. They'll have to wait till next year.

Week 5

Utah State (2-1) vs Colorado State - The Rams put together a bit of a rebuilding year last year by running the ball, a lot. This is a game where the Aggies will be glad to have Kyle Fackrell back in the middle of their defense. Outcome: In the first of many divisional battles on the season the Aggies squeak one out in overtime.

Byu (1-3) vs. UConn - The Cougars are finally out of the month of September, and are finally home for the first of 5 home games in the final 8 weeks, including the next 4 at home. Meanwhile UConn is a basketball school that also has a Football team. Outcome: Go Fast, Go Hard all day long as Taysom runs for over 200 yards, with an extra 150 yards thrown in by Hine and Brown.

Utah on Bye

Week 6

Utah State (3-1) @ Fresno State - The Aggies will be coming off of the close game with the Rams, and will have the Broncos the following week. The key to this game will be how well Matt Wells can keep his team focused. Outcome: In the first Ackbar Alert game of the year for the Beehive State teams, the Aggies trip up in California.

Byu (2-3) vs. ECU - Last year the Pirates were a surprise G5 team and a candidate for the New York 6 bowl berth deep into the season. Last week the Cougars righted their ship and found their rhythm on offense. Outcome: This year, the Pirates are rebuilding, and Byu will continue getting on track.

Utah (3-1) vs. Cal - Sonny Dykes has the Bears back on track with a high powered offense, and a darkhorse Heisman candidate in QB Jared Goff. The Bear Raid offense likes to put up points, and put them up fast. After falling just short, thanks to a season ending loss to Byu last year, this looks like the year the Bears get back into the post season. Outcome: While this should be a good year for the Bears, it'll be a bad week as the Utah defense breaks up the timing of Dykes' offense early and often. 4 defensive turnovers power the Utes.

Week 7

Utah State (3-2) @ Boise State - The Aggies were hoping this would be a battle for conference superiority. The Broncos look to still be not only the cream of the Mountain West, but the cream of the G5 crop altogether. Outcome: Aggies hang tough, but fall on the smurf turf.

Byu (3-3) vs. Cincinnati - With the Big 12 getting left out of the Championship game last year, expansion rumors began flying this offseason. Two teams frequently mentioned are Byu and Cincinnati. Outcome: The Cougars wish this could be a Big 12 play in game as they continue a trend under Bronco of rebounding when seasons start poorly.

Utah (4-1) vs. ASU - Not only are the Sun Devils one of three teams the Utes haven't beaten since joining the conference, the Utes haven't beaten Arizona State in over 30 years. Todd Graham seems to have the Utes number. The first two matchups as conference mates were two of the worst games the Utes have played in the past 4 years, while the last two games have been two of the most frustrating losses the Utes have suffered. Outcome: This time Andy Phillips gets the field goal in overtime, and if you listen carefully you'll hear me celebrating all the way from Disneyland.

Week 8

Utah State (3-3) @ San Diego State - The Aggies start to see the light at the end of the tunnel of their difficult season start. The Aztecs used a 6-0 home record in 2014 to carry them to a division tying 5-3 conference record last year. Outcome: The Aggies put the disappointment of the last two weeks behind them with an emphatic victory.

Byu (4-3) on Bye - Well technically the schedule says they play Wagner. Meh, same thing.

Utah (5-1) @ USC - USC QB Cody Kessler will be in the middle of a Heisman campaign. Unfortunately for the Trojans they are coached by Steve Sarkisian, and they'll be busy frustrating everyone by not fulfilling their expectations, but Sark the coach (despite being average at best) has had success against Utah. The Utes meanwhile are in the middle of a 6 game win streak against teams from California. Outcome: Kessler throw for over 350 yards, as the Trojans let Utah know they are no longer the Kings of L.A. Fortunately I'm flying home from Southern California this day otherwise I'd be in the stadium, and I'd be extremely upset.

Week 9

Utah State (4-3) vs. Wyoming - Does anyone know if Wyoming will ever be good again? Outcome: Not this week anyways, as the Aggies try to cling onto their small hopes for the division crown.

Byu on Bye - This week it's an actual bye.

Utah (5-2) vs Oregon State - Locally this game is going to get played up as a major rivalry due to all the local ties the Beavers have. However the cupboard is pretty bare for the Beavers, and Gary Andersen is extremely overrated as a coach and will be struggling during a rebuilding season. Outcome: The Utah defense welcomes back it's last two former coordinators by terrorizing the Beaver offense. Meanwhile Booker picks up where he left off last year against Oregon State: Running for TD's, and carrying the Utes to bowl eligibility.

Week 10

Utah State (5-3) @ New Mexico - You know say what you want about some of the crappy teams the Cougars have had to schedule during independence, but it still beats two weeks in a row of Wyoming and New Mexico. Outcome: Aggies by virtue of playing before 11:30 p.m. EST become the 2nd Utah based team to become bowl eligible.

Byu (5-3) @ San Jose State - The last time these two teams played the Spartans pulled a major upset. Outcome: Taysom is having none of it. All three teams are now bowl eligible.

Utah (6-2) @ Washington - The Utes had missed the Huskies due to the schedule rotation the last couple years. By this point of the season, Petersen should finally start to have forced his influence on the team and they'll be playing much better than earlier in the season. Outcome: The Huskies are the last of the three teams the Utes had yet to beat since joining the conference. This time they pull it off.

Week 11

Utah State (6-3) @ Air Force - Playing the Falcons requires assignment sound football, as even the smallest mistakes can turn into big errors. The Falcons play a triple option which is a style nobody likes to play. Add in the cut blocking the undersized linemen use to make up for their size and there is a reason this is a hell week for opponents. Outcome: The Falcons wear down the Aggies and pull off the victory.

Byu (6-3) vs. Missouri (In Kansas City) - During the offseason the SEC said they would count games against Byu in their requirement for teams to play 1 P5 non conference opponent, which opens the door to more opportunities like this for the Cougars. Missouri is the two time defending SEC East champion and a favorite to make it three. Outcome: The Tigers and Cougars are very similar in their style, but the Tigers are just a bit bigger, and just a bit faster, and despite a great game on the national stage by Taysom, he has a few too many mistakes.

Utah (7-2) @ Arizona - The Utes have had a problem with the State of Arizona the last few years. With a chance to ultimately win the South last year, the Utes laid a complete egg against the Wildcats last year in their worst performance of the season. Outcome: Rich Rodriguez seems to have the Utes number. Maybe he's upset over the Utes winning in his Michigan debut.

Week 12

Utah State (6-4) vs Nevada - This will be the conference closing game for the Aggies, and they will have a slim chance at winning the division if Boise stubs it's toe along the way. Outcome: Ultimately a 3 loss conference campaign won't be enough, despite a big victory here.

Byu (6-4) vs Fresno State - The Bulldogs complete the Utah triangle with their 3rd matchup against in state teams. Outcome: Byu clinches a winning record after starting the season with a major stumble.

Utah (7-3) vs. UCLA - Last year Travis Wilson stumbled before the Kendal Thompson led the Utes to victory thanks to a 10 sack performance by the defense. Outcome: The Utes don't get 10 sacks, but Devontae Booker reigns supreme in the Pac-12 running back showdown.

Week 13

Utah State (7-4) vs Byu (7-4) - It sucks that the Holy War isn't the last game of the year, but at least there is one in state rivalry game being played during rivalry week. Outcome: If Taysom makes it this far, it means that no matter what Utah State will end his regular season for the 3rd time in 4 years. Fortunately this year it's not due to injury, but much like last year it is with an Aggie victory.

Utah (8-3) @ Colorado - The Pac-12 want you to believe this is a rivalry game. It's not. That said Mike Montgomery has made some strides and there is a very good chance Colorado is either bowl eligible by this point or playing for a bowl

game. Outcome: Colorado better home it's clinched a bowl game before this game.

Final Records: Utah 9-3, Byu 7-5, Utah State 8-5

Games most likely to lose they shouldn't: Utah: Utah State, Michigan, Washington. Byu: Cincinnati, Fresno State. Utah State: Washington, Fresno State, Air Force, San Diego State

Games most likely to win they shouldn't: Utah: USC, ASU, Arizona. Byu: Nebraska, Boise State, UCLA. Utah State: Utah, Boise State

Plausible best case scenario: Utah: 10 wins with the right breaks and health by also winning one of the USC, Arizona games. Byu: 10 wins. Beat Boise in week 2. Take advantage of true freshman Josh Rosen in week 3. Avenge selves against Utah State. Utah State: 11 wins. Take care of business against Air Force and Fresno. Beat Boise.

Plausible worst case scenario: Utah: 5 Wins. Lose to the Khakis on Thursday. Lose to the Aggies. Lose to the Bruins, and stay 0 for 30+ years against Arizona State. Byu: 6 Wins. Go 0 for September. Rest of the schedule is just too easy to keep them out of the bowl game. Utah State: 5 Wins. Lose to Byu, Lose to Colorado State, Lose to Washington.

Games least comfortable predicting Utah: - Any game that's not Colorado and Fresno State. Byu: Nebraska, Boise State, UCLA, and Utah State. Utah State: Byu, Colorado State.

Final Thoughts

It's almost upon us. It just a few (36 or so) short hours the season begins. All three teams could be set up for really good years. All three teams could stumble badly and fall flat on their face. For Utah this year is a chance to show they weren't a fluke last season, but the Pac-12 slate, especially the South which was the best division in college last season, is such a grind. There's a great chance the Utes are better than they were in 2015 and end up with less wins.

For the Cougars the season is all about surviving September. If Taysom comes back, reads the defense, and gets better recognition of when to take off, as opposed to panicking at the first sign of trouble, the Cougars even have a slim chance of thriving in September. But if Taysom sticks with the same stuff we've seen from him the last three years, the Cougars are looking at another average, ho-hum season.

The Aggies are trying to punch through their glass ceiling. It's Chuckie Keeton's last ride, even if there is an argument to be made for him not being the best option at QB anymore. Matt Wells is a phenomenal head coach. It's no coincidence that the Gary Andersen Aggies moved beyond mediocrity and failed opportunities after he came on board. He won't be around in Logan much longer, so now is the time for Utah State to break through.

Where To Watch, And What To Know

The Utah game kickoffs the season Thursday night at 6:30 Mountain time. It will be broadcast, Haughbus, Khaki-Cam and all by Fox Sports 1. Collin Cowherd is making his Fox Sports 1 debut in the booth that night, so that means you can basically expect as much fawning over Harbaugh and Michigan, as he did over Riplinger in the movie Planes.

30 minutes later, the Aggies will kickoff. Amazingly enough in this day and age there are games that aren't broadcast on TV. This would be one of them.

The Cougars and Cornhuskers have earned the afternoon slot on ABC. They'll kickoff Saturday at 1:30 Mountain Time.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 06:17

Thursday, November 20, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Remember as the Utes suffered through the first couple years in the Pac-12 and the common wisdom was that Utah was lucky to have missed Oregon and Stanford during the first two year rotation, and they'd really be hurting once those two came up on the schedule?

2011 & 2012 Utes versus Cal and Washington 1-3

2013 & 2014 Utes versus Oregon and Stanford 2-2

Fortunately past results are not a guarantee of the future, or I would really be worried when Stanford drops off next year and Cal and Washington are back along with Oregon. (Let's be honest though, I'm always worried anyways.)

Meanwhile it's Senior Weekend in the state of Utah as all three Division 1-A teams play their final home game of the year. (The two Division 1-AA teams had their final home game last week, and final game this week.) For many of the seniors it's the end of a way of life. After this season most of them won't ever play organized football again. Also for the first time since 2011 all three teams are officially bowl-eligible. I Don't Know What To Say Anymore

Well, at least Byu officially became bowl eligible, even if it wasn't a concern considering this week's opponent. Outside of that nugget was there really anything remotely important that happened during the Unlv game?

Mostly it was just a confirmation of things we've already known.

A dreadful Unlv team did just enough to remind us that Byu, especially their defense has some major holes, and it was probably going to be the reason that Byu lost a game even if Hill hadn't gone down.

Offensively Byu did enough to remind us that the offense hasn't been the problem since Hill went down. Christian Stewart continues to show us that while Taysom Hill may have been more athletic, and more dynamic of a player, Stewart is the better quarterback, and by far the best passer Byu has had in 5 years.

I don't know if it's because the rest of the running backs have improved, or because Stewart isn't taking their carries the way Hill would, but it's nice that for the 2nd time this year the Cougars played without Williams for essentially the whole game (he was injured on the first play against UCF) and once again the Cougar running game didn't miss a beat in a committee role, rushing for over 250 yards with Lasike, Hine, and Carter carrying the bulk of the load.

In the end, the Cougars ended up with an unmotivated, and uninspiring victory over an uninspiring opponent to finally get that 6th win. But hey against Unlv, it could always be worse.

I'm Not Even Mad At You

I could go on, again, about how much I hate these prostitution games, and how this week's opponent may be the worst opponent to come into the state of Utah to play Utah or Byu in over a decade, but I won't. I know everyone plays these games (just look at the SEC slate this week.) Hopefully the playoff will change that, but it is what it is.

I also know the official excuse is that this was a scramble pickup when Hawaii canceled their contract a couple years ago, and it's hard to find a November 1 and done with only a couple years ago (even if this is only partly true, since an FCS team would always have been on the schedule.)

So I'm just going to ignore the opponent and focus on the seniors.

(But seriously, Savannah State????)

Saturday night will be the last time that approximately 25 seniors play in a Byu uniform. Some of the names are recognizable as they've been solid contributors to the team for a while like Craig Bills, and Alani Fua. Some of them have only been known for a short time but still made quite an impact like Jordan Leslie and Christian Stewart. Some of them have been disappointing and the target of fans ire like Skye PoVey. Some of them are names you don't even recognize, because they've been mostly on the Scout team like Kevin O'Mary and Quinn Lawlor. Some of them have

suffered serious injuries during their career for the program like Devin Mahina. And two of the are the final reminder of the Iggy's Press Conference with Ross Apo and Zac Stout.

Either way Saturday will be the last chance that Byu fans have to give appreciation to these players. The full list of Seniors this year is as follows: Michael Alisa - RB, Ross Apo - WR, Scott Arellano - P, Craig Bills - DB, Josh Carter - DL, Robertson Daniel - DB, Alani Fua - LB, Edward Fusi - OL, Harvey Jackson - DB, Jordan Johnson - DB, Marques Johnson - DL, Solomone Kafu - OL, Paul Lasike, - RB, Quinn Lawlor - OL, Jordan Leslie - WR, Devin Mahina - TE, Keanu Nelson - WR, Kevin O'Mary - DS, Skye PoVey - DB, Trevor Samson - K, Christian Stewart - Q, Zac Stout - LB, Brock Stringham - OL, De'Ondre Wesley - OL, Michael Yeck - OL.

Since it's a guarantee these seniors will win their final home game, the only question left is how many fans out there haven't just been beaten down so badly this year that they are willing to suffer the weather and the atrocious opponent to actually attend? Good news is, you can get a ticket for \$3.

Throwback Football

Remember before TV became such a force on football, and you didn't get so many stoppages. Broadcast windows used to be set for 3 hours, but you knew that the game would be closer to 3 and a half hours, instead of now where broadcast windows are 3 and a half hours and you know games will be closer to 3 hours and 45 minutes?

Remember before offenses were given easy mode and defensive battles were common?

Remember when defenses were dominant and casual fans would complain that offenses weren't able to move the ball as well?

Remember when scoreboard operators didn't get carpel tunnel from having to add points every 90 seconds?

Saturday's tilt between the Utes and the Cardinal was a throwback to those days. In a game that went into double overtime, and still didn't see either team get 300 yards of total offense. A game where the final combined score was only 47 points. A game that lasted 3 hours and 15 minutes. Again a game that went into double overtime.

Ironically it was a game that didn't seem like it was going to be that way after the very first offensive possession when Stanford took the ball, and marched 70 yards down the field in just under 4 minutes.

This was a classic field position game the whole way. A game where one team would put together two or three first downs, punt from near midfield, and pin the other team deep, just to see that team return the favor.

If you don't like hard nosed, hard hitting, defensive football, this wasn't the game for you. It's also what makes Utah and Stanford so drastically different from their Pac-12 peers.

This is a game that saw a 10 play drive take 5:55, a 9 play drive take 5:14, an 8 play drive take 5:03, and a 14 play drive take 8:44. That's 25 minutes of play (almost an entire half of football) in those 4 drives. Combined points allowed in those 4 drives? 0

None of those drives more devastating than the 8:44 drive by Stanford, who got the ball with 10:22 seconds, took the clock down to under 2:00. Go the ball to the Utah 34 yard line, and ended up punting rather than trusting their kicker to attempt a 51 yard field goal, which was 3 yards longer than his career long.

In the 2nd OT Stanford was forced to attempt a 51 yarder, and their kicker drilled it with room to spare. Which basically sums up exactly the way Utah football has been this year.

This was a throwback to the 3 yards and a cloud of dust games.

Punters Are People Too

Tom Hackett has become one of my favorite Utes. It's weird to say that about a punter, but then again it's also weird to see opposing teams game plan for a punter, and it's also extremely weird to see teams frequently drop a 2nd returner back on punts.

But another reason Hackett is fun is because he is kind of crazy.

As evidence I give you this quote:

I get nine snaps, and that's a lot of snaps. Generally, I get five snaps, and I go make the most of them. But at the end of the day, I'm kicking, essentially, pigskin. We eat bacon. So I'm kicking bacon down a field for people's entertainment. It's not that big of a deal. I just have a laugh on the sideline and do my job. It's something that's pretty easy.

Obviously the Australian Hackett doesn't understand why we make such a fuss over this football thing.

Since Hackett's only a sophomore, I really want to see this Bacon thing somehow turn into a gimmick for him next year.

Cardiac Alert

This season for Utah has been filled with close calls, and tight games. Utah is just as close to 3-7 or 9-1 as they are to 7-3. The one team that has outdone them on the cardiac scale this year is the Arizona Wildcats. Whether it's escaping UTSA and Nevada with 1 score victories, or catching a Hail Mary to be Cal, or seeing a questionable celebration penalty derail an Oregon comeback drive. Seeing USC successfully ice their field goal kicker not once, but twice in the same game during a loss, or watching the Huskies fumble the ball as they go for a game winning first down. The Wildcats have seen their share of close, cardiac games this year.

After seeing the nation's leading runner the past two years carry a QB deficient team, Arizona has flipped the script a bit this year. With their running game still good, but closer to average, they have been led by redshirt freshman QB Anu Solomon. Solomon has been a bit of a surprise this year and already has over 3000 yards and 25 TD's, including 4 games with at least 4 TD's.

Solomon gives the Wildcats a QB in the same vein as Marcus Mariota for Oregon, Brett Hundley for UCLA, and Taylor Kelly for Arizona State. Of course all three of those guys are experienced veterans, whereas Solomon is a young freshman who still plays like a freshman at times, and especially as the opposition increases. Solomon is still struggling with the Zone read offense that Arizona coach Rich Rodriguez runs. On top of that, Solomon has seemed to run into a bit of a freshman wall lately, as he has struggled more and more as the season progresses.

The Wildcats will try to attack the second level of the Utes defense. They will attempt to utilize screens and crossing routes to move the Linebackers out of position to open up the middle of the field. That's why the news yesterday that LB Gionni Paul will miss the rest of the season to have surgery on his foot is extremely hurtful. Paul was an instinctual beast of a linebacker. He's currently the leading interception man, and always seemed to be in the right place. Though it was clear he's been hampered the last couple weeks. Hopefully getting his foot looked at now will give him time to come back 100% for his senior season.

Without Paul, the LB corps for the Utes will need to step up.

At the beginning of the season I called Arizona "the biggest fraud in the Pac-12 the last 2 years." Each of those two years they weren't very good, but still managed to get to 8 wins. This year, they are actually a good team. They are a reminder of the West Virginia teams that made Rich-Rod a top commodity in the coaching circles. That said, much like the Utes, they are a team that has lived on the edge all season long, and much like the Utes, it won't take much to push them over. The question is whether Utah's defense will push Arizona, or will the Wildcats offense send the Utes over the edge.

Sayonara Seniors

The Utes have 18 seniors on their roster this season. 17 of which they will be recognizing Saturday for Senior Day. (The Utes are going to get a Medical Hardship waiver to allow Tevin Carter to come back next season) 1 of whom has an outside shot at being back for next year's Senior Day (Kaelin Clay has a possibility, though an outside one, of also getting a Hardship Waiver for a missed season to injury 2 years ago.)

The 4 year seniors in this class were part of the first class of recruits to play all 4 years in the Pac-12. They were the first class to be recruited after the announcement the Utes would join the Pac-12, and during Utah's final year in the MWC. The Redshirt Seniors would be the last group to be recruited while Utah was thinking they would always be MWC.

This group includes two former freshmen All-American Safeties (Eric Rowe, Brian Blechen), the son of my favorite NFL player ever, one of my all-time Utes, and someone who unfortunately won't be playing in the game due to injury (Dres Andersen), A WR turned defensive end stud, who has also changed their name while here (Nate FakahafuaOrchard).

While not all of them lived up to the hopes of fans (Andre Lewis, Marc Pouvave), they were all part of the Utes transition from MWC to Pac-12, and will get their moment in the spotlight. Of course none of them will get a louder cheer from the Muss than one of their own. Someone who impressed the coaches during the Muss flag game during the Red-White spring game and given a chance to eventually earn a walk-on special teams spot (Ryan Petersen).

The full list of seniors: Dres Anderson - WR, Brian Blechen - DB, Kaelin Clay - WR/KR/PR, Wykie Freeman - DB, Jacoby Hale - LB, Sese Ianu - DT, Chandler Johnson - DB, Andre Lewis - WR, Geoffrey Norwood - WR, Nate Orchard - DE, Davion Orphey - DB, Ryan Petersen - WR, Marc Pouvave - OL, Greg Reese - DE, Eric Rowe - DB, Junio Salt - OL, Westlee Tonga - TE.

In addition to the group of Seniors don't be surprised if this isn't the last home game for at least 1, and an outside shot at two other players. If I were a betting man (which I am), the smart money says Booker leaves for the NFL this year. RB don't get drafted extremely high anymore. Other than showing an improvement with holding onto the football, there isn't much more that Booker can do next year to improve his stock. He's the Pac-12 leading rusher in conference games. He has over 1100 yards and 8 td's on the season, and has shown that he can carry the rock 25-30 times a game against some of the nations best. Add in the recent Todd Gurley injury, the Marcus Lattimore retirement, and the short shelf life of running backs in general, and it wouldn't be any surprise to see Booker leave, even if he's only considered a 4th - 5th round guy.

The other junior that his getting some NFL love is tackle Jeremiah Poutasi. Poutasi is raw, but has been turning heads since his freshman debut against Usc three years ago. Poutasi is more likely to return though. General consensus seems to be that, unlike Booker, Poutasi would be a project pick this year, and actually can do more to greatly increase his stock next season if he returns and continues to develop.

Speaking of Poutasi, here's an article on how he turned his life around to even be where he's at now.

Some Love For The Aggies

I'll admit, I don't give Utah State the attention they deserve. A Lot of that comes from their tendency to attempt to gain relevancy, but ultimately fall short under Gary Andersen. They've managed to change that under Matt Wells, and are actually doing a remarkable job this season. They are on their 4th string QB up in Logan, and are still winning games. The Aggies are wondering why Utah and Byu have such a problem with this QB injury thing.

The last 4 years for the Aggies arguably was their most successful in history, and once again this year's group of Seniors has them in the hunt for an MWC championship.

They will be celebrating at least 18 Seniors, the one question is Chuckie Keeton who is eligible for a medical redshirt, but one could seriously ask whether he'd want to come back again.

The full list: La'Ron Bennett - CB, Jaron Bentrude - P/K, Ronald Butler - WR, Jefferson Court - TE, Nick Diaz - PK, Craig Harrison - QB, Joe Hill - RB, Shaan Johnson - WR, Elvis Kamana-Matagi - NG, Chuckie Keeton - QB, BJ Larsen - DE, Rashard Stewart - CB, Brian Suite - S, Joe Summers - OC, Frankie Sutera - S, Bill Vavau - OL, Zach Vigil - LB, Bryce Walker - OL, Kevin Whippey - OL.

From Hot To Cold

Ever since the Utes started in the Pac-12 one of the things I've really enjoyed is when a warm weather team has come into Utah in late November. Especially when it really cold or stormy. Last year, the two November games were actually some of the warmer ones of the year.

This week, not so much.

Even though it's an afternoon kickoff at 1:30 MST, broadcast on ESPN, the Wildcats will be leaving the confines of their 70 degrees to come to a game that will be about 42 degrees at kickoff. To make matters worse it's also expected to be a bit rainy during the game.

The same can also be said for the Tigers of Savannah State. They'll be leaving the 70 degree weather of Georgia for a

1:00 p.m. MST kickoff in Provo, UT that, not surprisingly, will also be 42 degrees and rainy. If you are one of those who don't want to brave the cold and the rain, to watch Byu play a dreadful opponent, or if you only go long enough to salute the Seniors and then immediately leave, this is the annual Byu Tv broadcast.

Ask Red, Blue And Pigskin

Since I haven't received any rules related, or game related questions lately, I haven't had this segment. However, this week I wanted to post a little back and forth with Rhett that came from when he decided to torture me a little bit more about my experience during "The Drop". It's just more of a look of the fan view when you can see disaster coming.

Rhett

View from the redzone was great

Me

I've seen the replay of the drop a few times and I swear the videos have to have sped it up, because it felt like 20 minutes

Rhett

How did you know from the north endzone that he dropped it early?

Me

You could clearly see it
From the angle we had
the people directly in front of him lower down probably couldn't, but other than that you could just see it drop on the green.

Rhett

and the ref not throwing up his hands
Did fans around the area, start yelling to pick it up?

Me

Oh yea.

Rhett

did it ever cross your mind to jump out of the stands and tackle the Oregon player? Not that you would do it, just a quick thought

Me

Before he ever picked it up, I wondered if I could get down and kick the ball out of bounds before they got to the ball. Or at the very least if someone on the West stands by the goal line would at least do it.

Rhett

I would of had the same thought
That's how much you love your team
Wait, where are your seats?

Me

I have two sets, 4 at Row 5, right behind the goal posts, and 2 more in N23 row 41 (which is where I was sitting at the time this week)

Rhett

N23 is where I had my season tickets haha

Me

It definitely was one of the more surreal moments I've seen live.

Rhett

I bet

Me

Especially only two weeks removed from the Usc lateral play

Rhett
oof

I bet when that Oregon guy ran away from you, it was like seeing the game run away from you. Praying that he would fall or go out of bounds or anything

Me
Yea, you could just see it slipping away the farther he got down field.

Rhett Weller
Contrasted with that amazing pass and catch coming right at you....

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:06

Thursday, November 13, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Just another boring old weekend of football in the Beehive State where nothing at all memorable whatsoever happened.

Okay maybe not true, but it was, what has become this year, just another Saturday Night at Rice-Eccles.

Also did you know that teams from the state of Utah have now lost 5 QB's, who have started at least one game, to season ending injury. One Play

I could bring up how Utah came out on fire and jumped to an early lead by moving the ball down the field, and by harassing the heck out of Mariota.

I could bring up how Utah overcame the loss to the QB who started the game when Kendal Thompson went down with injury.

I could bring up how the much maligned Travis Wilson overcame Booker fumbling on the first play after Wilson came into the game, and still managed to get 297 yards passing.

I could mention how the Utes fought back and was within 3 points of the Ducks with just under 12 minutes to play in the game.

I could bring up that Dave Christensen did a good job of completely changing the game plan for Kendal Thompson to start the game and gave fans a glimpse of how Thompson actually could be effective before his knee just collapsed on him.

I could talk about how injuries just suck, and make you feel for these players after watching Thompson go down. After watching Tim Patrick go down. After watching Oregon TE Pharoah Brown go down with an injury severe enough he's still in a Salt Lake hospital.

But none of that is what will be remembered about that game. Instead this game will forever be remembered for one play. It's a play that will go down in Utah lore. A colossal, monumental blunder. A moment of selfishness that turned what should have been a 14-0 lead for the Utes, into a 7-7 tie ball game. A play that the Utes took the rest of the quarter to shake off. A play that hung over every minute of the rest of the game. But everyone else is, or already has, talked about that play so much, including the Taiwanese, that I want to focus on other aspects.

Like how Kaelin Clay shook off the blunder and still helped rack up the 3rd most all purpose yards by a single player in Div 1-A this season with 339, and in the process looked like the player to take over the stretch the field duties of Dres. Something that's going to desperately be needed with Tim Patrick going down.

Or how Travis Wilson was actually able to be effective, once they stopped trying to make him a mobile QB, and instead put an extra back in the backfield, and let him set his feet. The 798 yard bomb to Clay was an absolute thing of beauty, as was the other bomb to Clay later in the game. Sure there were still a fair share of just hideous looking passes, but the takeaway from the game should be not to try and roll Travis too far out.

Also with Kendall Thompson out now, and Travis having thrown his first interceptions of the season, Wilson doesn't have anyone to look at over his shoulder. Maybe now he can just relax and go sling it.

The score eventually got away from Utah, but Oregon is really good at taking close games and making them seem not close. Who knows what would have happened had Utah got that 14-0 lead with the way their defense was playing and the way the offense was moving the ball, but it was nice to see Utah fight back. The 7 points scored on that play were the first of 24 straight points by the Ducks, and with just over 2 minutes to go in the half, trailing 24-7, the Utes easily could have folded. They didn't, and in doing so have shown how far they've come in the last few years.

View From The Red Zone

Have you ever been in an car accident? Ever notice how when you see it coming, it's like time slows down? As if the

world is slowing things down in order to give you a chance to avoid what is happening, only in a cruel irony there is absolutely nothing you can do. That's how it was Saturday Night.

To go from the elation of seeing Travis throw the best ball any Utah QB has thrown all year that was actually caught, and seeing Clay streak down the field, and then he dropped it. From the vantage point of the North End Zone, it was clearly evident he dropped it early, and time slowed down.

As everyone in the area is screaming to go get the ball, as you watch the official on the sideline, standing at the 1 yard line not making any gestures. As you watch Clay in the back of the end zone hamming it up with the crowd. As you see three Utah teammates come celebrate with him. The whole time an emptiness is starting to form in the pit of your stomach as you know this is not going to turn out well. As you hope and pray that somehow the ball rolls out of bounds, or that at the very worst it's a turnover.

Then you see it. In what was only seconds, but literally felt like minutes, you see an Oregon player start to recognize what's going on, and he picks up the ball, and you see nothing but grass ahead of you. But wait, Tonga is there, and yes he forces the fumble. But no he can't get to it, and instead you see the convoy form. 14-0 becomes 7-7. The elation that was there literally about a minute ago is gone, as you see the team realize what happened.

It's now despair. You can't help but feel that was it. That was the Utes chance to win the game, and now it's gone. You see Clay feels it too, as he's hitting himself in the helmet in anger. Then of course, you have to relive the moment as it's reviewed. You hope that maybe you were wrong and it was closer than you thought, close enough you might get the crappy Pac-12 refs to overturn it. But no, it's clear as day.

The Stadium goes flat. Kaelin Clay, who had many good plays for Utah this year, and will be needed the rest of the season, had managed to do something most teams can't, which is take the crowd out of it. It says flat. The despair, of that play is palpable. It hangs over the stadium the rest of the game. Every play, every score from that moment on is a what if. Oregon goes up 24-7 and the first thing everyone in the stadium thinks is, it should only be 17-14. Utah pulls to within 27-20, and everyone does the math, it should be 27-20 the other way.

As Utah pulled to within 3 there was renewed hope, but there was also the worry that maybe the Utes expended too much energy overcoming the mistake.

And as you left the stadium there was a "what could have been" feeling, as well as the realization that the only thing people were going to talk about was that drop, forcing you to see it again, and again, and again.

Misfits In The Land Of Offenses

This week the Utes battle their Mirror image team from the Pac-12. In a conference that is known for high powered offenses, and great QB play, Utah and Stanford are the outliers.

Utah and Stanford are mirror images of each other. Both play teams have a defense first mentality. Stanford has the 4th ranked scoring defense in the country, while the Utes lead the nation in Sacks and Tackles for loss.

Both teams have more of a power offense, choosing to rely heavily on their running backs. Both teams have also been forced into the power running due to weaknesses at the QB position (Utah more so, than Stanford.) Both teams seem to really struggle in short yardage, and red zone situations.

Both teams enter the game 3-3 on the year in conference play.

Last year, the Stanford Cardinal brought an elite, 5th ranked team into Rice-Eccles stadium. At the end of that game the Utes had their first signature win in the Pac-12 after they upset the Cardinal, in a game the Utes controlled for most of it.

This year, the Cardinal will look for revenge at home on the Farm, after a bye week, but with a team that has severely fallen off from the elite teams of the past 4-5 years. The problem for the Cardinal is that their offense struggles with consistency. You've heard the saying "strength against strength"? Well this game will be a battle of team weaknesses. As in which teams weak offense can do enough, and be consistent enough to make the defensive effort pay off.

Season Reclamation Project

Byu will try to continue reclaiming their lost season this week with a visit from an old conference mate in Unlv. Now while it may have been awhile since these two teams saw each other some things never change. One such thing is how

a school in Las Vegas simply cannot attract recruits who are any good. They don't have this problem in Basketball, but man do their Football teams continually just suck, and the 2014 edition of the Rebels is no different.

Unlv ranks towards the bottom of the country in all major statistical categories, except passing yards. But when you are as bad as Unlv is, you end up passing a lot, because you are down often. The Rebels do have 2 victories on the season, by a combined 4 points. One against Div 1-AA Northern Colorado, and an overtime victory over equally awful Fresno State.

The Cougars are looking to reclaim a season that is now void of any major meaning. The lofty goals early in the season are gone. Now the Cougars are still looking to become Bowl eligible (the last of the three Utah based team to become eligible), and find some way to make the final month of the season have meaning. Byu should have no problem accomplishing that feat this week.

Marketing Gimmick Alert

While the quality of opponent is clearly not enough to generate even a mild pulse of excitement regarding this week's game, the Cougars are hoping making the game a marketing gimmick Blackout game will. This will be the Cougars second attempt at a Blackout game. The first one didn't go so well, but that's what they get for having a Blackout game in the middle of the day.

This week the Blackout will mark the third marketing gimmick this season for Byu. The Cougars are 1-1 so far during those games. A record that will have no problem going to 2-1.

Football In The Daylight

For the first time in the while, not only will the Utes kickoff on Saturday night, but they'll finish the game on Saturday as well. The Utah game will kick off at 4:00 p.m. MST and will be broadcast on the Pac-12 networks.

An hour later the Cougars will begin as their kickoff will be 5:00 p.m. MST on ESPN U, which means that now that the sun sets so early, shortly after the Cougars come onto the field in their dark uniforms, it'll start getting dark period (they way it should be for blackouts.)

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 06:07

Thursday, November 6, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

November begins the way September ends with the Cougars getting a win (much needed) and the Ute fans all on a ledge with me just wanting to push them all off. Righting The Ship

Facing down a bye week, the Cougars really couldn't afford another loss on the road against Middle Tennessee State. While much closer, and sloppier than you would have liked, Byu finally managed to get back on the correct side of the scoreboard with a 27-7 victory.

Christian Stewart continued his ascendancy as the best passing Quarterback at Byu since Max Hall. Even more promising for Byu is that Stewart has done an effective job of sharing the ball, and not just having a favorite target and relying exclusively on him.

Defensively, the Cougar defense harrassed Blue Raider QB Austin Grammer to the point he became Jake Heaps like by ducking and going down the moment it looked like any pressure was going to be on him.

The highlight of the game, and honestly a turning point, was Byu Punter Scott Arellano taking a punt from his own 10 yard line and booming it 81 yards to flip field position, just as it looked like the Raiders were going to score and take a lead with decent field position. Instead they got the ball at their own 10 and never threatened again.

The fact that a victory against Middle Tennessee State is such a huge win, shows how the rails have come off for Byu this year, but it was a much needed victory. The last thing Byu wanted to do was be on a 5 game losing streak going into a bye week.

M*A*S*H Unit Gets Another

Not all good news for Byu this week though, as they suffered another serious injury to a key player. Junior running back Jamaal Williams suffered a knee injury during the middle of the game. Bronco revealed on Monday that he would be done for the season as he had to have surgery on multiple severe knee injuries.

Williams is just another in what has become a long list of injuries for the Cougars. Here's hoping for a speedy recovery to Williams, who has been the best player on the Cougars (not the most hyped) for three years now.

Still A Game Of Inches.

Another week, another extremely tight conference game for the Utes. The Utes had been walking the on the razor's edge for a month. The problem with walking that close to the line, is it's not difficult to stumble and go over it. That's exactly what happened to Utah against Arizona State.

The Utes lost to the Sun Devils in overtime after a missed Andy Phillips field goal, allowed the Sun Devils to kick a figgie for the win. While it's shocking that Phillips missed such an easy field goal, the blame for this game isn't on him. Instead it's on the offense.

The defense had some issues. Playing against a true spread team for the first time, really struggled holding the edge, which allowed the Sun Devils some large gains on the ground. They also missed two gift chances for interceptions, one of which would have ended the game tying field goal drive and sealed a Utah victory. Where the defense excelled though was in the bending and not breaking motif. Arizona State moved the ball at will in the first quarter. Both times though, the Utes clamped down inside the 30 and held the Sun Devils to measly field goals. After that Sitake adjusted, and confused Taylor Kelly and the Sun Devil offense for most of the night.

Unfortunately it all went for not because the Offense didn't show up.

A Group Effort Of Crap

In the aftermath of last weeks beyond abysmal 57 yard performance a lot of the criticism went straight to Travis Wilson. Wilson had the opportunity to finally seize control of the QB Competition that has plagued the team all year. Instead the

lack of consistency that worried me last week showed up. When the Utes desperately needed Scorpion Travis to show up, timid Travis made the trip instead.

It wasn't all his fault. Without Dres, none of the Wide Receivers were able to stretch the field or get separation, which allowed the Sun Devils to blitz like crazy, and play close to the line. Honestly though, by the 2nd half of the game, I'm not sure it would have mattered if they were open, because by then Wilson was so rattled, and his confidence had been entire too shaken that he just wasn't making plays.

And that's the crux of the problem for the Utes at QB. The coaching staff has thoroughly mishandled the QB Competition. Now I'm okay with the competition having happened in the fall, but it needed to stay in fall camp. When Travis Wilson won the job, the coaches needed to get behind him, and let him know, that while he doesn't have a free reign to make mistakes like he had the previous year, he was there guy.

Instead from the moment it was announced that Wilson won the job, it was always with a caveat. First the coaches said Wilson won it "by a thin margin" and that Thompson would be given time during the season, essentially telling Wilson, that he didn't have much room for error.

The playing time wasn't an issue during the first three games as it came in the second half of blowouts, and when Travis went out with an injury after going full Scorpion. Then came Washington State game, and the Utes first loss. The majority of the rhetoric coming out of that game was that as the Utes offense bogged down in the second half, the coaches felt they should have given Thompson some time.

Wilson has never been the most mentally strong player. You could see it last year when he'd get into funks, he'd stay in those funks (UCLA's 6 picks, Arizona State, Usc games are all good examples of this.) So now the coaches had undermined him during their only loss. By doing so, they basically told Wilson he can't make any mistakes. For someone who thrives as a gunslinger, having them be afraid to make the wrong decision is a severe detriment.

Against UCLA, the drops came to Utah, badly. Travis led the Utes on 3 extremely ineffective drives, and it was time to try Thompson to spark something. It worked against Ucla, but became abundantly clear, that Thompson is not a long term solution. Ask Byu fans what happens when you have a QB who trusts their legs way too much. So, the coaches replace an ineffective Thompson with Wilson, and immediately saw the offense open up for Booker as the Utes won against OSU, and the Coaches began saying they just wanted somebody to take the job, but they were letting Travis start by default.

Then something weird happened against Usc. Surprisingly enough the coaches showed some trust in Wilson with the gameplan. Aided by the fact that Usc had a really stout run defense, the coaches let Travis throw the ball. While it wasn't anything to wow anyone, it was enough that Wilson had the offense moving throughout the night, and when the team needed a leader on the final drive, Wilson became that leader.

Sadly that confidence didn't last long, the Utes were never able to handle the ASU blitz, and Travis struggled early, so how did the Coaches adjust? Once they got the lead (by allowing Travis to move the pocket and try to make plays) they went into an extreme shell. To call the play calling vanilla is an insult to vanilla offensive games. With a lead, and a running back who was finding holes, the Utah coaches stopped even pretending to call pass plays. Despite having Arizona State keying on every run. Despite them playing a cover 0 defense which leads to no support in the back field, and is ripe to be picked apart by skinny posts, and slants. Nothing is called. Also despite letting Travis run and move out of the pocket on their way to 4 scores in 5 drives and 16 unanswered points, so to are those gone.

The play calling got so bad that Joey Freaking Harrington was calling out the Utah plays as soon as the Utes got to the line. Of course it wasn't that hard, the play call was run.

At the first sign of trouble, and with a miniscule lead, the Utes took away any confidence in Travis. They started playing not to lose, and basically let Travis know his only job was not to turn it over. Is it any wonder when the time came he didn't have the confidence to make a play. He's thinking any mistake will cost him his job.

Sure enough, after struggling, the coaches went back to the old "it's no ones job" rhetoric and move Wilson and Thompson back into an OR situation on the depth chart.

Where To Go From Here

I'm not sure how to fix the QB situation at Utah. Even worse, I'm not sure at this point Travis Wilson can be fixed. He's honestly never been the same since he initially hurt his hand against Stanford, and even this year when he was doing

well at the beginning, there was just something off.

As his confidence has become entire shot, he's become more off.

Kendall Thompson isn't the answer. He's a great athlete, and is maybe deserving of a drive or two a game, but it's clear, until he learns to trust his arm (which is pretty good, and pretty accurate) he's going to be limited. So what can the Utes do?

This week the Utes host the #4 team in the College Football Playoff poll, and the standard bearer for the Pac-12 when the Oregon Ducks come to town. With them comes the player who should be the obvious Heisman runaway selection (but isn't solely because he doesn't play in the SEC) Ducks QB Marcus Mariota. Everyone knows what the Ducks are. They speed, speed, and more speed.

The Utes can beat Oregon. The Ducks are weak on the offensive line. Washington State got 7 sacks against the Ducks. Granted they were missing players who are now back, but even still, the OL has been a weak link for Oregon. The Utes defense can take advantage of this. They need to pressure Mariota and make him uncomfortable. Still, don't expect him to make mistakes, because that's just not what he does. Mariota is far and away the best player in College Football this season, and he's actually been that way for a couple years.

To beat the Ducks, the Offense needs to keep Oregon off the field. They don't need to be great, they just need what they had against Usc (minus the goal line fumbles.) The offensive coaches need to call a dynamic game, and not get predictable. If the Utes can manage even that, if Scorpion Travis shows up, the Utes will stay in this game, and as we've seen the last 5 games, anything can happen.

So what happens if Timid Travis shows up? What happens if the offense isn't up to snuff again. The Utes obviously can't survive with 57 yards passing. The Coaches can't just let Travis stand back there and be ineffective. At the same time, I don't think you can keep swapping between Thompson and Wilson.

I know the common logic says that going against the Ducks is a terrible time to throw somebody new in for their first reps. Especially since at best they'd be a Redshirt Freshman. I'm going to disagree and here's why.

Coming into the season the goal was bowl eligibility. The Utes got there. Yes it would suck to have the Utes end the season on a losing streak and end up with only 6 or 7 wins. It would definitely be a blight on the season. But let's be honest, the loss against the Sun Devils put any hope for a Pac-12 South divisional title on the ropes. While the Utes are still technically in it for a chance to win the division, it would be hard. A loss to Oregon would essentially kill any chance the Utes have for a magical Pac-12 season or more, and instead would leave Utah focusing on bowl game improvement, and next season.

6 wins is fine this year, but the Utes will need to keep improving to really become a player in the Pac-12. Next year, the QB competition will obviously be opened up, but it can't just be between Thompson and Wilson. The Utes also have 3 other QB's on the roster that deserve a shot. Redshirt freshmen Conner Manning, Brandon Cox, and true freshman Donovan Isom (who is my pick to be the future.) The coaches really like Brandon Cox. So if the offense is stalling, and the Ducks look like they're about to take control of the game, why not look to the future. Why not put Brandon Cox in and see if he gives us something different than we're getting with Wilson and Thompson.

Honestly the Utes would have nothing to lose. It would give them a chance to see Cox in real game action against real opponents. It would also give them a leg up on their decision making for next fall camp. The Utes staff is playing with house money at this point. Why not put that house money to use. Now that the Utes are bowl eligible they'll get the extra bowl practices which are great for developing youth. Why not see what else you have. The worst that can happen is you find out that someone isn't your guy and you have one less guy in the mix next year. It's better than the alternative which is Travis continues to struggle, you could lose anyways.

Either way, the competition next year cannot just be Travis Wilson and Kendal Thompson. Not saying Wilson can't be the guy, and can't improve. (Although if you haven't noticed I am intimating that Thompson can't be the guy) Just saying his confidence has been shot this year by the coach mismanagement. It's time to either prop him up or start to move on.

Of course the best case scenario is Wilson gets out of his own head, turns back into Scorpion Travis, the coaches trust him, and he starts moving the offense and we don't have to worry about it at all.

Wait, A Poll That Makes Sense?

This week marked the second appearance of the College Football Playoff Committee's Top 25. While I didn't see the need for them to release an in-season poll when it was announced, I'm kind of glad they are, since it gives us an insight into what they're thinking. One of the things we've learned is that they kind of make sense.

One of the major problems with the AP Top 25, the JokersCoaches Poll, and the BCS is that it discouraged matchups between good teams. The reason for that is that the pollsters all looked at a loss being a requirement for a drop in ranking, no matter the circumstances.

So far, it's looking like the Committee is taking the opposite approach and rewarding wins, instead of punishing losers.

For example, in a matchup between two top 20 teams, one would expect a close matchup. Theoretically one would also expect the higher ranked team to come out victorious. So in the past when a say 14th ranked team would beat a 17th ranked team, the previous polls would drop the 17th ranked team for losing, without looking at the situation. So say the 17th ranked team was the road team and lost in overtime, they would still be punished for losing, despite the fact that the rankings basically stated that they should lose closely.

The Utah/Sun Devil game is an example of this, and an example of how the committee is thinking differently. Utah dropped in both the Coaches poll and the AP poll, while the Sun Devils got a minor bump in both. Not so for the committee. Instead they left Utah ranked 17th, and rewarded the Sun Devils by moving them up 5 spots into the top 10.

If this is truly how the committee is going to act, it shows that they do in fact value strength of schedule, and teams won't be punished for playing and losing against tough opponents. It will also encourage teams to schedule better.

All that being said, any team that has two sub 70 yard passing games on their resume, that isn't a full on triple option team, should not be ranked in the top 20.

Back To The Dumb Polls

The Cougars and Aggies both played their 9th game of the season last week, meaning we have two of the three teams in state having turned the 3rd Quarter poll. So let's see how they rank.

3. - Byu (5-4) - To say October wasn't easy on them is an understatement. A win last week, a bye this week, and Unlv and Savannah State following gives them a chance to get some positive momentum. 1 more win and they'll be bowl eligible.

2. - Utah State (6-3) - The Aggies not only ruined the Cougars season, but they're also ruining their injury excuses. Already down their defensive captain and other starters, the Aggies had to start their 4th string QB last weekend. Playing against similar competition, they've kept it rolling despite the injuries.

1. - Utah (6-2) - The Utes are just as close to 3-5 and 8-0 as they are to their current 6-2 position. Their defense though is a beast, and they're proving that they are for real, even as their offense tanks.

Up All Night

Well last week didn't undo time and space, it also didn't bring an end to those really late nights.

This week the Utes have another late one. Kickoff will be at 8:00 p.m. and the game will be on ESPN.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 06:04

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 schocked 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

Wednesday, October 22, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

See, I told you we hadn't seen the last of Travis Wilson.

They say that an ugly win counts just as much as a win with style points. Fortunately for Utah the same can be said about a fugly one.

For Byu, it became painfully obvious that some changes need to be made to attitudes on the team, but not because of anything that happened during the game. A Message For The WR's And Westlee Tonga

CATCH THE [expletive deleted] BALL!!!!

When 2 Is Not Greater Than 1

While it's true that neither quarterback has been greatly helped out by their WR's, who apparently don't realize that catching the ball is in their job description, the passing the last 4 games has been bad. This week though it officially passed up bad and entered absolutely, horrifically, dreadful.

9/18 62 yards, 0 TDs 1 Int.

Just look at it. The combined, full game stats of both quarterbacks. Not a drives worth, or a quarters worth, or a bad half worth. That is the full game. You don't win with passing stats like that, unless you are a team like Navy or Air Force.

I'm more and more convinced that Kendal Thompson is karmic payback for three and a half years worth of Riley Nelson/Taysom Hill jokes. When Thompson does pass the ball, he has a good arm, and is fairly accurate, but much like Nelson, and Taysom passing is not his preferred way of playing. Thompson is extremely confident in his legs, too confident. Many times during the first half, he'd lock onto his first read. If the first read wasn't open, or if he thought there might be a pass rush, he would scramble around and end up with a short game, many times passing (pun intended) up a huge play, had he just continued with his read progressions. When it was clear that Thompson wasn't going to pass the ball (and his receivers weren't going to catch it if he did) the Beavers reacted accordingly and started stuffing the box, shutting down not only Thompson's ability to run, but Booker's as well.

It was clear the offense wasn't working, and thanks mainly to a superb defensive performance, the Utes went into the half tied at 6, but it was clear that they had to do something. So to start the 2nd half, out trots Travis Wilson. Immediately, just the threat that Travis Wilson was going to pass the ball forced the Beavers to react. Room began to open up for Booker to run, and the Utes had their best drive of the game up to that point, until it was halted by yet another dropped pass.

However, that was really it for Wilson. He never looked right. He played the rest of the night like someone who was too afraid to make a mistake because it meant he'd get yanked, and the passing game never took off.

Fortunately for the Utes their defense was on top of it's game. Save for one bad angle by Brian Blechen where he ran a pick against Dominique Hatfield and took him out of the play that ended up being a 72 yard touchdown pass from Sean Mannion to Jordan Villamin the defense absolutely shut down the Beaver offense. At some point in the second half of this weekend's game Sean Mannion is going to become the all time Pac-12 leader in passing yards, yet for 4 quarters (minus 1 play) he just couldn't solve the the Utah defense the entire night.

With the defense doing enough to to stifle the Beavers, Booker was running like a beast, and keyed a 94 yard touchdown drive late in the game, and added 2 more in the overtime periods to spur the Utes to victory.

An Untenable Situation

The Utes won't win many more games this year with only 60 yards of passing. Actually I'm fairly confident the Utes won't win anymore games with only 60 yards passing, no matter how good Booker and their defense is. What the Utes really need is to pick someone, and have that person show enough confidence, and have the coaches show enough

confidence in them, that they can get the offense out of it's funk.

This week, Travis Wilson gets the starting nod. It's the correct move. The offense moved better with Wilson in the game. Wilson is more careful with the ball than Thompson is. Wilson is also the better passer of the two.

What Wilson needs now is confidence. We've seen a couple times in his career that Wilson may not be the most mentally strong player. Last year against Arizona State you could tell that Wilson was look for the hit to be coming his way, and it greatly affected his ability to pass the ball.

Last week Wilson once again looked to be struggling mentally. The Utes desperately need Wilson to get his head in the game. They need the Wilson that led the Utes down the field against Michigan after coming back from going full scorpion. Actually scratch that, they desperately need the Wilson who has bravado enough to think that he can dive over 4 defenders from 6 yards away to get a first down. They need the guy who went full scorpion.

If the Utes can't find that version of Travis Wilson, they are in deep trouble, because Thompson's issues are harder to fix. He'll always be more confident in his legs than in his arm.

The Closer They Get, The Farther They Need To Go

The Utes are now sitting at 5-1 on the season, 1 game away from the goal of a bowl game. The last win may very well prove to be the hardest. We could easily be sitting here the last week of the year talking about how a win at Colorado and the Utes will be bowl eligible.

Having won two games this season at College Football Meccas (The Big House, and The Rose Bowl), and now the Utes first attempt at Bowl Eligibility will come against College Football Royalty. Now granted the Usc Trojans aren't what they were a decade ago, but the name Usc still has a mythos associated with it.

The last time Usc came to Rice-Eccles stadium was one of the most electric crowds in recent memory, and I expect something similar this upcoming Saturday.

On the field the Utes are going to have a real test. While many people remember Usc giving up 451 yards rushing in a week 3 loss to Boston College and are quick to assume that the Trojans must have a terrible run defense, and are apt to get gashed on the ground.

The truth though is actually quite the opposite. Outside of that aberration the Trojans are more likely to get beat through than air than they are on the ground. In the other two games they've struggled the most this season (games against the teams from Arizona) the Trojans were stout against the run, giving up 77 yards to Arizona in a loss, and 31 yards to Arizona in a close win. Meanwhile the Trojans were gashed for 510 (Arizona State) and 395 (Arizona) yards in the air.

That said, the Utes still need to come into the game with a power run gameplan. One that has lost of intent to Feed Booker. If Booker can get going it can take some pressure off of Wilson, and just maybe this Usc team might be just what the doctor ordered to get the passing game going.

Making both those tasks difficult will be Usc DE Leonard Williams. Williams is currently considered the #1 overall prospect for the upcoming draft. While that spot will eventually go to a QB, it doesn't diminish just how much of an effect Williams will have on games, and why the Utes will have to keep an eye on him for every play. Don't be surprised if many of Utah's passing plays include a delayed route by either a RB or TE solely to allow them to get a chip on Williams prior to going out for a catch.

Offensively, the Trojans are just as dangerous now as they've ever been. QB Cody Kessler is coming off of a 7 TD Game, while Nelson Agholor continues a long line of great WR's for the Men of Troy. Though the key for the Utah defense will be stopping RB Javorious "Buck" Allen, who already has 909 yards and 8 TD's on the season. Between Booker and Allen, don't be surprised to see this game turn into a running battle.

Everything aside though, the Utes have a tough road over the next 4 weeks, one that could just as easily see them bowl eligible with a win, or battling for a bowl game in the final week of the season if they go 0 fer. If they can't get a QB going, the latter is more likely.

The Excuses Aren't (Entirely) Valid

Meanwhile in Provo the Cougars played their first Saturday game in three weeks, and for the third time in those three

weeks ended the night on the wrong end of the score board. For the second time in two weeks they lost after holding a two touchdown lead in the third quarter.

Predictably a lot of the excuses since then have revolved around Taysom being out injured, the host of other injuries the Cougars have suffered, and lack of depth caused by those injuries. While there is some validity to those excuses, it does not, nor can it, completely explain away the last two weeks.

If injuries and depth are the reason the Cougars blew those leads, that doesn't explain how the exact same depth was able to get those leads in the first place. It's the same group of second stringers and replacements who are building these big leads, that are blowing those leads.

Yes Taysom was a special player who managed to hide a lot of the flaws that were already deeply ingrained in this team. Without him, those flaws are magnified, but Taysom being out doesn't excuse the defense for being so soft, and so terrible. Taysom being out could explain some of the offensive struggles, but let's be honest, while not nearly as dynamic, Christian Stewart has played well the last couple weeks, and seems to be getting more comfortable as the weeks go on. Last week against Nevada Stewart was 38/63 for 408 yards and 4 TD's. There were some mistakes made, and Stewart is very likely to latch onto one WR, and not progress through the options, but the last two weeks, from just a passing standpoint, the Cougars have had their best QB since Max Hall graduated. It's the other things (scrambling, keeping plays alive, etc.) that they miss from when Taysom was in the game, that was able to hide many things.

Of course, the injury and depth excuse is nothing compared to the whopper levied by Head Coach Bronco Mendenhall.

Sorry Bronco, The System Isn't Phenomenal

During his Monday press conference, when asked why the team was missing plays, and if they might have to adjust the system to deal with all the players who are now lower on experience, Mendenhall threw his players under the bus by replying that "the system is phenomenal, the execution is what's lacking."

Really? The system is phenomenal?

When your team keeps making the same mistakes year in and year out, the system isn't phenomenal.

When Skye PoVey is your starting DB over more athletic, more talented, less experienced athletes, the system isn't phenomenal.

When Skye PoVey is your starting DB period, the system isn't phenomenal.

When a starting DB for 2 years is only 5'6", the system isn't phenomenal.

When Riley Nelson is your starting QB for 2 years, the system isn't phenomenal.

When a future top 5 NFL draft pick, and overall freak of nature languishes on the bench, and only gets to start because of an injury, the system isn't phenomenal.

When you're blowing two touchdown leads, in consecutive weeks to Nevada, and Central Florida, the system isn't phenomenal.

If after three weeks, an injury to a single player, no matter how dynamic, or how great, still has your team in shambles, the system isn't phenomenal.

When you fired your previous Defensive Coordinator to take over the playcalling, saw your entire team struggle because you were focusing too much on the defense (which did become stellar), so you gave playcalling duties to a new DC, just to watch your defense collapse to the point your thinking about taking over the defense again, the system isn't phenomenal.

When you have to "bite your tongue" in regards to the defense, the system isn't phenomenal.

When your team is 4th worst in the nation in penalties, and penalty yards, the system isn't phenomenal.

When three times in the same season you've been offside during onside, or onside like kickoffs, the system isn't phenomenal.

When you routinely don't use all of your allotted practices, and your team then comes out sloppy and undisciplined, the system isn't phenomenal.

When you refuse to practice with contact, and your team then is weak at tackling, the system isn't phenomenal.

When you run your offensive coordinator out of town, languish in a crappy offense for three years, partially due to the fact you hamstrung said offense with Riley Nelson, and then have to re-hire said offensive coordinator, the system isn't phenomenal.

When you try to run a 2 QB system, despite years of evidence telling you "if you have 2 qb's you have none" because in you're mind the other teams just weren't doing it correctly, the system isn't phenomenal.

And sorry Byu fans, not trying to rub salt in the wounds (well not completely trying), but when you lose 4 in a row (3 of which you were favored), 5 of 7, and 6 of 9 to your bitter rival, the system isn't phenomenal.

Finally, if all of the above were taken away, and you had the most perfect, phenomenal system in the history of football, but your team still struggled to execute in it, well guess what, the system still wouldn't be phenomenal, because if you can't succeed in the system, no matter how great it is, than it's either the fault of the system, or the fault of the implementer. (Thanks Rhett.)

You want better execution Bronco? Why not try to execute some actual game plan, instead of going into half time with a lead, telling the reporter that things are looking good, and if you keep doing what you're doing you'll win the game, then watch the other team adjust to what you were doing while you fail to make any adjustments whatsoever and lose the game.

Of course all that said, as a Utah fan, I hope Bronco stays in Provo for a long, long time, because the system is phenomenal.

The Smurf Turf

This week Bronco gets to take his phenomenal system and make the boring trek to Boise, Idaho to play the Boise State Broncos on the smurf turf.

The Broncos have come back to earth the last few years, and especially this year without Chris Petersen as their coach. This year the Broncos enter the game with a 5-2 record, mainly due to their workhorse running back Jay Ajayi. The Broncos struggled early on in the year losing to Ole Miss, and Air Force. It'll be interesting as we go through the rest of this year, and the next couple to see if Boise State can ever get back to close to the heights they once achieved, or if they are permanently going to settle into the role of a good, but never again elite, team.

Byu on the other hand, looks to be getting some much needed help back on both sides of the ball. Offensively Jamaal Williams will be starting again. The Cougar running game didn't miss much of a beat last week without him, but an offense power like Williams can only help the Cougars and Stewart. Speaking of Stewart, as mentioned above, he has played really well the last two weeks. While you don't ever really want him throwing the ball 60+ times, he's shown that he can put the offense in position to make plays.

Defensively, the Cougars will be aided by Alani Fua's return. Fua is the closest thing the Cougars have to a defensive play maker, and his return will greatly shore up the line backing corp. Now if only, Byu would stop playing Bronson Kaufusi out of position and put him back on the line. Rumors are also starting to abound, that Bronco will once again take over the defense.

Which leads me to....

Would You Rather

Okay Byu fans I have a question for you.

We know that Bronco is a good head coach. We know that he's a very good defensive coordinator. We know that when Bronco focuses on the defense, other aspects of the team fall by the wayside because he's not giving it enough attention. We also have seen that when he's not in charge of the defense, it sucks.

Considering we've kind of seen the ceiling that Bronco can achieve as a head coach, but we've also seen that he could coach a defense to be borderline elite, would you rather have Bronco the Head Coach, or get somebody else as head coach, and have Bronco the defensive coordinator?

The Uniform Game

This week is the Utes annual marketing gimmickblackout game. In preparation for this year's game the Utes released a new version of their black helmet. The players like it, and who can blame them, because honestly it is a sweet looking helmet.

Between this, the white helmet from earlier in the year, and the new uniforms, which I actually don't mind, I like what the Utes have done with uniforms this year. Of course, if the Utes lose Saturday, that just means the sweet looking, chrome lined black helmets are cursed and can never be seen again.

The Utes won't be the only team sporting new helmets during their game.

Set Your Schedules

Byu's game against Boise State is an early week game. It kicks off Thursday at 7 p.m. MST, and will be available to watch on ESPN.

Utah will once again have a late night, as they again kick off at 8 p.m. MST. It's the third consecutive game for Utah that kicks off 8 p.m. or later. (Arizona State next week will make it 4 in a row.) With no threat of World Series preemption this week, the game will be televised on Fox Sports 1.

One More Message For WR's And Westlee Tonga

CATCH THE [expletive deleted] BALL!!!!

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:48

Wednesday, October 15, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Thursday night sure ran the gamut. There was a little bit of everything. Some good, some bad, some ugly. Enough to make Byu fans happy. Enough to make them sad, and definitely enough to anger them.

Meanwhile the Utes were off as they prepared for a possible season defining game in Corvallis.
The Good, The Bad, The Ugly: The Cougars

Let's start with the The Ugly. That first quarter. Woof. When you can play 15 minutes of football, have three drives go for three and outs, and come away with a grand total of 3 yards. That is some very atrocious football. The defense wasn't much better as it was gashed early, giving away a 10-0 lead after the first to Central Florida possessions. The Cougars were so bad during the first quarter they were getting mocked on twitter by national pundits. Exposure is great when you're winning, but when you're dreadful it will get you mocked by more than just Ute fans.

Even worse for the Cougars is the voodoo hex that seems to be on their players. Jamaal Williams carried the ball on the first play from scrimmage for Byu, and never touched the ball again after suffering an ankle injury. This was just two plays after Defensive Back Jordan Johnson had to be carted off the field after suffering an arm injury trying to tackle UCF Qb on the games opening touchdown. Later in the first half fellow defensive back mate Craig Bill suffered a concussion after a friendly fire incident with teammate Kevin O'Mary. These are just a week after losing Taysom Hill, Alani Fua, and Dallin Leavitt to lower leg injuries.

While many Byu fans may want to point to the last play of the game mugging of Jordan Leslie as an ugly, I'm a firm believer of not leaving it in the hands of the ref, so I won't rate that here. Instead I'll rate the choke job the Cougars performed after storming back to take a 24-10 lead. Despite early success on their first two drives, the Cougars defense adjusted, somewhat, and kept the Knights contained enough to get a 24-10 lead with just over 9 minutes to go in the third quarter. After that point, the Cougars gave up 21 unanswered points, including the key 7 in overtime to squander the lead, and choke away the game.

Don't get me wrong, the mugging call by the officials definitely belongs with this next list of The Bad, but the fact the Cougars let it come to that is what's ugly.

The officials aren't the only non-playing participants who deserve bad marks. The Byu coaching staff definitely deserves there share. Does someone want to tell me who's idea it was to have your backup QB, starting is first game, on the road, cross-country no less, throw almost 40 times in the game? Especially when Algernon Brown was pounding the rock for 5 yards a carry! The only successful sustained drive of the game for the Byu offense was by pounding the rock, so I really don't get the insistence on passing the ball with Stewart.

Enough with off the field, now for on the field. Taysom Hill's injury was bad, and is going to cause the offense to struggle a bit for awhile. But that doesn't excuse the Byu Defense for being as bad as it's been for a few weeks, and for being as soft as it was against UCF. Blake Bortles is gone. Justin Holman isn't exactly a gunslinger, but once again a QB has their best game of the year against the Cougars.

Fortunately for Byu, despite the loss, not everything was bad for them.

I Told You There Was Hope

Now for some of The Good. Among the good, I would put Christian Stewart. His numbers weren't anything that will wow you, 22/37 153 yard, 3 Tds and 1 Int, but what earns him good marks, was how calm he was even when the team was a dumpster fire around him, and nothing was working. Stewart is still working on getting a rapport built up between him and the rest of the offensive players, which is why there were some costly mistakes, such as the failed zone read fumble late in the first quarter. However, he did enough to show that he can lead this team to some wins this year, and keep the ship righted. In order to do that, though, the offensive coaches are going to need to make some adjustments. I know that Anae is infatuated with the concept of "Go Fast, Go Hard", but when the offense isn't working, all it does it put your defense out there to wear down quicker. For at least the next few games, until Stewart gets comfortable, the Offense needs to slow down just a little bit. Instead of running 80 to 100 plays a game, they should be in the 70 range.

The biggest note of good for the Cougars is simply the fact that they were able to overcome a dreadful first quarter. Especially on the defensive side where they were getting gashed pretty regularly to start the game. They tightened up, started to stop the UCF offense, and even caused two huge turnovers that the Offense was immediately able to turn into points, that got them the 24-10 lead. That's good for the Cougars, as the Offense will probably no longer be able to be relied on to win games, just not to lose them, and that the key to the future of this season will be on whether the Cougar defense is bad or good.

Holstering The Pistol

The next game will be an interesting test for new Defensive Coordinator Nick Howell. This week the Cougars take on the Nevada Wolf Pack, and their pistol option formation. The Wolf Pack are a team that upset the Washington State Cougars by holding them to a mere 13 points (The third lowest point total of the Mike Leach era), and lost to Arizona by a single touchdown. They're also a team that got blown out by a middling Boise State team, and also by the surprising Colorado State Rams.

What makes the Wolf Pack difficult is their Pistol offense that they still run. The Pistol is a triple option, but instead of the options being lined up horizontally with the QB, they're lined up vertically. It's core though is still the triple option, and to beat the triple option requires assignment sound football, and for the defensive players to resist the urge to do too much. It's never the defense's favorite week, because it's a week you are going to get beat up, a lot, and it requires a lot of discipline. With Bronco as the defensive coordinator, the Cougars were extremely excellent against triple options. No coach seems to be more prepared to shut down a triple option based attack than those led by Bronco.

This year though, Bronco has handed over the play calling duties to Nick Howell. So far the returns have been mixed. The run defense is still the strength of the defense, but it's not as stout as it has been in past years. Of course, unlike in years past, the defense doesn't have the playmakers it's had in years past, and that was before the loss of (at this point in his career) overrated Bronson Kaufusi.

As said before, the key to stopping the triple option isn't playmakers, it's discipline, and this is why it'll be interesting to see how they do. So far through this season, discipline is not a word that goes with the BYU defense. Sloppy, mentally weak, frequently penalized, but far from disciplined.

Defining Who They Are

While BYU is still striving to figure out who they are after Taysom, Thursday in Corvallis will feature two teams out to prove they aren't Paper Tigers. Both the Beavers and the (probably shouldn't be ranked this high) 20th ranked Utes come into the game with just a single loss, but with the majority of their games against less than stellar opponents.

For Utah, the big question mark is who's going to be the QB. While Whittingham isn't saying for sure, I would be absolutely shocked if it's not Kendall Thompson. Although even if Thompson does start, Travis Wilson needs to be ready, because Thompson is still unproven, and we're not exactly sure how the offense will move. As I mentioned last week, Thompson isn't the type of quarterback that teams are going to worry about his arm. Instead they are more likely to load the box and dare the teams to pass. For Utah, the key offensively will be two-fold. Firstly, can Thompson make enough plays with his arm to keep the defense honest. When he does pass, Thompson has proven to be pretty accurate with his passes, and he's also shown a willingness to attempt all the ranges of throws.

Secondly, can Devontae Booker help take pressure off of Thompson by continuing to be the workhorse back. In their loss to USC, and their close victory against Colorado, the Beavers allowed over 4 yards per carry. Booker and Thompson both may have hard time finding holes in the run game to start with, as the Beavers will be keying against the run, but it'll be important for the Utes to stick with the run, and specifically stick with Booker.

Look for Utah to implement even more zone/read runs, but to also add in a passing option wrinkle for Thompson. However, one thing to note for Thompson, he usually gets most comfortable to start passing with quick, pocket based passes until he feels comfortable.

Good Offense > Good Defense

Last year in a 51-48 overtime victory for the Beavers, Sean Mannion threw for 445 yards and 5 TDs. 210 of those yards, and 3 of those TD's went to Brandin Cook, in a game that proved a well placed pass will beat good coverage. During that game, the Utes defensive backs had good coverage on the WR's, but Sean Mannion had an incredible night, and Cooks showed the kind of ability that's currently making him a weapon for Drew Brees.

The problem in that game, is the same problem that ended up hurting the Utes against Washington State earlier this year. They just could not get any pressure on Mannion. Mannion is arguably the most underrated QB in the conference. While QB's like Hundley and Mariota get the publicity for their athletic plays, Mannion may very well be the most NFL ready Qb in the conference. As such, it will once again be important for the Utes defensive front to pressure Mariota, especially if they can manage to do it rushing just the front 4. If Hunter Dimick, and Nate Orchard are able to disrupt Mannion's timing, the Utes will be able to pull off the victory. However if they can't get to him, and Mannion has time to pass, it could very well be a long night for the Utah defensive backs.

Pivotal Game

I've said all year that this Oregon State game was the pivotal game of the year for the Utes and for Coach Whittingham. A win Thursday and the Utes are in the drivers seat not only for a bowl birth, but for possibly even 7 wins and an outside shot at 8. It will also begin to justify the comments by those within the program that the team is close. However, a loss on Thursday, and the Utes will end up fighting all the way to the end just to avoid another 5 win season, and it would signal that the Utes just aren't progressing.

There's a lot of optimism around the program after their victory over the Bruins, but there are still enough questions around the team to doubt they are legit. Thursday will go a long way to answering those questions.

Best In State

This year nationally has proven what an absolute joke the polls are. It's also fitting that the first year of the selection committee is one filled with lots of intrigue, and crazy upsets. I don't envy the process they'll have to go through to choose the 4 best teams.

Much easier is ranking the in-state teams as the 2nd quarter of the season has really shed some light.

3: - Byu (4-2) - Even before the injury to Taysom holes were beginning to come to light on the team, and an undefeated season seemed unlikely. Without Taysom this team is still trying to figure itself out.

2: - Utah State (4-2) - Won the Beehive Boot this year thanks to the head to head victory over the Cougars. Garretson continues to show that he is more than serviceable in replacement of Keeton. While the schedule isn't daunting, they have some tests looming, starting this weekend against Colorado State.

1: - Utah (4-1) - I'll admit I have no idea what to make of the Utes and aren't exactly sure how good they are or aren't. That said coming off they're upset over Ucla in the Rose Bowl they have the best victory. I also feel strongly they'd beat either of the two in-state teams, even if they were full strength.

Of course, things could change greatly between now and the 3/4 season mark.

Another Reason To Hate BaseballFox

The Utes and Oregon State play a Thursday night matchup kicking off at 8:00 p.m. MST. The game was originally chosen to be on the Fox Sports 1 broadcast. However since Fox is terrible at scheduling, and at keeping to previously arranged schedules (Yes I'm still bitter about Firefly, Drive, and many others,) they decided that starting this year they wanted to start putting the Baseball National League Championship Series on Fox Sports 1. What do you know game 5 between the Giants and Cardinals is Thursday night at 6:00 p.m. meaning it would definitely conflict with the game.

As such a lot of scrambling the past few days has given the following options for the game. Locally the game will be simulcast on KMYU (Satellite Channel 12, Comcast channel 643, Over the Air channel 2.2). It will also be on Fox Sports 2 (Directv 618, Dish 398), as well as on the Pac-12 network.

Byu's game meanwhile will be much easier to find this week as it will be 8:15 p.m. MST Saturday night on Espn 2.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:26

Thursday, October 9, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

I may not have many rules in life, but this is one of them, it doesn't matter if I'm on vacation, when the Utes are the historical night cap of one of the craziest, wildest, upset ridden weeks in college football history, a week that also saw all of the Cougar worst case scenarios come to fruition, well then I have to talk about it.

The only problem is, I'm not sure where to start after such a crazy weekend.

I guess we'll just rip the band aid off for Byu fans and get the bad out of the way, but worry not Cougar fans, as I will actually point out a glimmer of hope. What's Worse Than Defcon 1?

After Byu beat Texas I mentioned that I thought there were only two things that could stand in the way of the Cougars and the special season they've been in search of for so long. Unfortunately Friday Night with about 2 minutes to go in the first half, the first one of those things came to fruition as Taysom Hill rolled out on a run play, and as he was tackled, the defender rolled up on his leg causing a fracture that will cost Hill the rest of the season.

Obviously Hill's health is the bigger issue from last Friday, but like the old saying goes, the show must go on. There was still a game to be played, and unfortunately for the Cougars, the rest of the game did not go well. When Hill went out the Cougars were trailing 21-7. By the end of the game they would find themselves on the losing end for the first time 35-20.

The night didn't start so bad for the Cougars. The crowd was there early, and according to Rhett who was there, "the buzz pregame was insane." As the game kicked off it seemed a blowout was indeed in store as the first play of the game was a 53 yard pass to Jordan Leslie, which was turned the opening score just 4 plays later.

Unfortunately for Byu the route wasn't to be, as Utah State hung around. First they tied the game up, then surrendered another touchdown. Down 14 - 7 the Aggies would score 21 unanswered points to end the first half, the final of which coming immediately after the injury. Even before Taysom went out for the game it seemed as if the Aggies had punched the bully in the mouth and were on the verge of taking control.

Ironically coming out of the 2nd half, the injury seemed to spark something in Byu that was missing the entire first half, and they rode a wave of emotion to a quick stop, and it seemed like they were going to find themselves back in the game, but every time it seemed as if they were going to turn the corner, they would make a bad penalty, or Utah State would make a play, and in the end the Cougars special season came to a crashing halt. Gone was any hope of a playoff appearance. Gone was any chance at a New Year's bowl. Gone was their ranking. Gone was the interest in the later half of their easy schedule. And sadly, and most importantly gone, was their leader Taysom Hill.

Injury Not An Excuse

The injury obviously overshadows everything from Friday night, and the team obviously centralizes around Taysom, but truth be told, I'm reticent to use the injury Friday as an excuse for the Cougars to have lost that game. Afterall, the Aggies were also playing with a backup quarterback because their equally dynamic quarterback, who also entered the season as a dark horse heisman candidate is done for the year, after re-injuring the knee he injured almost one year to the day prior against Byu. Of course, unlike Byu, Usu was able to prepare for their backup during the week, instead of the quick entry scenario Christian Stewart faced for the Cougars.

Mostly though, I don't fully give a pass, because the Aggies just seemed to want it more, and I think they were on their way to winning it even had Hill gone out. Byu still was making the same mental mistakes that caused them to keep lesser teams like Houston and Virginia in the game. For example, on one of the few plays that seemed to go Byu's way, they did a high semi-squig kick off that the Aggies badly misplayed. After the ensuing scramble, the Cougars came up with the ball. Excitement throughout the stadium, so much so that nobody noticed the flag on the ground as a Cougar player was offsides. Yes offsides happen, and yes they happen sometimes that overrule bad plays, but most concerning is that Byu attempted the same type of kick the previous game, and although a turnover didn't happen on that try, an offside did.

These are the mistakes, and penalties the Cougars have been making all season long.

On top of the mistakes there was just the mental attitude around the team. After the initial drive of the game, the Cougars seemed to settle into an expected route mentality. Only that didn't happen, and the Cougars were never able to adjust back into the game. When Taysom went out of the game, it finally seemed to spark a fire under the team, but it just didn't last long enough for the Cougars to get back.

The Bearer Of More Bad News (a.k.a. Ask Red, Blue And Pigskin)

Utah State decided against playing Chuckie Keeton this week, and instead is going to seek a Medical Redshirt to recoup a season of eligibility, so it's natural that one would think that the silver lining I mentioned earlier would be Byu's ability to get Taysom Hill another year.

Alas that is not it.

Under NCAA rules (Bylaw 14.2.4) there are essentially three important aspects to obtaining a medical redshirt.

First the injury must be incapacitating, or cause the player to miss the rest of the season. Check.

Secondly the injury must occur prior to the first competition of the second half of the season. Since Byu plays 12 games, that would mean the injury would have to occur in the first 6 games. Since this was only game 5, Check.

Finally the injury must occur when the student athlete has not competed in the contests, or 30% of the season (whichever is greater). The important thing to note is that competing in one play is the same as competing an entire game. Again it's a 12 game season, and this was Byu's 5th game. Therefore Taysom had competed in 41% of the season. Ruh-Roh....

Now this doesn't preclude the possibility of a medical hardship waiver, as the Cougars could still seek one, however it's much, much harder to get one when the player has played beyond the above rules. One thing that may help Taysom though, is the fact that this is his second season ending injury, and the first one came after a single game played.

But even if he does get a waiver, there seems to be some chatter that Taysom may think his stock won't ever be as high as it is this year, and may try to test the draft waters.

A Glimmer Of Hope

Okay Byu fans, does it feel like I've been kicking you while you're down? If so, believe me that wasn't my intention. Last Friday's game falls into that category where it was such a bad loss that I don't gloat, so as a piece offering I will now convince you that not all is lost.

Let me be clear though, the magical season is for sure lost. There is not New Year's bowl on the horizon, the best that can be done is the Miami Beach Bowl against a team from the American Conference. However, what's not lost is that bowl game, a possible 10 win season, and an end of season ranking. All of which are things that Byu fans like to be proud of.

Not only that, but I will submit that the example the Cougars need to follow is actually that of the team they just beat. Last year the Aggies had just come off their best season in school history and were hoping for another great showing with at least a MWC championship in their first season in the conference. Despite an early season loss to Utah, and a three point dog fight loss to Usc they entered the Byu game with high hopes. That is until their QB Chuckie Keeton suffered a knee injury that would cost him his season. The Aggies would go on to lose the game that night, and the following week against Boise State. Then they settled in with their backup, and reeled off five consecutive victories and found themselves in the MWC Championship game.

Byu can also have a similar response. Much like Utah State's MWC schedule, the rest of the games on Byu's slate still aren't that daunting. Byu still has dynamic options at the Receiver positions in Jordan Leslie and Devon Blackmon who with a week of actual preparation, can help backup Christian Stewart get comfortable. More importantly, the Cougars still have their best offensive player in Jamaal Williams. I said it before, that Taysom may get all the publicity, but Williams is still their best player. Stewart won't be taking as many runs from Williams as Hill did, which will allow Williams to recapture some of his early career success. Right now on the season Williams has 395 yards rushing. If the Cougars adjust accordingly to take advantage of him, I don't see any reason he can't finish with near 1200.

It all starts this week. Unfortunately it's a short week of preparation for the Cougars, and a cross country flight to go to

Florida to take on Central Florida. The good news is that Blake Bortles isn't there for UCF, and they are still trying to adjust to that fact, as an offense that was dynamic last year ranks near 100th or worse in the three major statistical categories (rushing, passing, scoring), which is good news for a Byu defense that has been tested the past four weeks. And as long as the Byu defense can keep the Knights in check, the Cougars can still get a victory this week on their road to recovery.

The Last QB Standing

Alright so who would have guessed that the Utes would be the team to keep their starting QB the longest?

And because this season is quickly starting to become about zero kinds of predictable, Utah's status as the team with the longest starting QB lasted approximately 3 drives. Granted they were three extremely unproductive, drop passed filled drives, but it was still enough for Whittingham to pull Travis Wilson in exchange for Kendall Thompson. Whittingham got the spark he wanted as the Utes who got 13 total yards and zero first downs on the first three drives immediately started moving on offense.

Runningback Devontae Booker proved why it was a huge mistake that it took the coaches four games to figure something out that was readily apparent in Spring Camp, which is that not only should he be the starter, but he should also be the workhorse back, that Utah used to crank out. This was most obvious in the final drive for Utah as the Utes were trying to grind out the clock. On the night Booker carried the rock 33 times for 156 yards.

Of course the real key to the Utes pulling off the upset was the stellar play of the defense. Tevin Carter got the night started with a pick six (the only turnover of the night for either team) to give the Utes a 7-0 lead. The Defense was a constant thorn in the side of the Bruins, as they pressured, harassed, and sacked Brett Hundley constantly. All told the Utes had 10 sacks on the night, led by Nate Orchard with 4. Considering Hundley ended up with 22 passing attempts, when you add in Utah's 10 sacks, in means the Utes were in the back field roughly 1 out of every 3 pass attempts. That usually leads to good things.

Now For The But...

Despite the brilliance of the defense, and the workhorse use of Booker, the Coaches, and players, did their best to give this one away. From a coaching perspective, the staff continued what is starting to become a disturbing trend of aggression early, conservative late. The Utes used early game aggression, especially after Thomson came in, to get a 14 point lead. After the Utes scored on Tevin Carter's interception return, a well executed onside kick by Andy Phillips got the ball back for the Utes.

But as the game went on, and as UCLA began to push back, and eventually take the lead, the Utes play calling got more and more conservative. Never more so than on the final drive for the Utes. Down by 1, and with ghosts of heart breaks past (including a week previous) the Utes got the ball. After two big runs got the ball to the UCLA 38 yard line, the Utes started playing for the Field goal. Now with Automatic Andy, there is a some sense into feeling safe with the points, but considering that UCLA's last two scoring drives were both quick hitting, big play drives, the Utes were in serious risk of giving the ball back to UCLA with too much time on their hands.

Another huge mistake the Utes would make is kicking it short on kickoffs. Yes Ishmael Adams is a dangerous return man, but the short kicks are never a great idea. It gives the opposition too much field position. For example the final UCLA started around the 43 yard line. The Utes might as well just kicked the ball out of bounds, at least then it would have only been the 35.

Now to be fair, part of the reason the Utes may have wanted to go conservative, was the fact that the Utah WR's have come down with a serious case of the drops. Early on when Travis Wilson was playing Kenneth Scott had a huge drop that stalled a drive. Late in the game, trying to keep UCLA from coming back, Kendall Thompson threw a pass to a wide open Kaelin Clay. Clay could have hit the corner and been gone for a touchdown. Drop. Drive stalls. The very next drive on 3rd down, trying to extend a drive and keep a now only down 6 UCLA off the field Kenneth Scott drops an easy pass over the middle. Something is going on with the Utah WR's. The past few games there have been a large number of extremely untimely drops.

In the end the conservative play, and the stone handed WR's help tire out a defense, and UCLA managed to get a 1 point lead. Fortunately this week Andy Phillips kicked a field goal to put the Utes back up, but there was too much time on the clock as UCLA drove for a 54 yard game winning attempt, that sailed wide of it's mark giving the Utes the upset. But in the ultimate case of "Don't leave it in the hands of referees", the previous mistakes the Utes had made allowed for an acting job on the part of the UCLA kicker to convince the refs he was ran into. 5 yards closer. Fortunately for Utah the

ball still went wide.

The Utes pulled the upset, and now had their 2nd road win of the year.

Who Are The Utes?

Usually it takes a few weeks for us to get a good idea about who a team is. For example after the Houston game, we had a relatively good idea who BYU was, and it was something that was confirmed the next couple weeks. (A pretty good team, prone to mental mistakes.) After 5 games I have no clue who the Utes are. Here's what I know, what I think, and what I guess about this year.

What I know is they may have the best special teams unit in the country. Andy Phillips is almost automatic, and has quite a range (enough so Whittingham would have been comfortable with him kicking a 49 yarder to win last week.) Kaelin Clay is a threat to break it for a touchdown everytime he touches a return, and if they try to kick to the other guy on kick offs, the Utes usually have Booker back there with him. Tom Hackett is still the only punter I've ever seen teams drop a 2nd person back because he was just too dangerous flipping field position (2013 Arizona State, 2014 Washington State both did this.) I know DeVontae Booker is an absolute stud, and if the Utes make in the focal point of the offense, they can book their bowl game tickets.

I think this is a classic aggressive defense like those of Whittingham past. Orchard has shined in his role as the man on the team with 8 sacks already on the season. The line backers are aggressive. However opposition has to be taken into account. Idaho State and Fresno State are both bad football teams. Michigan is in a free fall as an entire team, and especially offensively. While UCLA is a good team this year, they've shown they were overhyped to begin the season and are not a premiere elite team. That said Hundley is an elite QB, so the fact that they could make him look so uncomfortable, and keep him contained is great. Another concern is that they've worn down each of the last two games. They also still seem to be vulnerable in the middle.

I think the Utes are in a good position for the season. I still target Oregon State after the bye as a pivotal game, but currently they are 4-1 and have two big victories under their belt for the season.

I guess that the Utes have an offensive unit. The Wide receivers haven't found nearly the separation they were getting the first two games, and to make matters worse, they can't seem to catch anything. From a Quarterbacking standpoint it's even more confusing. Travis Wilson has struggled for the last couple games, and the offense was absolutely anemic with him in there against UCLA. While the offense saw a spark with Thompson in there, I have to wonder how effective he can be long term. Right now Thompson is where Taysom Hill was to begin the season last year. An athletic runner, uncomfortable with his passing ability. He's a great runner, but he's a player that teams aren't going to worry about his arm. Teams will start to creep up to the line, and dare him to beat them through the air. UCLA began doing this late in the game last week, and it really slowed down the Utes. One thing I'll give Thompson credit for, is when he throws he's extremely accurate, and has a nice pass, with nice touch on it.

I'm also willing to guess, that despite getting the probably starting nod against the Beavers, and despite being the popular pick right now, Thompson is going to struggle, and the Utah offense is going to struggle a bit over the rest of the season. The Utes quarterback situation is far from clear, and far from decided. I also guess that Travis Wilson is going to start at least two more games this season, either by injury, or by getting the nod back. I hope I'm wrong, not because I don't like Wilson, and not because I don't think he can lead the team to success, but just because an unsettled QB situation is always troublesome.

Good Luck Playoff Committee

I was all prepared to pull out a sandbox and talk about the SEC Bias that is heavily prevalent in the polls and complain how a undefeated SEC team can beat a top 10 ranked SEC team, (Mississippi State over LSU 3 weeks ago) and instead of the top 10 team being considered overrated, the unranked team made a huge jump, and if it happened outside the SEC team it would be quite the opposite.

That is until undefeated Arizona (the last remaining undefeated Pac-12 team) upset Oregon for the second year in a row. The results in the polls was Oregon dropping from 2 to 11 or 12, and Arizona making a historic leap from unranked to 10 in the AP, 13 in the coaches.

Of course Arizona beating Oregon was just the first blow of the bloody week that was. Next was BYU on Friday. Then the fun really started on Saturday. #11 Ole Miss beat #3 Alabama. Minutes later #25 TCU finished the upset over #4 Oklahoma. #12 Mississippi State demolished #6 Texas A&M. When Utah knocked off UCLA it was the first time in

history that 5 of the top 8 teams lost on the same weekend.

The weekend just continued what has been a wild season. And there's more drama still to come. The selection committee is going to have their work figured out trying to only get 4 teams. The bright side to all the confusion is it will make it more obvious that 4 teams isn't enough for the playoffs.

Heck Utah being ranked 24th in the AP poll, just goes to show what little sense everybody can make of the season.

Gotta Love Homerism

So when you listen to the home town radio station of teams, you expect homerism from the play by play guy. Sometimes the homerism is so blatant, it because kind of funny to listen to. Greg Wrubell for Ksl is really good at this. However he can't hold a sock to the Homerism from the Ole Miss play by play guys.

To start with, just by listening to their voice you could hear them living and dying with every single play, just like a fan would. Any close call against Ole Miss was a referee conspiracy, and every good play was the best play ever in college football history.

The best part of listening to them on my drive up though was their blatant, and absolutely ignorance of the facts. The best part being in regards to how Hugh Freeze was working on, and how the Ole Miss Rebels finally, defeated the #1 team in the nation for the first time in their school history. After the game, they talked about how this will put the Rebels back on the map, whenever you can make the kind of noise that comes from upsetting the #1 team, it really sets up the rest of the season.

The only problem with that is that Alabama wasn't the #1 team, in any possible ranking. But never let the facts get in the way of a good homerism.

Flipping The Question

With a fair amount of snark, Rhett responded to the first Red, Blue And Pigskin of the year, where I bashed Byu's schedule quite frequently by asking, "would you rather watch your team get crushed every week or beat sub-par opponents?" I want to flip it around back to him.

First a couple things. Obviously every fan would take a win over a loss every single week. Secondly we've established that Utah isn't getting crushed every week. Didn't happen last year, Hasn't happened weekly this year. Utah may lose, and their may be an occasional crushing, but it's not a routine thing.

So here's the question. Would you rather watch your team play against an extremely weak schedule, knowing that they'll probably not only win, but win big, except for it won't really matter because your season ceiling has already been met, and even at the end of the year you wouldn't know how good your team really was, or would you rather watch teams against good competition, which may mean your team will lose, but the games will be more exciting/heart attack inducing?

I said at the time, that I'd much rather watch games against better competition. It's a better measuring stick for your team, and games against inferior teams, get boring, fast. What say you guys?

Broadcast Information

It's another secret holiday for the significant others this week, as the Utes are on bye before their game with the Oregon State Beaves next Thursday, and the Cougars play on Thursday night this week. The Christian Stewart rebound era starts on Thursday. It'll be on Espn at 5:30 p.m. MST.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 11:10

Thursday, October 2, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

It was all set up perfectly. The Utes had just passed a major test the week previously by winning a road game. They're up 21-0 just about 8 minutes into the game. Here they had their chance to have their first ever Pac-12 winning record, and really get a stranglehold on a bowl bid.

Sadly with the opportunity in their hands, the Utes dropped the ball.

A Collective Failure

So how does a team manage to blow a first quarter 21-0 lead? It's not very difficult when an almost every player on a unit of the team manages to have their worst games in a few years all at the same time. Offensively there was only one bright spot for the entire game. That was Devontae Booker who rushed for 178 yards on 24 carries. Even if you remove his 76 yard touchdown run, Booker still had a good night. Enough so that he has taken over the starting job.

But that was it. To say the rest of the offense was off would be an understatement. The previous week, the Utes manage to keep the Michigan offense from entering the red zone. This time it was Utah's turn to get that treatment. They couldn't find a rhythm all night, and whenever it seemed like they were about to find one, they would promptly kill the drive with stupid penalties, or Kaelin Clay (who had a good game on special teams, getting his 3rd Punt, and 4th overall return touchdown) would fumble the ball.

Passing wise, Travis Wilson had a terrible night. He never seemed comfortable the entire game. Part of that was the offensive line, while they did a fine job opening up running holes for Booker, could not protect Wilson, and left him under pressure and under fire by an aggressive Washington State defensive line. As such Wilson never got into a groove and was erratic throughout the night.

Wilson's decision making was suspect most of the night, especially in the run game. He never seemed to be able to get a read on the Wazzu defensive line, and therefore misplayed the zone/read for most of the game, letting Booker take it even when the line was crashing down on the running back, leaving a large hole for Travis had he kept the ball. Of course, even when he took the ball, he would misread the hole, and get stopped for a loss.

When passing Wilson was only on target about half of his throws (as evidenced by his 18/38 stat line). There were multiple times where Wilson missed an opportunity to move the ball, or gain a first down, with an errant throw that would be way off target of his receiver. Of course, since this was a unit based crap fest, even when he did manage to get the ball right on target, the ball would be dropped. While some may want to blame the weather, Washington State had to deal with it as well and didn't suffer from drops.

Overall it was just a dismal, horrific performance on the offensive side of the ball, but all that being said, late in the game, down by 1, Dres Anderson sped past his defender and was wide open. Travis spotted him and threw a beautiful pass. Dres catches it, he sprints untouched into the end zone, and the Utes are 4-0. But as is far too common for Dres during his career, he didn't catch it.

Despite the terrible performance Travis Wilson threw the winning touchdown pass, Dres just dropped it.

Not Just The Players

The players weren't the only ones to have a bad night, as the coaching staff had a dismal night. Unlike most fans, who are blaming Whittingham for being too conservative, I'm going to go the opposite way and say the offensive staff didn't go conservative enough.

I mentioned last week that the Utes absolutely did not want to get into a shootout with Washington State. I said this, not because they didn't have the athletes to get into a shootout, but because when you are playing a team that passes it as much as Wazzu does, you need to shorten the game. You don't want to keep giving them opportunities, because it is extremely difficult to pass protect that much. Especially if you play a man based defense like the Utes do. Eventually plays will be made by the offense.

Of course, how do the Utes come out of the gate? Pass, pass, pass. They start with 6 passes on their opening possession. While it is understandable not to want to totally change your gameplan at the start of the game, once you have a 21 point lead, and especially when your running game is working so effectively, it's usually a good idea to adjust in game. Instead, as WSU started to chip away at the lead, the Utes would open up every drive the same way. Through the air. Maybe it wouldn't have been such an issue if Travis and the offense were having a good day, but they weren't.

Now while I think offensively the Utes needed to be more conservative, defensively it should have been the opposite. Last week I posed the thought that while many would be tempted to say the play of the defensive backs would be the most important defensive matchup, in my opinion it was going to be the defensive line and their ability to get pressure on Halliday and make him uncomfortable.

Sure enough to start the game, the Utes used a variety of stunts, and blitzes to bring pressure on Halliday. It clearly affected him, and was a big reason why Washington State simply could not move the ball in the beginning of the game. However, coming out of halftime, the Ute defensive staff decided to play it safe, and started to only bring pressure with 3 men, and drop everyone else into coverage. Now without the pressure in his face, Halliday had more time to make decisions, and eventually started picking the Utes apart. While the secondary coverage was actually pretty decent, considering the task, with no one to pressure Halliday, they eventually started to tire, holes began to open, and points started to be scored. At no point did the Utes ever go back to pressuring Halliday.

Moving On, Or Here We Go Again

Thanks to an offense that couldn't get out of their own way, and a coaching staff who went conservative defensively and aggressive offensively when the exact opposites were needed, the Utes managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. They failed to secure their first ever winning record in Pac-12 conference play, and with UCLA up next are staring down the barrel of another conference opening losing streak. Oh yea to make things worse, UCLA finally found their rhythm against Arizona State last week.

UCLA came into the season riding a wave of hype, with many picking them to be the Pac-12 playoff representative. Through the first three games of the season, despite being undefeated, had failed to live up to that hype as they narrowly escaped Virginia, Texas, and Memphis with victories. That all changed last Thursday as they finally woke up and put a curb stomping on the Sun Devils from Arizona State.

Offensively the matchup the Utes need to worry about Brett Hundley. The Heisman Trophy candidate QB of the Bruins is the first of several dual threat QB's the Utes will face in the coming weeks. The Ute Linebackers especially will need to remain sound defensively. While Hundley has been sacked an amazing 11 times this season (especially when you consider he didn't play most of the Texas game, he still has an incredible ability to beat teams with his legs. In fact, it's been exactly that ability that has killed the Utes the last two games. The Utes have managed to contain the passing attack of the Bruins, and should likely do so again, although Hundley does lead the country with 20 TD passes, but they absolutely cannot let Hundley kill them when the play breaks down.

Offensively we're going to learn a lot about the mental makeup of QB Travis Wilson. Not only is he, and the entire offense, coming in after an atrocious performance last week, but it was against UCLA that Wilson had his career worst performance last year, throwing 6 interceptions. It'll be interesting to see how Wilson reacts. So far through the season Wilson seems to be making smarter decisions with the ball. Even last week when his performance was so bad, his decisions weren't (at least passing the ball.) Not turning the ball over will be important, because the Utes do not want to give UCLA extra opportunities and short fields. That's how UCLA turned a 2nd quarter slug fest, into a rout last week in Tempe.

Not only do they not want to give UCLA short fields, but if they can keep the ball, the UCLA defense is vulnerable. They rank in the 100's in pass protection, and they are middle of the pack nationally against the run, so the Utes will have opportunities to make plays, assuming they can get over the Washington State loss, and not allow the Cougars to beat them twice.

Let's Continue The Conversation

Earlier in the week I tweeted my annoyance with the Utah fan base, and how I would like to push them all off the ledge they seem to be on after the loss. Which led to a comment from Rhett, that even though it was only 1 loss, wasn't it the pivotal game of the season?. While I gave my answer on twitter, I wanted to expand upon it a bit.

First off, I'll admit to start the year I had Utah losing @ Michigan, and also had Washington State as one of the "should" win games of the year. Entering the season I also pegged the Oregon State game as the "pivotal" game of the season,

simply because it was the first toss up conference game of the year for the Utes. It was also the most winnable game of the UCLA, OSU, USC, ASU, Oregon, Stanford stretch. A loss at Oregon State meant that despite there being a couple other winnable games in that stretch, the greater odds were that the Utes could be looking at a 6 game losing streak

Granted had the Utes lost at Michigan, like I predicted earlier, would have probably made the Washington State game more pivotal, but since the Utes won at Michigan, it gave the Utes a little room for error (which they promptly used up.)

So now despite having lost one of the two "should" win games on the conference slate, in my opinion the Oregon State game remains the pivotal turning point of the season for Utah. A loss there and 6-6 becomes extremely, extremely difficult. But a win, could turn the point for the season, and give them just enough to snag one of the other toss up games.

The truth of the matter is that most Utah fans, especially the ones who had them winning 6 games this year, expected them to be 3-1 at this point of the season. And yes, there are some things to be concerned about, simply because it's the same exact problems from previous seasons, especially the inability to finish tight games, but the Utes are exactly where everyone expected them to be 4 games into the season. < br />

View From The Red Zone

I gotta give it to the crowd on Saturday because they were really amped up. It was the most electric crowd since last year's Stanford game. While I think some of that can be attributed to it being the first home game of the season against a team with a pulse, I gotta give credit to Curtis who pointed out that one of the nice things about weather like last Saturday, is that it causes the people who show up, to be people who actually want to be there.

On a negative note, there was something visible for our seats, that turned out to be a harbinger of the undisciplined play we would see the rest of the night. On the second and third Andy Phillips kickoffs of the night, the ball was downed for a touch back. Usually when that's the case, the kickoff return team runs towards the returner, before veering off at the end.

However on the 2nd kickoff, right in front of the official, Brian Allen, and Boobie Hobbs both went up to the returner and gave him a slight bump. On the 3rd kickoff, Boobie Hobbs did it again. On both occasions a personal foul for unsportsmanlike conduct not only would be justified, but probably should have been thrown.

While the bumps may not have been much, it's the sheer stupidity, and lack of discipline that is the bigger concern, especially on a night where discipline was lacking. Of course that might also explain why Brian Allen is only on kickoff teams despite this being his 3rd year in the program, and why despite the hype the coaches gave Boobie Hobbs during camp, he hasn't really seen much playing time.

One Game For The Boot

For the first time since the Beehive Boot was created in 1971, it will be decided in a single winner take all game as the Cougars and Aggies will play in the only matchup of in state teams this coming Friday in Provo. While in state rivalry games usually have more excitement around them, especially the last few years when the Aggies have shown to be semi-competent, it's really hard to get excited for this year's matchup.

On the Aggie side of things, they really are hurting. Defensively they lost their best player early in the season when Tyler Fackerell went down for the year. Offensively there's rumors coming out of Logan that Chuckie Keeton may be done for the year, and will seek a medical redshirt. Even if he is back, the truth is he just hadn't seemed right so far this year.

Outside of Keeton, this just really isn't a good Aggie team. Their offensive line is troublesome, they have no weapons at the skill players, and have been unable to establish any semblance of a running game this year.

For the Cougars, the truth of the matter is we may never find out exactly how good this team really is, but we've seen enough to know that they are good. We've also seen enough to know that they are good enough to manhandle this year's Aggie team.

This game is going to be a massive blowout. It's going to be a return to the old days of the Aggies being out of the game before they step off the bunch. And that's even with Chuckie Keeton playing. If Keeton's not there, goodnight Irene.

This will be a good chance for the Cougars to get some much needed style points after the sloppier than desired

victories of the past few weeks. Especially since the Aggies return to normal hasn't really been caught on to yet by national media. If Chuckie does play, the perception will be even better for the Cougars.

Broadcast Info

As the Utes jumped out to an early 21-0 lead, everyone's minds probably started thinking about a primetime matchup against Ucla on broadcast tv. Instead the Utes dropped the ball, and in response Fox dropped the Utes, opting instead for the Usc/Arizona State matchup. Fortunately for the Utes this drop wasn't as damaging as the ones Saturday night, as the Utes will end up on Espn kicking off at 8:30 p.m MST.

Byu meanwhile continues their annual Conference Weekend tradition of playing Utah State on Friday (The first of three weeknight games over the next 4 weeks) kicking off at 8:15 p.m. MST, also on ESPN.

RB&P Scheduling Info

Next week I will be on vacation, so I'm not sure when RB&P will be out next week. It may also be cliff noted as well depending on how much I can do.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:43

Friday, September 26, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

What is it about Byu and Virginia playing that causes a major weather delay for fans in this state? Oh well even the rain in Michigan couldn't damper a good weekend for the state of Utah.

In Provo, although sloppily, the Cougars managed to secure their most impressive win of the year so far. It'll probably end up as their most impressive win of the year when things are all said and done.

For the Utes, the talk was about playing Michigan in front of the 100,000 plus of the Big House. In the end, the Utes also secured their most impressive victory of the young season in front of about 5,000, most of whom were sporting Red.Unimpressively Impressive

I mentioned earlier that the win over Virginia last weekend is arguably Byu's most impressive victory of the season. While Virginia may not have the cachet of a victory over Texas, especially considering that last year Virginia's only 1-A victory was over Byu, but through the first four weeks of this young season, Virginia has been the best of the four teams Byu has face. And they've been the best of the four by a long shot.

Virginia's defense is legit, especially that front four who manage to contain the Byu running game in the first half, so putting up 34 points (7 points came on an Adam Hine kickoff return) on a day when Byu was only managing 3.9 yards per carry on the ground goes to show how efficient the offense is. Especially when the gameplan calls for passing routes of less than 10 yards, taking advantage of the middle.

While Virginia's defense is legit, their Offense however is not. The Cavs are unsettled at quarterback, don't really have a strong running game, and receiving wise are led by one player, with an awesome name in Miles Gooch. So the fact that the Virginia offense essentially matched Byu's point for point, minus one, and racked up 519 yards of offense is a bit more worrisome. Of course, Byu isn't the only good team this year to have struggled against Cal.

While getting Bronson Kaufusi back from injury will help some of the issues in the middle, and the line is stout against the run, the real concern for the Cougars is the secondary. While the secondary doesn't have the speed issues of the past, this group is frequently out of place, and sloppy, forcing them to grab, onto WR's to prevent getting burned. Which of course, leads to penalties.

That's the other big area of concern for Byu is the penalty situation. Once again Saturday, the Cougars had 12 penalties for 133 yards. Unfortunately for Byu a good portion of them were of the mental kind, such as the late hits, or taunting. I tweeted during the game that Bronco must absolutely hate this team with how sloppy they are, and how frequently penalized they are. It's very uncharacteristic for a Byu team in the Bronco era, and could lead to a team being in a game, they otherwise shouldn't be.

Bye, Bye, Bye

Next up for Byu is a week off then they get the conference weekend matchup against Utah State. A week off will come at a good time, as it will probably allow Bronson Kaufusi to be back, as well as Jordan Leslie who was injured during the Virginia game.

You know, it's ironic that the Byu vs. Utah State game is on conference weekend this year. Ironic because what Byu is going to do to the Aggies isn't going to be very Christian like, and that's if Chuckie Keeton is back.

Deciphering The Translation

So the big question entering into the game against Michigan, and furthermore Pac-12 conference play, for the Utes is whether anything from their games against air (a.k.a. Idaho State and Fresno State) would be able to translate against teams with a pulse. (Debate about whether Michigan has a pulse notwithstanding.) So let's compare and contrast performance from the first two weeks to performance in week 3.

From the start it was clear that the Utes were no longer playing walk over competition. After the first two drives of the game, it looked like it was going to be a long day for the Utes, and a blowout for the Wolverines, as Michigan took the

opening kickoff and marched down the field to the Utah 24 and kicked an opening drive field goal. On Utah's ensuing position, the Wolverines defense stiffened up and forced a quick 3 and out. Suddenly the Wolverines were going to get the ball back, with the lead, and all of the momentum.

Little did we know that after giving up a first drive field goal, the Wolverines would never even come close to Utah's red zone again. The following 11 offensive drives for Michigan would yield 0 points, as the Utah defense put on an absolute clinic. During the first 2 games, the Utes averages 10.5 tackles for loss per game, against Michigan the defense had 8 tackles for loss including 4 sacks, 2 each for Jared Norris and Nate Orchard.

But then again, defense is rarely the huge concern for Utah.

Offensively, it took the Utes a little bit longer to get going. It seemed through most of the first half as though the offense was content using the same vanilla calls that moved the ball against Idaho State, and Fresno State. Michigan though is a slight bit better defensively, and shut the Utah offense down in the first half. Even on the one good play in the early going, the fact that Michigan isn't a pushover shown through. On the second offensive drive for the Utes, RB Bubba Poole took a screen pass and broke away, with clear selling to the end zone, or at least it should have been, except the Michigan DB outran the Utah WR's who thought Poole was home free, and made a touchdown saving pass. Though the Utes would tie the game up, it was just another point of emphasis that this game wasn't going to be a cakewalk.

Not His Best Decision

For most of the first half, the Utes offense struggled. The struggles of the Ute offense were exacerbated by one decision of QB Travis Wilson. All of the early season praise I had given Travis Wilson for his smart decision making almost went for naught, when on 3rd and 5, Wilson put the Utah Season, his season, and honestly his career in jeopardy with one tremendously stupid decision.

As Wilson scrambled out of the pocket he was forced to the sideline. 6 yards away from a first down marker, and looking down the gun of 4 Michigan defenders, Wilson left his feet. The Outcome, Wilson ended up going "full scorpion" and was immediately injured. After being on the sideline for a while, Wilson ended up going back to the locker room, and every Utah fan immediately saw the season circling the drain. While leaving ones feet is usually not a good decision, what made this one worse was that there was nothing good to come out of it. Wilson wasn't going to leap over 4 defenders and get the 6 yards he needed for a first down. And even if he magically did, they'd still be around their own 30 yard line.

As Wilson was in the locker room, Kendall Thompson came in, and immediately did what Thompson does. Unfortunately what Thompson does is seem to be really bad on his first drive or 2, before finally settling into the game. With Thompson in the game, the Utah coaches insisted on trying to use his running ability with the zone/read play. Michigan was having none of it. After gaining a total of -10 yards on his first 5 plays over two drives, Thompson dropped back for a screen pass, and promptly threw it in the gut of the Michigan D-Line, who would then score Michigan's only touchdown.

Just as Utah fans were having flashbacks to Jon Hays, and Adam Shulz, something clicked. The Utah coaches switched from the zone/read to plays designed to take advantage of their edge speed. Kendall Thompson settled down, and led the Utes on a 5 minute drive, that accomplished three things. First it took the momentum away from Michigan. They'd never get it back. Secondly it allowed the Utes to take a 13-10 lead into halftime. Finally, when Travis Wilson came out of the locker room after half time, and looked to go back on the field, it put a ton of pressure on him.

With Thompson moving the ball, had Wilson came out and faltered, it could have been the beginning of the end for him. Instead, Wilson showed why he truly is the leader of this team. As great as Thompson final drive of the half was, Wilson was better. Despite the brutal hit, that could have made him a bit gun shy, Wilson led the Utes down field, hooked up with Dres Anderson for a touchdown, and the domination was afoot.

When It Rains, It Pours

Early on in the game, the Utes were having a problem with WR Devin Funchess, who was eating the Utah zone alive. That is until he met Brian Blechen. During a pass route over the middle, Blechen drilled Funchess just as the ball got there and caused an incomplection. From that point on Funchess wasn't really effective. Especially as he started having Alligator Arms over the middle. Blechen was rewarded for his earlier hit, when a pass that should have been caught by Funchess, bounced off his alligator arms, and directly into the arms of Blechen for the interception.

Remember a couple weeks ago, when I talked about how I though when the pressure of that first interception was off,

the secondary would relax a bit, and the flood gates would open. That's exactly what happened. Granted Michigan QBs Devin Gardner and Shane Morris helped out with some bad passes, but even still the Utah secondary over the last 15 games still weren't turning those kind of passes into turnovers. This weekend though the Utes matched their entire 2013 interception total in this one game, as Blechen, Tevin Carter, and Gionni Paul all snagged a pick.

Another interesting twist that the three interceptions all came from someone the Utes hoped would play last year, but for a variety of reasons (Injury for Blechen, failing to qualify for Carter, failed NCAA waiver request for Paul) didn't.

Paul would actually add a fumble recovery later for a total of 4 turnovers.

A Long Awaited Debut

Though the defense had a very strong day, the best performance for the Utah defense was the debut of LB Gionni Paul.

Gionni Paul was the leading tackler for the University of Miami as a Sophomore in 2012. However as the Hurricanes dealt with NCAA violations, Paul wanted out. Around that same time the Utes hired former Miami coach Dennis Erickson who still had a lot of contacts in the Florida area, and he managed to convince Paul to come to Utah. Paul had to sit out last year due to NCAA transfer rules, after a failed waiver request due to Miami sanctions. During spring practices Paul suffered a Lisfranc fracture in his foot, and would be forced to miss some time.

Despite not playing last year, and knowing he'd have to sit out the first couple games of this year, Paul quickly became a defensive leader, and almost was voted a captain. Every time a coach talked about Paul, they had to genuinely try to hide their excitement about what he would bring to this team.

Saturday he made his debut at the Big House, and despite taking a couple drives to regain his football feet, he clearly delivered with a 14 tackle, 1 interception, 1 fumble performance, on his way to Pac-12, and National Defensive Player of the Week honors.

Man The Hatches, Here Comes The Pirate

This week the Utes welcome the mad pirate Mike Leach and the Washington State Cougars into town to open conference play. Here's a sample of what you can expect from the Washington State offense. Pass, pass, pass, pass, pass, pass, and when those don't work, pass some more. The Cougars don't hide who they are. They are a passing team. They don't even pretend to run to keep a defense honest.

Through 7 combined games Travis Wilson and Taysom Hill have yet to pass for 41 passes in a single game. Washington State QB Connor Halliday threw the ball 41 times in the first half last week. Halliday hasn't thrown it fewer than 41 times in a game since September 28 of last year, including a game in that time span with an NCAA record 89 attempts. It's no wonder that the Cougars come in with the nation leading passing attack.

When a team passes that much anything can happen. The Utah secondary will be tested. The problem is, when a team passes that much, it means all the more opportunities for a small mistake to turn into a big play. By the end of the day, you'll probably be able to count on one hand, the number of defensive snaps where the Utes have less than 5 defensive backs on the field. With the need for 5 defensive backs, and less of a concern for the run, don't be surprised to see the Utes in a lot of 3-3-5 defenses, with Paul, and Jarred Norris taking care of the line backing duties along with Orchard, who won't be used so much as a line backer, but as a pass rusher. In addition this might be a good week for the Utes to use Pita Taumoepeu, who is a young linebacker the Utes are high on, but who is a little raw in run stopping right now, but has excelled at chasing down the QB.

To help the secondary, the Utes will want to get pressure on Halliday and make him uncomfortable so he can't just sit in the pocket and pick his shots. The nice thing about playing a team like this, is the defensive line can just pin their ears back and go, without worrying about the run. One question I've heard a lot of radio this week is "What's the more important position this week, the DB's covering, or the DL getting to the QB?" While it's tempting to say the DB's, the truth is a good pass will beat good coverage every time. Just ask Sean Mannion and Oregon State last year at Utah. The more important thing for Utah will be to aid good coverage with a strong pass rush.

Offensively, the Utes must resist the urge to match Washington State shot for shot. The Cougars will get the yards, but the Utes must simply control the ball, and do their thing. Last year in Pullman the Utes, being led by Adam Shulz came out firing in the passing game. The result were two consecutive pick sixes to open the game. Utah was never able to recover and ended up losing by 12. Instead, the Utes need to play their game, which is a spread running attack, that

carefully picks it's spots in the passing game. The Washington State defense is a young aggressive defense. They like to blitz alot, but are also prone to giving up the big play. As long as the Utes take care of the ball offensively, that much passing by the Cougars will give the defense a chance to get some more turnovers.

Last week, the Utes running game wasn't up to the standard set in the first two weeks. A lot of that can be put on the Michigan defense. This week though the Utes will need the running game. Expect to see Devontae Booker and Bubba Poole both get 15-20 rushes as the Utes will want to work the clock.

Another concern for the Utes, will be to make sure they put the joy of the Big House behind them. Especially since the Cougars come into the game 1-3, and after having gone to a bowl game last season, they want to return. Another loss will really put that in jeopardy.

Last week the Utes passed a serious test by winning their first game outside the state of Utah since November of 2012. This week the Utes have a chance to do something they haven't ever accomplished in their time as a member of the Pac-12. The Utes have the opportunity to have their first ever positive conference record, even if it is only 1-0. A win will also put them 2 games away from their season goal, but to get there, they will have to figuratively do something, they literally had to do last week. Weather the storm. Although instead of actual rain (which, if you look at the weather report you can't completely rule out,) the storm this week will be the relentless pirate passing attack.

Ask Red, Blue And Pigskin

So occasionally during a game, or in conversation afterwards questions will arise. During the Fresno game, a situation came up, that Curtis said would make for a good clarification during RB&P, and although I did answer it during the game, I figured it would make for a good segment. As such I present "Ask Red, Blue And Pigskin" where I try to use my knowledge for some of the more obscure parts of the game we love to answer your question.

During the Fresno Game there was a point where Fresno was running an up tempo drive. As the Bulldogs snapped the ball, the officials blew the play dead, and promptly announced they they had to allow the defense a chance to substitute. Thus prompting Curtis' request for clarification.

While I don't know the exact wording of the rule, it goes something like this. Either side can attempt to substitute players during any dead ball time. If the offense has not substituted any players, than the defense does so at their own risk, knowing the offense can snap the ball and get the defense for anything from too many men on the field, or even an offsides call depending on where the substituting players are coming from. In the NFL Peyton Manning, and Tom Brady are really, really good at taking advantage of this.

However, if the offense has substituted players, the defense must be given a chance to react. You'll usually see this accomplished by the umpire standing over the ball, preventing the offense from snapping the ball. Although if the offensive substitution wasn't immediately after the preceding dead ball, you end up in situations where the ball had already been set, and the offense attempts to snap the ball. I'm not quite sure on the exact amount of time the defense is given, especially since it seems to differ by officiating crew.

This is something that can be a bane to both Utah, and Byu, and all up tempo offenses who try to get the snap off as quickly as they want, and sometimes think the officials wait too long.

If you have any scenarios or questions you'd like clarified email them or leave them in the comments.

Broadcast Update

This week's game is scheduled to kick off at 6 p.m. Mountain Standard Time, and will be broadcast on the Pac-12 network. I say schedule because according to the weather report, thunder storms are expected Friday and Saturday. Again what is it about Byu playing Virginia that causes one of our teams to deal with two weeks of severe weather. This is why we can't have nice things.

The Utah @ Ucla game on October 4th was one of two games optioned by Fox for the 6 day window, along with Usc/Arizona State. What this means is that the game will be on either 5:30 MST on Fox, or 7p.m MST on the Pac-12 network and we won't know till next week. If Utah wins, expect Fox to snag the battle of undefeateds. If Utah loses Fox will go with name recognition in Usc.

Soapbox Time

Excuse me a moment while I pull out my soapbox

Okay here we go. Can we please quit with the Travis Wilson has a history of injuries baloney. Look I know that Travis landing in the Michigan game was scary. But what really upsets me, is how much this week people have brought up Wilson being injury prone, and making it sound like he has a history of missing game. Similar to this article by Pacific Takes.

I realize the fact that they refer to Travis suffering a concussion in the Michigan game should mean I shouldn't pay attention. If it was a concussion he wouldn't have come back. But it's more about the same thing that people have been saying since the offseason.

Yes Travis Wilson health scare was really bad last year. It was one of those things that transcend the football field and had put his career at risk. But Let's not act like that one thing makes Travis injury prone, and someone whose "history of injuries, you have to worry that his status for the rest of the season will be hit and miss at least." In fact his playing history says exactly the opposite.

Travis came in as a true freshman in 2012 and played in the first five games of the year, before becoming the starting QB for good. Travis then started the next 16 consecutive games for Utah. During this time Travis showed an ability to take hits in the running game, and even played with a hand that was extremely jacked up and probably should have kept him out of a game. It was during that 16th game that he suffered a concussion. While concussion symptoms seemed to have faded by the end of that week, and coaches have said he probably would have missed one game at worse, it was the concussion tests that were ran that found a pre-existing condition not related to an injury that caused Wilson's season, and possibly his career to be sideline.

After getting cleared Wilson came back, and hasn't missed any of the three games. Even coming back after getting stiches in his nose this past week, and with sever road rash on his face.

Look last year was scary, and Utah has an injury history at QB over the last decade, but it's still a bit too early to call Travis Wilson injury prone.

Although there still needs to be a team rule, that he's not allowed to leave his feet again.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:51

Thursday, September 18, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Have you ever been busy in your day to day grind, and forget how close to a holiday you were? When you look at the calendar and realize that next Monday is a holiday you had forgotten about, there's this brief feeling of elation and happiness. I have to think that's how all the football widows in the state felt this past weekend when they realized that neither Utah or Byu were playing on Saturday. It was as if they had found a forgotten holiday.

Utah State fans wish they could go on holiday after seeing Chuckie Keeton go down with another knee injury. Breaking The Curse

Byu Head Coach Bronco Mendenhall is now in his 10th season in charge of the Cougars. Going into last Thursday's game he was 1-8 on third games of the year, with the only previous victory coming in the 2008 shellacking of the UCLA Bruins. Despite jumping out to a 23-0 lead, the Cougars tried as hard as they possibly could, to continue Bronco's bad luck with 3. Stupid sloppy penalties, turnovers, and bad technique turned a 23-0 2nd quarter blowout into a 23-15 halftime slugfest.

This was the first real test of the Cougar secondary and while they got a passing grade, it sure wasn't with flying colors. Houston QB O'Korn was able to rack up 307 yards and 3 TD's. Of course Byu will take that greatly over their last matchup against this team.

Of more concern for Byu is that they seem to lesser opponents hang around. Against both UConn, and Houston the game should have been a blowout, except for the fact that Byu couldn't get out of their own way. Last Thursday night in addition to the 3 turnovers, Byu also had 11 penalties for 98 yards, many of them being mental mistakes. On the season, Byu is averaging over 10 penalties and over 100 penalty yards per game, which is very un-Byu like in the Bronco era.

Vengeance On Their Mind

Last year to open their season, Byu went to Virginia and suffered the most embarrassing loss by any team in this state since a 2007 Desert Meltdown. While many Byu fans want to blame the weird weather delay during the game, the truth is, Byu let a Cavalier team that would only win 1 more game (against a Division 1-AA team) the rest of the season, physically manhandle them. Byu was dominated on both sides of the ball, and Mendenhall was outcoached from the beginning when he didn't have his team prepared, through the weather delay when Virginia came out with more fire, to the end where boneheaded play calling gave the winning TD to the Cavaliers.

A year later and many things have changed. First, this game is in Provo and not in Virginia, and after a week when the local media has been hounding Byu fans for not showing up against Houston, I would expect an extremely packed house this week. Secondly Mike London has his team playing real well. The Cavaliers have already matched last season's total wins, and their lone loss was a quality loss by taking UCLA the distances before falling 28-20. The Cavs come into the game fresh off their upset of 21st ranked Louisville last week. Of course, as the other team from the state of Virginia learned last week, coming fresh off a major victory could lead to a bit of a letdown.

For Byu, they brink have replaced Louisville as the 21st ranked team in the nation, and if they weren't already taking Louisville seriously before last week, you can bet they are now.

Gameplan wise this Virginia team should look very familiar to Byu fans, as it's a pretty good replica of the 2010-2013 teams. It's a team that leans heavily on their defense, and only asks their offense not to hurt them too badly. One of the strengths to this Virginia team is their defensive line. Their defensive line is one of the more underrated, and one of the better lines, in the entire nation. After being pushed around and badly abused last year, it'll be really interesting to see how the Byu offensive line responds. After all the key to beating Byu is putting pressure on Taysom, and making him a passer. If Virginia can't pressure Taysom, they may be in for a tough go of it, because they still just don't have the offensive firepower to get into a shootout.

Most Important Week

While Byu has their hands full with an important revenge game this weekend, Utah plays, what I think, is probably their

most important game of the year. Now I know it's a bit crazy to consider a non conference game in the 3rd week the most important, but for what Utah's goals are this season, this week may be the difference between accomplishing them, and not.

While Utah absolutely would love to run the Pac-12 table, win the Conference Championship Game, and then defeat two more teams in the playoffs to become National Champion, I think we can say that's probably not going to happen.

Instead, despite two blowouts in the first week against non-existent competition, the Utes goals for the season remain now, what they were to start the season: 6-6, and a bowl game.

A win against Michigan puts the Utes halfway to their goal. And winning 3 games in conference is a lot more achievable than 4.

We can break down the Utes conference games to Should Lose, Toss Up, and Should Win category. Right now their are two games in the Should Win category. At Colorado, and home for Washington State.

In the Should Lose category we have home for Oregon, on the Farm for Stanford's Revenge game, the Overrated, and low on depth Usc Trojans. and At UCLA.

That leaves Toss up games of home versus Arizona, away for Arizona State, away for Oregon State.

Assuming the Utes win the two should win games, a win this week against Michigan means they only need to win 1 of the 3 toss up games to reach their goal. If they lose this week, the road gets a lot harder.

Of course, the Utes were 3-0 in non conference play last year, and still didn't make a bowl.

Return To The Big House

The first step though remains, Beat Michigan. Michigan is a big interior team, and won't be able to be pushed around by the Utah lines the way the first two opponents were. They will be the first true test of this year's defensive line.

Offensively, the Wolverines live and die on the decision making of Devin Gardner. Gardner is the type of qb, who when he's comfortable and in a groove, can really get the offense clicking. Fortunately for Utah, Gardner also has a history of being rattled, and when he's rattled his decision making becomes very poor. Gardner's job will be even tougher without his primary target 6'5" Jr Wideout Devin Funchess, who is expected to miss the game due to injury.

The Utes probably won't be able to matchup up size for size, pound for pound against Michigan either offensively or defensively, but where the Utes will have a distinct advantage is in the speed department, especially on the edges. Look for Utah to take advantage of their speed, and try to get WR's Kenneth Scott and Dres Andersen in one on one situations.

Think back to the offensive gameplan that the Utes used against Stanford last year. Lots of short quick passes, meant to stretch the defense side to side, opening up the middle of the field. This could be a very big game for Bubba Poole. While I think DeVontae Booker should be the Utes starting rb, and shouldn't get less than 20 carries a game, this week might just be set up to take advantage of Poole's ability, especially coming out of the back field.

The major key will be weather the great decision making Travis Wilson has shown during the first two games can continue against a team with a pulse. A couple Michigan fans summed it up nicely. Fan 1: Utah hasn't beaten anyone with a pulse. Fan 2: I hope we get a pulse.

There seems to be an unreasonable amount of hope and optimism coming from Utes fans this week, but rest assured, despite their recent struggles beating Michigan at the Big House won't be an easy task. After all they are 11-2 under Brady Hoke at home, on undefeated against non-conference foes. That said, I have to like the attitude coming from the players, as it's clear they aren't intimidated by the Big House itself. It doesn't seem to have the same awe around it, as it did for our 2002, and 2008 teams. Of course yearly trips to the Rose Bowl, or the LA Coliseum can have that affect, but getting over the awe of the Big House before they every get there, will really help the Utes focus not on the field, but on the opponent.

One Major Downside To The Playoffs

I love the fact that college football is going to a playoff this year, but there has been one unforeseen consequence. Every media member, and their dogs, have found it necessary to inundate us with their weekly playoff predictions polls.

Dealing with the AP and the USA Today polls this early in the season is bad enough, but trying to choose the 4 best out of 120+ teams, when most teams have played only 2 or 3 games (in the case of Cincinnati 1 game), and when a good chunk of those games are against teams like Sam Houston State, Idaho State, UConn, Fresno State, William & Mary, Troy, SMU, FAU, South Dakota State, etc. is beyond ridiculous.

Can we at least wait till we have a reasonable sample size of both in conference, and out of conference games. We don't need every media member doing a Playoff 4 this early.

Speaking Of Stupid Polls

And despite the fact I just spent the last section railing against the idiocy of ranking teams this early in the season, I'm introducing a new feature. Quarter Polls. But unlike the media where I'm going to try and rank the top 4 of 120+, I'm only dealing with three teams: Utah, Byu, and Utah State. When 2 of those 3 teams have reached a quarter mark of the season (3, 6, 9, and 12 games) I'm going to rank who's the best. Consider it a way to early Beehive Boot primer.

After the first quarter these are the rankings.

3: - Utah State (2-1). Coming into the season there were a lot of question marks surrounding this team. A home win against Wake Forest helped take the sting away from their season opener on Rocky Top, but losing Chuckie hurts this team.

2: - Utah (2-0). While they may not have the most impressive win of the year, the Utes have been the most impressive statistically, as well as the most consistent team. Travis Wilson looks to be making much better decisions with the football than a year ago. Now the Utes have to go out and do it against actual competition.

1: - Byu (3-0). They have the most impressive win by an in state team this year by going to Austin and pounding Texas. Sloppiness and inconsistency could be a concern, but not many on their schedule will be able to corral Taysom in the run game.

Scheduling Notes

The game time for the Utes home game against Washington State on September 27th has been announced. It will be a 6 p.m. MST kickoff and will be televised on the Pac-12 networks. Hopefully this means we can avoid the sun burnt heads that come from forgetting sun screen.

This week the Utes and Cougars play at the same time, which means get those multi tv setups going. Of course, if you are a Byu fan and are in state, you really should be at LaVell Edwards Stadium so that there are more than 57000 like against Houston. But you do want to set your DVR's.

Both games will be broadcast by the ABC family of networks. Byu will kickoff at 1:30 and be available on ESPN. The Utes will be on ABC (Channel 4) also at 1:30. Both games will also be available on Watch ESPN.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 07:33

Saturday, September 6, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

If the first week of the year is all about expectation and anticipation, and the second week is all about hyperbole with only a single game (usually against crappy crappy opponents), than around the country this is the week where we can actually start looking back on what we learned.

Around the country, we've learned a few things so far this year.

For example we learned that Byu has a better shot at making this year's playoffs (with their odds still at a little less than slim) than any of the 12 teams from the B1G (who are firmly planted at none.)

We learned a QB can make a huge difference (although we've already known this), as Everett Golson continued his regular season undefeated streak for Notre Dame. Golson led the Irish to an undefeated season and championship game appearance two years ago. He was kicked off the team last year, but earned his way back this season and has the Irish at 2-0. Meanwhile in Columbus Ohio State went from playoff contender to struggling to beat Navy in the opener, and losing to Virginia Tech (despite how hard the Hokies tried to give it to the Buckeyes) after the loss of Braxton Miller.

In Texas we're in the process of learning if a Football obsessed fan base is willing to suffer through a difficult short term, in order to return to prominence eventually, but this time having done it the right way, without thugs and criminals.

Locally we've begun to learn a few things about Byu and Utah as well.

No Relief

For Byu the biggest takeaway was just how unrelenting the offense is. For three quarters (1st, 2nd, and 4th) both teams were mediocre. Well Texas was mediocre for all 4 quarters. The Longhorn defense had kept the Cougar offense mostly in check, and especially had made Taysom look very average. The Texas defense had also managed to stuff Jamaal Williams. Despite a missed field goal and 2 fumbles by Texas on their first 5 drives, Byu only managed a 6-0 half time lead, and the game started to feel like the 2011 matchup, and a late interception left the Longhorns feeling semi confident.

The problem though is you cannot relax against this very relentless Byu offense. And the third quarter showed that, as Byu took the opening kickoff and preceded to have as close to a perfect quarter as you can have. By the end of the third quarter Byu had made the most of their 28 3rd quarter plays, and turned a 6-0 snoozefest into a 34-0 blowout, once again leaving Texas defenders scrambling.

Texas managed to right the ship a little bit in the final quarter, but all it took was just a little relaxing at half time, and they got swarmed by the Byu Offense.

Byu Offense in quarters 1, 2, and 4: 13 points, 230 total yards, 120 passing (3.8 ypa), 110 rushing (2.68 ypc) with Hill getting 31 yards rushing and having been sacked 6 times.

Byu Offense in quarter 3: 28 points, 199 total yards, 61 yards passing (7.65 ypa), 138 yards rushing (7.67) with 68 rushing yards, and no sacks for Hill.

One More Note On Hill

On Byu's first drive of the game, the Cougars faced 4th and 1 and the Texas 30, and the announcers brought up the question of whether the Cougars should go for it, because they were in that no mans land where they were too far for a figgie (especially with their kickers) and too close to punt.

One announcer made the comment that he wouldn't because it's too early in the game.

My response: Are you freaking stupid? I don't care the time of game, the situation, or the location on the field. If there is very little time on the clock, and a figgie would win the game for Byu you attempt the kick. Under absolutely no other situation, with Taysom Hill back there, should you ever even contemplate not going for it on any 4th and less than 3

situation.

Taysom is such a dangerous weapon on any down when the distance is three, because there are too many options for Byu. They could hand it to Williams, or Lasike for a short yard bang. Taysom's passing questions aside, it is undeniable that where he excels in the passing game are the quick slants and underneath, which is a perfect play for less than three. Then add in the damage that Taysom can do with his legs, be it designed run, draw, or scramble.

There have been a lot of comparison's lately to Tim Tebow. One place where I absolutely agree with that, is on less than 3 yards, where Tebow was almost always money.

On The Verge

With Texas out of the way, it's pretty clear that the Cougars are now looking at the possibility of a special season. Texas was always going to be the toughest challenge to an undefeated schedule, and Byu managed to dispatch them in an even more impressive manner than last year.

Now as you look out at the rest of the year, it's very obvious that there are only 2 things standing in the way of Byu and an undefeated season.

First is injuries. Specifically injuries to Taysom Hill. Last year, and through two weeks this year Hill has managed to take some a good pounding and stay healthy, but be honest Byu Fans, you hold your breath a little bit every time he takes off, especially when he decides to charge head down towards defenders instead of sliding.

And to Hill's credit you can't play in fear of injuries. You just have to play your game.

But an injury to Hill would be absolutely devastating to this Byu team. Offensively, outside of mass casualties on the OL, the Cougars could probably survive most other injuries.

Defensively though attrition could cause problems. The Defensive backfield has never been extremely deep, and we saw last year what happened with just two injuries. The case is the same throughout the Byu Defense. There isn't a single player on that side of the ball you can look at and say, without them they're screwed. But, the defense also wouldn't be able to sustain multiple prolonged losses. As such they hope Bronson Kaufusi can hurry back from his ankle injury.

But injuries are a part of the game.

The second obvious thing that could prevent Byu from the magical season is Bronco Mendenhall.

This may very well turn out to be the best team Bronco has had in his tenure (Right now it slightly behind the 2009 squad 2006/2007 squad), and the schedule is breaking just right for Byu to run the table. I'm just not sure that Bronco will be able to stay out of their way for 10 more weeks.

Home At Last

This week Byu will play their 2014 home opener on Thursday night as they welcome in the Houston Cougars. Last year, the Houston Cougars provided the Byu Cougars with their worst defensive performance as Byu came out on top 47-46 in a back and forth affair that saw both teams combine for 45 points in the first quarter, and over 1000 yards of combined total offense. Taysom Hill had his best career yardage output, and Houston QB John O'Korn was 1 yard shy of his career best.

This year the game will probably be another high scoring affair, but not nearly as bad as last season. This will be the first true test of the season for BYU's passing defense as Houston is still very much a pass happy team, and both teams come back with most of the same offenses in tact. Although through two weeks Houston has struggled to get their offense going, and while Byu's overall defense may not be as good as it was last season, the secondary is improved with Jordan Johnson and Robertson Daniel back there, which should be enough to get the couple key stops that will turn this season's matchup from a 1 point affair to a multi score game.

Of course, one big difference in this game is location. Last year's game was in Reliant Stadium in Houston. This year it's the home opener for Byu coming off of a big victory over Texas. The stadium is going to be filled with a bunch of Byu fans hyped about what could possibly be a special year for the team, or at least one would think it should be.

A Game Of Guess Who

Let's play a guessing game. Can you name the following player:

"As a true freshman, and a member of what was thought to be one of the best recruiting classes in that school's history I rushed 99 times for 505 yards and 5 Td's. As a sophomore I entered the season as the starter, but injuries and problems with the coach led me to only carry the ball 86 times for 298 yards. Following my sophomore season I decided to transfer. At my new school I once again became a featured offensive weapon, and I ran for 807 yards and returned to a greater than 5 yards per carry average for a team that won our conference. This year, I missed the opener due to injury, and in week 2 got to play against my first school's rival. Unfortunately my team royally sucks now that our star QB graduated and much like in my freshman season, my coach is making the beyond stupid decision to go with a two QB system."

Okay time to guess. Read on to find out.

About That Whole Actual Competition Thing, Nevermind.

Last week I mentioned that after the week 1 prostitution game against Idaho State, it would be nice to see how the Utes do against something resembling actual competition. After week 2 we're still waiting. The Utes rolled over Fresno State on their way to a 59-27 blowout, that was actually 45-7 before the Utes made wholesale changes to let second stringers play defense, but that doesn't mean there weren't some positives to take away from week 2.

In week 1, despite getting blown off the field by USC, the one bright spot for the Bulldogs was their rushing attack as they racked up 157 yards on a 4.8 yards per carry average. They were led by Marteze Waller, who got 97 yards. All this despite the game being a blowout.

For Utah, one of the big concerns out of week 1 was the fact they gave up 179 yards rushing, 133 by Xavier Finney, to Idaho State. During the week, Whittingham mentioned it was a matter of changing gap assignment, and gap integrity. With the Bulldogs expecting senior running back Joshua "Juice" Quezada (did you guess correctly?) back, it would be important for the defense to get righted correctly.

Sure enough, the Ute defense came ready to play. They started the game with 5 straight 3 and outs. In fact, the Utes went the entire first quarter without giving up a first down, and only allowed the Bulldogs to gain a total of 4 yards in the quarter on the Bulldogs 5 full drives.

For the game, the Utes allowed 55 total rushing yards when their 6 sacks got figured in. Marteze Waller had 61, and Quezada was held to -4 yards on 3 carries.

Of course not everything was absolutely great, as the Utes secondary was exposed a little bit for their lack of depth and experience on the boundaries. In particular Senior Eric Rowe, who moved over to corner this year had an extremely difficult day. On one series in particular Rowe was targeted over and over, and had a series of mistakes that kept alive a drive that turned into the Bulldogs first TD of the game. Rowe is trying to make the same move that Keith McGill did last year, but through two games is still struggling at his new position. Something that could cause concern as the competition begins to ramp up. To be fair to Rowe though, Josh Harper is an extremely good WR. Last year he caught 13 TD's and racked up over 1000 yards. He's on the Belitnikoff Watch list, and is currently considered a 2nd round draft pick in the 2015 NFL Draft, so it's a tough matchup for anyone playing only their 2nd game at corner, but if Rowe better learn fast, because the Pac-12 has some pretty good WR's.

View From The Red Zone

For the second straight week fans were treated to a game that was over by the first quarter. Add in the extremely warm midday weather, and it's no doubt why the biggest cheer in the 2nd half came when there was finally some cloud cover.

Another thing I observed is how badly the dearth of interceptions is starting to get into the heads of the Utah secondary. A couple times as the game wore on, defensive backs to extremely risky gambles on plays, solely trying to finally break through and nab that interception. I have a feeling that when the Utes finally get a couple turnovers, especially interceptions, it's going to be like a flood gate opens, and they'll nab more of them, but until that happens you can tell it's definitely on their minds.

The other observation I had was just how drastically improved Travis Wilson seems. Now I'm not talking about his stats, as they are very similar to what he had last year after two games. Instead I'm talking about his decision making. On the

season Wilson is 24/38 (63.2%), but I have yet to see him make bad pass. That's not to say all his throws have been perfect, because they haven't. By not having a bad pass, I mean he hasn't made a bad decision on when to throw the ball, or where to throw the ball. Not one of his passes have been intercepted, or even been in danger of being intercepted. For a guy who was a bit of a gunslinger last year, and ended up with 16 interceptions in 9 games of action, this was a real concern. Wilson needs to take better care of the ball than he did in the past, and through two games he has done that extremely well.

You can see it when he's making his reads as well. Multiple times in the last two games you could see he had a guy he wanted to throw it to, but the window wasn't enough to be comfortable with. Rather than try to squeeze it in there, he'd take the smart play and run, or throw it away.

Now this could all change as the competition ramps up, but threw two games, his worst decision is that he didn't get far enough outside the tackle box on a throw away and got called for intentional grounding. That's something I can live with.

Early Bye Week

This week, the Utes are on the first of their two byes. While I'm not usually a fan of such early bye weeks, I'm okay with it this year. Mainly because, after two weeks of sub optimal competition, the Utes prepare to travel to play in front of the 100,000+ fans of the Big House next week as they face off against the Michigan Wolverines. Not only that, but due to their schedule the rest of the way, there is a strong case to be made that this could be the most important game of the season, which I'll get into more next week.

Fashion Police

A bit of uniform news for this week.

First off, after having now seen the red versions on the players in action the last two weeks, and seeing a video of the white version on some of the players, I have to say that I actually don't mind the new Utah uniforms, and actually like them some. The mountains on the sleeves may not have come through nearly as much as been intended, but I like that the front of the jerseys have been stream lined a bit. All in all I actually prefer these jerseys to the ones the Utes have had the previous few years.

The second bit of news for the Utes is the reveal of the all-white Helmet. I'll have to admit, those look sweet. This does perhaps explain why the date for the annual marketing ploy/blackout game hasn't been announced. Maybe this year it'll be a white out.

With Thursday being the anniversary of the September 11 attacks, a few tributes are being planned for the game in Provo. One such tribute is for both Byu and Houston to wear USA themed helmets during the game. In the first battle of the week between these two teams, Byu comes out on top, just like they hope to do Thursday.

Broadcast Info

As has been mentioned the Cougars have a Thursday night game and kickoff on ESPN at 7:00 p.m.

Utes are on bye this week, but it was announced that their game next week against Michigan will be on ABC at 1:30 p.m. MST. With both BYU and Utah not playing this Saturday, if you want to scout the Wolverines they'll be playing this week at 1:30 p.m. on the Big Ten network.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 21:13

Tuesday, September 2, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Well thankfully that's over, maybe now we can actually get to something resembling actual competition.
The Less Said The Better

I really don't get the point of these games.

Except for the cases where you are playing an actual 1-AA power house, like say one that is on a 5 game win streak against 1-A teams, there is nothing you can learn about your team from playing such crappy competition. Every bright spot is tempered with "but consider the competition." Even the negatives have to take the competition into account because teams play very vanilla, and players take the opponent too lightly. You can only hope you come away from the game without major injuries.

Well, that's not entire accurate. I do understand the point of these games. It's the easy purchased victory. Which for a team like Utah could be the difference between a bowl and not.

With the aforementioned "consider the competition" caveat in place, here are a few thoughts on last weeks game.

So That's What The Kaelin Clay Hype Was About

For those who don't follow recruitment very closely, you probably hadn't heard much about Kaelin Clay until a couple weeks ago.

Kaelin Clay is a Junior College Transfer who comes into this season with one year of eligibility, and a slight, extremely slight, Jim Carrey like chance at earning a second year. It's unusual for teams to bring in JuCo guys who will only be here for a year, because it takes a while to get rid of bad habits earned in the JuCo ranks.

When Clay committed to Utah many thought this was a great pickup, as Clay had the speed to be a difference maker, but then class issues cropped up, and Clay had one more class to finish, and was unable to make it for Spring Ball.

As fall camp approached, there was some question about whether his grade would post in time for him to come up. Finally it did, and Clay was on campus in time to start fall camp.

If you only have a single year to make an impact and try to work your way into the heads of NFL's scouts, scoring a punt return on your first ever 1-A college touch is a good way to start it. Taking a kickoff back 100 yards for another TD would also qualify as helpful.

If Clay can be that dynamic for Utah all season long, it will give them quite a formidable return weapon.

The Play Of The Night

One thing that was really missing from this team the last couple years was strong leadership from the Upperclassmen. Most of last Thursday night's game is completely forgettable, but one moment stood out to me above all others.

With under 2:00 to go in the first half, and Utah driving down to the Idaho State 25 yard line, redshirt Freshman Troy McCormick, someone who the coaches have high hopes for this season, fumbled the ball, resulting in the only turnover of the game.

It's easy for a youngster to get down on himself at this point, but instead Jr Kenneth Scott immediately went over to McCormick. Scott could be seen the entire time from the field to the sideline encouraging McCormick, and letting him know it'll be okay.

It's a small thing, but it's the kind of thing that can help a young player, and it's the kind of leadership that has been missing.

A Slightly Tougher Test

Despite their result from opening weekend it's safe to say that the Fresno State Bulldogs will be a tougher test for the Utes than the one they faced to start the season. The Bulldogs are the defending Mountain West Champions, who came into the season with a few questions they were in search of answers for.

It's safe to say after a 52-13 shellacking by the USC Trojans, they are still searching for answers to their questions, and probably more.

The big question for the Bulldogs is obviously how do you replace 2nd round draft pick, turned opening day starting QB for the Oakland Raiders Derek Carr, as well as Carr's best target from last year, fellow 2nd round pick WR Davante Adams? Follow up question being, since Fresno wasn't exactly a defensive power house last year, if their offense does suffer and they aren't able to put up the large points of the past few years, how will they cope?

The offense, and defense both failed their first test during the USC Contest.

Fresno State offensive coordinator Dave Schramm, who was the first, of many many offensive coordinators to replace Andy Ludwig after 2008, might have some extra incentive to get his offense going in the right direction this week.

A Weekend Not Devoid Of Knowledge

While Utah and Byu both played opponents that were completely and totally inept, as to make anything gleaned from the game almost worthless, there was one bit of knowledge that came out of the weekend.

I never knew, until this weekend, that it was possible to make the kicking team, re kick the ball, when they send a kickoff out of bounds. In my defense, I never knew this, because no one ever does it. Instead they simply take the ball at the 40 (35 in Nfl) yard line and start their drive.

But thanks to Bronco Mendenhall I now know it's possible to make the other team re kick, when he opted to do just that after UConn kicked a 4th quarter kickoff out of bounds. Of course we learned why it's best to take the yardage when a holding penalty caused the Cougars to start the next drive at the 20.

In the end, it's nothing more than an interesting footnote to an unremarkable game, but I did learn something new.

A Comfort Enigma

One thing I didn't fully learn though is how improved is Taysom Hill as a passer. Now to be quite clear, Taysom had a good night passing the ball, and it's clear he is no longer just a one trick pony. He's actually improved enough that I can't just refer to him as a Running Back playing the QB position. And with the schedule, and the opposing defenses that he will go against this year, it's clear that Hill is primed for a very very good season.

That doesn't mean it's all good though. First and foremost, I noticed Taysom tends to lock onto a single reception. Though it's only one game, it does seem like Mitch Matthews is going to be the primary beneficiary of this, as he and Hill seemed to have good chemistry, and Matthews is tall enough to present some matchup problems. Plus Matthews seems like he'll be the intermediate route option, which works right into Hill's wheelhouse.

Secondly, Hill was slow in making his reads. Against the majority of the defenses Hill will face this season, it won't be an issue, but should a defense actually manage to get pressure, Hill very well could resort back to his legs (again, a very useful weapon.)

What I found most intriguing about Hill, is how uncomfortable he looks staying in the pocket. On plays where he had to sit in the pocket to make his reads, Hill seemed extremely uncomfortable, and seemed to struggle with making his reads, and it felt like he was just waiting for a reason to bolt. On the same note though, whenever Hill was forced out of the pocket he was always poised, and calm, he kept his eyes down field and looked for a target.

Maybe Hill just likes chaos.

Speaking of chaos though, it's only a matter of time before one of his rocketed overarm "laterals" bounce off of a runner.

Remembering A Whooping

This week is the toughest game remaining for the Cougars. Not just because Texas is arguably the best team left on

their schedule, but because Texas is also extremely motivated. In the past, we've seen Bronco's teams at times fail to match the intensity of an extremely motivated opponent, and this may be the most motivated opponent they've faced since 2008.

Of course, we all remember why the Longhorns are extremely focused on this game, but that doesn't mean it's going to be an easy victory for them, especially with the news that their starting QB David Ash will be out for this game with a concussion.

Of course the object of the Texas' affection this weekend will be Taysom Hill, who absolutely shredded the Longhorn defense a year ago, which means Byu will be glad to see Jamaal Williams back in the lineup this week, so that Texas can't just crash down on Taysom.

This will also be a good test of Hill's to see if he truly has improved as a passing threat.

Offensively, it is unknown exactly what David Ash's replacement will bring to the table, but it's not exactly like Ash was ever the kind to light it up in the first place. I would expect Texas to put the ball in the hands of their two running backs who are both looking to add to their greater than 5 yards per carry average.

Ultimately this game will be won in the trenches. The biggest issue last year was a lack of fire by anyone in the trenches for the Longhorns. They seemed to think they could go into Provo and just manhandle the Byu OL and DL's, and when they couldn't they refused to adjust.

Charlie Strong is a good coach, and has already set the expectation for this season lower than most Longhorn fans would like, but this is the first real test of his tenure. Of course there is always the worry of putting too much on this game.

One Man Against The World

So in the comments last week, Rhett wondered why I didn't give much love to Chucky Keeton. Truth is, I think he's going to have a very difficult year.

As we all know Keeton is coming back off of a serious knee injury. On top of that, he's coming to a team missing it's running threat from last year. He's playing behind a rebuilt offensive line, and he has no real receiving weapons to help him out. It's going to be a tough year for Keeton.

This kind of played out against Tennessee on opening weekend when the Volunteers, with a true freshman heavy squad, playing 16 of them to be exact, absolutely took it to the Aggies.

Even Keeton himself looked quite rusty.

Keeton is a remarkable athlete, and if he were playing in a different conference would get insane amounts of hype. Heck he started the season as someone's Heisman pick, and that's while playing in Logan, Utah. He just can't do it by himself, and based off of early returns, he'll need to.

Broadcast Info

After this weekend, we get to start playing the waiting game for Utah Kickoff times. This week's game kicks off at 1:00 p.m. MST, and will be broadcast on Pac-12 Network.

Byu meanwhile will kickoff at 5:30 MST and will be seen on Fox Sports 1.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 13:17

Tuesday, August 26, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Has anyone ever figured out why two equal amounts of time can feel so drastically different? For example, this year's offseason will last a grand total of 234 days, the exact same amount of days that last offseason lasted. Yet for some reason, this year, it seems to have been an extremely long, and slow time frame.

Of course, that's all about to come to an end. The Cougars and Utes are both in game week preparation

This means, the two most disturbing trends in the world are about to come to an end. This Thursday marks the start of the 2014 season, and today officially marks the end of no more Red, Blue And Pigskin.

There will be one major difference in the 2014 season. For the first time since the Axis and the Allies were busy squabbling like siblings at a reading of a rich relatives will, the Cougars and the Utes will not play each other.

While there are some who won't miss it, I sure will. I love the Holy War, even if I can't stand a lot of the crap on both sides that lead up to the game. Since they won't be playing a game this year, I won't be able to write by annual Tale of the Tape comparison, so I'm co-opting it and using it as my season preview. Tale Of The Tape: 2014

When Last We Saw Them

The ending to 2013 was bitter sweet for both teams. For Byu they were last seen ending their season with a disappointing performance in the Fight Hunger Bowl as they were defeated by the Washington Huskies, as the Cougars finished the season with an 8-5 record. While 2013 did have the high point of ending the Mack Brown era at Texas, the entire season was disappointment (Virginia), deja vu (Utah, again), and missed opportunities.

For Utah, the secret of the 2013 team is that they were actually a good team. It could even be argued that they were the best Utah team since 2008. However, much like Byu suffered through deja vu in losing to the Utes once again, Utah was forced to relive their Quarterback woes, as once again they failed to have a qb start every game of the season. In fact only twice in the last 11 years has Utah had a single Qb start every game of the season (2004, 2008). Even though the Utes got their first signature win as a member of the Pac-12 when they upset #5 Stanford at home, injuries, and a top 5 ranked schedule doomed the Utes to their second consecutive 5-7 season, leaving them once again at home.

Advantage: Byu - Utah may have clearly been the best team in the state, but in the end going bowling, even if you get thumped, trumps watching at home.

Offseason

For the Utes there have been two questions that have engulfed the offseason. The first, and most prevalent have been in regards to how warm is the seat under Coach Kyle Whittingham, and should the Utes fail once again to make a bowl game, will, or should he be back in 2015? When people weren't questioning the future of the head coaching position on the hill, they seemed to be focusing on would Travis Wilson be able to come back this season.

Well one question will be answered over the next 5 months, but the second question received an answer during the summer, as Travis Wilson received medical clearance to return to the field. However, the Utes aren't solely relying on Wilson this year, as they seem to have finally learned from the past, and brought in a Junior QB From Oklahoma, Kendall Thompson. Since Thompson has already graduated from OU, he's immediately eligible this season.

Another consistent at Utah the past 5 years has been a new Offensive Coordinator every season, and this year was no different as Utah Brought in former Wyoming Head Coach, and former Offensive Coordinator at Missouri to take over the duties from Brian Johnson and Dennis Erickson. This of course means 7 years, 7 OC's.

Down South, Byu didn't have the best offseason out there. While there was nothing extremely disastrous there were a lot of small things throughout the year. Consider it as though they never suffered a knockout punch, but took a lot of body blows. There were off season drinking incidents, rumors of suspensions from an honor code violating party, actual suspensions from various incidents. There was also the internal investigation currently underway at Byu. As is usual at this point of investigations, not much is known, other than it started with socks. How much more is involved we don't

know, nor will we until Byu and the NCAA reveal the results.

Since the investigation, and many of the honor code incidents are all internal, and we will only know exactly what's going on, if and when Byu chooses to let us know (they made the proper decision after this off season to stop talking about Honor Code violations unless it was public news such as an arrest.) The worst blow to Byu this offseason was on a perception level. As Byu fights to prove they belong and deserve to be a part of the new playoff era, their battle was dealt a blow by the SEC and the ACC. During the offseason, the SEC and the ACC both showed their cowardly colors by deciding to chicken out and not join the Pac-12, Big XII, and B1G on the 9 game conference schedule front. Instead the ACC and the SEC decided to stick with 8 game conference schedules, but that one of their out of conference games must against a Power 5 opponent. A week later they clarified that while Notre Dame counts as a P5 opponent, the other independents, including Byu, don't. This means that in the eyes of the SEC Iowa State is more valuable as an opponent than Byu.

Advantage: Utah

Schedule

Enough of the past, we're all ready for the future, so let's get to it by talking about who exactly these two teams will be up against. Last year the Utes faced an extremely tough schedule. One that was consistently ranked in the top 5 of toughest schedules. On paper, the Utes 2014 schedule is tougher with some even calling it the toughest schedule in the country. Sure the Utes start the season this Thursday with the Annual Prostitution game, this year against Idaho State. That's the only guaranteed W on the slate. The rest of the out of conference schedule consists of Mountain West Champion Fresno State, though they will be without Derek Carr who is now in the NFL, a bye week, and then a road game at the Big House against Michigan. In conference the Utes face the typical southern division foes, as well as Oregon, a trip to the farm against a Stanford team looking for revenge, Washington State, and Oregon State. One nice bonus for the Utes is that the only consecutive road games during the year, have the Utes second bye week squeezed in between.

For the Cougars there is no pretense of a tough schedule. While 2013 was supposed to be the toughest schedule ever for the Cougars, before many teams began to disappoint on the field, there's no same guise about 2014. The tough game is week 2 with a trip to Austin against the now Charlie Strong coached Texas Longhorns. The Cougars should honestly be favored in every other game the rest of the season, a schedule that includes Boise State post Chris Petersen, a road game against UCF who will be replacing QB Brian Bortles, and the annual conference weekend matchup against Utah State with Chucky Keeton back. Those are your headliners.

While Utah has a schedule that could beat them up in their quest to win 6 games, if the Cougars win less than 10 this year, it may seriously be time to rethink Bronco as coach.

Advantage: Utah - Not to rub salt in the wounds, but really really sorry about that November home schedule BYU fans.

Quarterbacks

Terrance Cain, Jordan Wynn, Jon Hays, Travis Wilson, Adam Schulz, Jake Heaps, Riley Nelson, James Lark, Taysom Hill. That is the parade of quarterbacks at the top 2 teams in this state since Brian Johnson led the Utes to the Sugar Bowl in 2008, and Max Hall had his post rivalry therapy session. Not exactly a murderers row of passers. With more than one player who is a glorified running back in the Quarterback position.

Speaking of I must give credit where it's due. Last year I called Taysom Hill a faster, more athletic Riley Nelson. However, Taysom did improve his throwing ability enough last year, that I think we can now say Riley Nelson is an extremely poor Taysom Hill. While Riley was a 1 read (if you were lucky), huck and pray type passer, as the year went on, Taysom actually showed the ability to make decent decisions, and throw balls that were more than lame ducks. Still Taysom isn't now, nor will he ever really be an elite passer who is a danger with his arm. Taysom's weaponry still revolves completely around his legs and his running ability, and if a defense can take that away they've gone a long way to winning the game, but Taysom can throw just well enough, especially on quick hit type passes, that the defense can't completely sell out against the run.

One thing that would really worry me as a Byu fan, is the pronouncement by Offensive Coordinator Robert Anae, that they are actually installing a package of plays where Taysom will have the freedom to change the play. If Taysom didn't have the freedom last year, and he called his own number as much as he did, just imagine what it'll be like when he has the freedom to do what he wants.

Up on the Hill, it's different verse, same as the first. Utah was finishing up a fourth quarter drive against Stanford. Utah was leading and on the verge of a major upset. As QB Travis Wilson came off the field I saw him shaking his hand and looking down at it. In came a sense of dread. Sure enough it was announced that he had injured his hand during the game but he should be fine the following week against Arizona. It didn't take long to see that he clearly wasn't okay. Then the USC Game came and he still was completely out of whack. A bye week before Arizona State gave Wilson time to get the hand healed, but he was clearly a little bit shaken. A concussion during the game, led to a test that revealed a previous intra cranial injury that threatened not just his season, but could be life threatening should he continue playing. With another starting qb gone, the Utes just didn't have the depth to recover, and stumbled to a 1-5 closing stretch.

Now that's not to say Wilson didn't have some issues. He had a high interception rate for the games he did play, finishing with 16 interceptions in 8 games, but there was a difference in the leadership and of the offense when Wilson wasn't in there.

Finally the Utes have some QB depth. Wilson was cleared medically to come back, and won the starting QB job, but only after an intense QB Battle with Oklahoma transfer Kendall Thompson. Thompson is a QB similar to a Taysom Hill, or a Marcus Mariota where the legs are the first weapon. Thompson impressed the Coaches enough, that even though he lost the starting qb battle by a slim margin, he worked himself into a package of plays (hopefully red zone.)

Behind Thompson are two redshirt freshmen qbs, that the coaching staff feel so high on, that they did everything they could last season to protect their redshirts.

Truth is, Utah fans solely want to see the starter go for all 12, hopefully 13, pipe dream 14, games. But should/when the backup have to come in, it's no longer a grand canyon sized change.

Advantage: Utah

Running BacksGame

Taysom may have got all the publicity, but Jamaal Williams is the true cog that makes that offense run. Jamaal Williams is far and away the best player on the Cougars, and is in the top 3 for players in the state (Dres Anderson, Healthy Chuckie Keeton.) In 2012 Williams did not become the featured back until the 5th game of the year, and still put up 775 yards rushing, this despite Riley Nelson taking a good chunk of rushing yards that should have been his. Last year, Williams missed a game and a half with an injury and still put up 1233 yards of rushing, this despite Taysom taking a good chunk of carries that should have been his. The fact that defenses have to account for the threat of Williams, helps open up running lanes for Taysom. Something that will be missed in week one at UConn when Williams serves a 1 game suspension.

The other part of the Cougar running game is of course, Taysom himself. Taysom exploded onto the scene with a 259 yard output against Texas, but showed he wasn't a one game pony throughout the year. Taysom ended just behind Williams with 1211 yards rushing, good for 3rd best for a quarterback in the nation.

While deciding who is RB1 and who is RB2 is still up in the air, the Cougars know who their top two running backs are. Utah, not so much. While Utah would prefer to have someone come up and take the job, it hasn't happened yet, and as of now are a committee running team. Last year Bubba Poole looked like he was going to steal the mantle of featured back, but as the year went on, he began to falter. Instead of hitting the hole with authority like he was at the beginning of the season, Poole spent too much time, dancing in the backfield, and was never able to wrestle the job away.

Devontae Booker was the star of the Summer, showing a nice blend of speed and power, but problems putting the ball on the ground during Fall Camp led to some Depth Chart infused motivation tactics from Whit.

When it comes to just pure blazing speed, the Utes also have a young combination of Dre'vian Young, and Troy McCormick, who can both burn.

The Utes have a lot of potential, but Poole is really the only one who has seen any time in action.

Advantage: Byu - Hill and Williams are a killer two running back combo.

Wide Receivers/Tight Ends

If you can't keep your QB healthy, at least give the backup plenty of targets with which to work. Unfortunately for Utah

when Kenneth Scott went down on the second play of the season last year, and Jake Murphy went down with an injury a few games later, that left all of the play making up to Dres Andersen. And While Dres had a fantastic year, earning Honorable Pac-12 honors on his way to 1002 yards, it didn't take long for teams to realize they only needed to roll a safety over to Dres, and the Utes didn't have many options.

This year Kenneth Scott is back, and looks to help take some of the pressure off of Dres. The Utes also brought in Junior College transfer Kaelin Clay to take reps in the slot. It's the Utes hope that with three guys who can stretch the field, defenses won't be able to just smother Dres Andersen who could have a special senior season.

For Byu, they enter the season without Cody Hoffman. Honestly I kind of feel bad for Cody. During his time at Byu his quarter backs were Jake Heaps, Riley Nelson, and Taysom Hill. Despite all this he still managed to become the best statistical WR in Byu history. Imagine if he only had a real quarterback. How do you replace Hoffman? Well the Cougars brought in a crop of new faces to go along with returning players Mitch Matthews, and Ross Apo. Ross Apo of course was a member of the Iggy's group of young prospects. And while Apo has been a major bust during his time here, He's probably the most successful of the group, as he's the only one who's never left the team.

Unfortunately for Byu some of their hope at WR took a hit when they learned they lost Nick Kurtz for about 8 weeks. On top of that, Devon Blackmon, a Junior College recruit who used to be at Oregon, was suspended for the first game. While it'll be a surprise if this is Blackmon's only rules related suspension during his career, it means the Cougars will probably run a lot during week 1.

Advantage: Utah Outside of Dres the WR's are all about potential in state this year, But Dres is a known commodity and better than anyone else on either team.

Offensive Line

Byu is really hoping they can upgrade their offensive line play from truly atrocious that it was last year. In year one of "Go Fast, Go Hard", the OL struggled to match the intensity and the pace of the offense, and seemed to lack any real nastiness during their play. While the coaching staff has talked about a vast improvement in their play this camp, it can't be a good sign, that they are still shuffling the OL around, with just a few days before game 1. They can blame it on the fact that their pace requires so many offensive lineman all they want, it's still not a valid excuse. Another bad sign for Byu: The only Offensive Lineman last year, that had real fire and nastiness, Brayden Kearsley, is academically ineligible.

For Utah, they were never truly terrible last year, they just weren't any good. CJ Poutasi who earned Honorable Pac-12 honors as a true freshman playing the right side in 2012, never quite adjusted to playing on the left side, as he seemed a step slow at his new position, and is hoping that losing 25 pounds this year will help. The rest of the line, outside right guard Junior Salt, was adjusted, and tinkered with all season. Junior Salt may very well be the safest NFL bet in the state this year, but the Utes really need to get him some help this season, or their QB history may rear it's ugly head again.

Advantage: Push There's equal amounts of worry on both lines.

Defensive Line

"Next man up!" That seems to be the mantra for the Utes when it comes to replacing defensive line players. Next man up. Paul Kruger leaves, in come Sealver Siliga. Siliga out, replaced with a Star. Star goes Reilly and Tenny Palepoi hold the spot. Reilly/Palepoi graduate, now it's Orchard's time to shine. Granted not all those players were on equal level, but the point holds. For quite a while now, the Utes have managed to just keep cranking defensive line talent through the system. 2014 shouldn't be any different. This time it's Nate Orchards turn to anchor the defensive line. Orchard who has played in all 37 games since his true freshman season, is 5th all time on the Utes in forced fumbles. This year though will be the first time he'll be the man that the opposing team focuses on.

While the Right end is solidified, the Utes will have rotating depth at the other three positions. But there's a name that will be seeing time at tackle spot that will make Ute fans happy, and announcers cringe, as true freshman Lowell Lotulelei, yes Star's brother, has cracked the depth chart.

In such a pass happy conference, getting pressure with the front seven, and specifically the front four, will be very important for Utah.

For Byu gone are the days of Ezekiel Ansah, and Eathyn Manumaleuna. Instead there is a lot of unknowns on the

defensive line. The most well known player on the dl, is the player who was supposed to replace Ansah, and that's Bronson Kaufusi. Kaufusi is a two sport player for the Cougars as he also plays basketball. But so far after his freshman season, he's been all hype, with very little to show for it. He's flashed enough talent to seem like he could be a big contributor, but mostly he seemed lost and pushed around by the oppositions OL.

Byu's defensive scheme relies mainly on it's Linebackers for production, but with the LB corps also suffering some defections, and no longer having Kyle Van Oy back there as a disruptor, the Cougars desperately need someone on this defensive line to make a name for themselves.

Advantage: Utah

Linebackers

Rob Morris. Brady Poppinga. David Nixon.

Kyle Van Oy was the next Nfl bound Linebacker for the Cougars. One could even make an argument that he was the best linebacker to play at Byu. But he's gone now. Also gone are his LB mates Spencer Hadley, and Uani Unga. It's hard to replace a great player at a position. It's even harder to replace 1 great player, and 2 good ones all at the same time. Alani Fua is about the only LB from last years squad with a lot of playing time.

Outside of Fua, the Cougars are hoping that true freshman Fred Warner can be the next Van Oy. Warner is very athletic and a heavy hitter but is also raw.

Harvey Langi, yes the very same one, is fresh off his mission, and has seemed to crack the two deep at his line backer position. It's unsure if this is a sign of lack of depth, or Langi's talent.

Finally former Iggy Boy, and shamed Line Backer Zac Stout has been brought back on the team, and the Cougars are desperately hoping to finally get some of that production they hoped for back when he was sharing the table with Heaps, and Apo.

For the Utes the Linebacking corps was the weak link when they entered the conference, and has slowly started to improve into a strength. Van Oy may have gotten all the publicity, but the best line backer in the state last year was Trevor Reilly. Reilly is gone, but the Linebacking corps may be better than it's been in a while. Jason Whittingham has shed the label as the Coach's nephew, and is making his own name for himself. University of Miami transfer Gionni Paul has been wowing people for two years now. Paul will be slowed by a foot injury that could keep him out for the first couple weeks, but now that he's able to play, many figure he'll be the anchor in the middle.

Pita Taumoepenu is raw, but is a name that many mention when asked who they are excited to see play, and Uaea Masina is another young prospect the Utes are really high on.

Advantage: Utah - I know it's blasphemous to think so, but there is just so much unknown about Byu's corp. Like exactly who's playing.

Defensive Backs

Years of replacing players finally caught up to the Utes last year, as their defensive backs struggled all year with production. As a team the Utes only managed 3 interceptions all season. 1 was by a linebacker.

Brian Blechen missed all of last season as an injury, but is back this year, and has apparently earned his teammates respect enough to become a team captain. Eric Rowe has moved from the Safety position he's played for two seasons to become a corner. The Utes can only hope he's as successful as the last player who made that move, Keith McGill last year.

JuCo transfer Tevin Carter was supposed to be a big play safety for the Utes last year, before being unable to clear academics. This year he's cleared academics and taken the second starting safety spot. Davion Orphey, and Justin Thomas will be on the opposite side of Rowe. The problem for the Utes though is depth. They don't have much experience depth wise beyond those mentioned. In a conference that passes as much as the Pac-12 that could be a problem. Afterall if you have a player playing both ways, like Utes will be doing with Dominique Hatfield, it means he's either a special talent, or you are really hurting for depth, and if he's a special talent, wouldn't he have cracked the depth chart sooner.

For Byu, the Cougars are hoping that Jordan Johnson, and Trent Trammell have recovered enough from their season ending knee injuries suffered last season, that Byu can finally shed the "slow white secondary" mantra that's plagued them for a while. Craig Bills is the next in a long line of nosy safeties who, while not the most athletic, are usually some of the more disruptive. Last season the Cougars had to line up 10 yards deep to limit the damage with the deep ball. If Trammell and Johnson can live up to some of the expectations they had before last year, that might change.

Advantage: Utah - But not nearly the advantage it's been in the past, and could easily flip.

Special Teams

This may be the biggest separation on a position group for one team. While both teams will be trying out new players in the kick return game, Byu is also replacing long time starters at both kicking positions.

Meanwhile Utah's Andy Phillips is a preseason All American selection by Sports Illustrated and was one of the more accurate kickers all of last season.

Tom Hackett also was a preseason All American selection and is a master at directing his punts. In fact it was during the Arizona State game that I saw something I'd never seen before. Tom Hackett had hurt the Sun Devils all game long by angling his punts away from the returner and gaining the Utes an extra 20 yards of field position, that the Devils actually put a second punt returner back there to stop the damage. For kickoff returns having a second returner is the status quo, but I've never seen a team have two punt returners back.

Advantage: Utah

Coaching

One may be coaching for his job, the other is trying to battle perception. For the Utes, Coach Whittingham is on the hot seat. There are many who think that the Utes must get back to a bowl game, for Whit to be brought back for another season. Personally I think, unless it's a flat out disaster of a year, Whit has done enough to get one final season. After all he always said it would take 4 years before Utah could begin to compete, and this is year 4. That and the depth on this team, is finally starting to match that of some of the Pac-12 brethren.

However that's not to say that Whit deserves a free pass for the struggles of the last few years. After all the neglect at the QB position as Brian Johnson ended his career greatly led to the QB struggles of the past few years. Also one cannot cycle through offensive coordinators, and play callers as frequently as Whit has and not see on the field play suffer because of it.

That said, this last OC reshuffling may not be all of Whit's fault, and may not be as bad as some of the previous. Apparently, despite being the OC, or Co-OC last year, Dennis Erickson really didn't want to be as involved in the gameplan last year. Erickson mainly just wanted to coach, and recruit. So that left it up to Brian Johnson to gameplan and call plays. While I still maintain that one day Brian Johnson will be a good OC, now is not that time, so when Wyoming fired Christensen as head coach, Whittingham saw an opportunity to fix some issues. And while it meant Brian Johnson moved on, Whittingham hopes that he finally has the right combination calling plays to stop his offense from sputtering.

Meanwhile, now more than ever, Bronco Mendenhall has to battle the perception that his team cannot compete with the big boys. After all for every 2013 Texas Game, or 2009 Oklahoma game, there are far too many 2013 Virginia, 2013 Washington, 2008 TCU, 2009 FSU games. The knock against Bronco is that he treats every single game exactly the same, and this means Once in a great while you'll win a game you aren't supposed to, but more often than not, you win the ones your are supposed to win, and typically struggle against anyone better.

The Cougars are also now in year two of era two of Robert Anae, and while last year was a different scheme, it was still a lot of the same from the first era. A little to predictable, and not much adjustment.

The Utes and Cougars don't play each other again until 2016. There is a strong chance that one coach won't be there, but don't discount the chance that both teams will be without their coach. For me, I'll still take Whittingham over Bronco every day of the week, and twice on Saturday. After all while faith, family and all that are extremely important, and both coaches to a great job of molding young boys into men, I want my coach thinking Football is higher than fifth.

That all said, I have to add one more thing in regards to Bronco. I've taken plenty of jabs at him in the past for no personality, so I have to say I am extremely happy to see his true personality start to poke through his previously

carefully crafted coach facade. The Bronco that was the Defensive Coordinator, was drastically different than Coach Mendenhall, but over the last two years that's started to change.

It's also partially why I believe he won't return at the end of his contract.

Advantage: Utah

So How Will It All Work Out

Truthfully how the teams matchup against each other doesn't matter, since they don't play each other. What matters is how they will match up week in and week out. So here is a run down of the weekly matchups for both teams.

Week 1

Utah vs. Idaho State - My thoughts on playing Idaho State are not secret. In fact I've talked about my disdain for this particular prostitution game matchup 3 of the last 4 years. Outcome: If it's in doubt at the end of the 2nd quarter, Whittingham might as well get that resume ready.

Brigham Young @ UConn - UConn is not a good team, last year they won only 3 games. Then again, it's not the first time that BYU opened up the season on the road to the east against a terrible team. And while last year you could blame extenuating circumstances like the weather, this year's game also has some extenuating circumstances. Specifically Jamaal Williams suspended, Devon Blackmon suspended, Brayden Kearsley academically ineligible, and rumors of possible more suspensions. Outcome: Byu should win, but with all the extenuating circumstances, and Bronco's history, a loss wouldn't be a shocker.

Week 2

Utah vs. Fresno State - Fresno State won the Mountain West Conference crown last year, largely behind the arm of eventual 2nd round draft pick Derek Carr. Carr is off to the NFL, but former Utah co-offensive coordinator Dave Schramm, who is now calling plays for the Bulldogs might be out to prove that the answer to Whit's OC problems may have been on his staff at the start. Outcome: Utah should win, but Fresno is good enough to make it scary

Byu @ Texas - It's not a stretch to say that Texas is really looking forward to this game, which would be the exact opposite of Texas' opinion of the game last year. To say Byu embarrassed Texas last year doesn't give Byu enough credit. Outcome: Texas may not be as talented as years past, but you remember what happened last time a team from Texas spent all summer aiming for the Byu game, right?

Week 3

Utah Bye

Byu vs. Houston - Byu finally opens up it's home schedule. Last year this game closer than it should have been as Byu edged Houston 47-46. But that game was in Houston. Houston's high powered offense could put Byu's defensive backfield up against a real test. Outcome: Despite possible Ackbar Alert vibes coming off this game, there's no way Byu loses it's home opener here.

Week 4

Utah @ Michigan - The last time the Utes went to the big house, it was the start of a special season. This year, the game very well could be the most important game of the Utes season as they strive to return to a bowl game. While a win won't guarantee bowl eligibility, having to win 3 games against the rest of their schedule is a lot more manageable than having to win 4. This could very well be the Hot Seat bowl, with the losing coach leaving town. Outcome: My heart says the Utes win, my head says they'll lose (There are a lot of these on the schedule this year.) Either way the Utes' 8-1 non conference record since joining the Pac-12 gets a real test.

Byu vs Virginia - Easily the most embarrassing defeat for the Cougars last year, and one of the more embarrassing losses of the Bronco era. It's easy to blame the weather delay, except that affected both teams, and a similar delay didn't affect Byu a week later. The Cougars went into that game completely unprepared. Much like Texas for Byu this year, Byu will be just as ready for Virginia this season. Especially with the extra few days of rest from the Thursday game the week before. Outcome: Byu's largest margin of victory the entire year.

Week 5

Utah vs. Washington State - Mike Leach has done an admirable job getting the Cougars back to respectability. Now comes the continuing it part of his job. Last year despite two early pick sixes by Adam Shulz this was a one score game late in the 4th quarter. This game also comes early in the season hopefully before attrition can affect the defensive

backfield, because that's what's needed most against Leach's Air Raid offense. Outcome: This is one of the games I'm confident Utah wins with Wilson last year. This year with Wilson, and back at home, Utah wins a game that won't make defensive minded people happy.

Byu Bye

Week 6

Utah @ UCLA - Last year Travis Wilson played both sides of the coin as he was Horrible enough to throw 6 interceptions in the game, but good enough that until he threw #6 he was on the verge of leading the Utes to victory in one of their many oh so close losses. Travis Wilson will hopefully make better decisions with the ball this year, but UCLA is the favorite of many to not only win the Pac-12, but some have even got them winning the National Title. Outcome: On the road this is too much to ask against a really well coached Bruins team.

Byu vs. Utah State - Conference time means Byu and Utah State. This was the game that Chucky Keeton got hurt in last season, so he'll be out to prove somethings. The Aggies have had multiple chances the last few years to show their recent victories over Byu (2010), and Utah (2012) were anything more than just flukes, but they're never quite able to get back over that hump. With this being Keeton last year, it's also likely the Aggies last chance for a while to make a statement. Outcome: Another moral victory for the Aggies, another Actual victory for the Cougars.

Week 7

Utah Bye

Byu @ Central Florida - There are many picking this game as a tough game for Byu because UCF made a Bcs Bowl last year. A Couple things to remember though. UCF got there by winning the AAC (formerly Big East) which is a terrible conference that still had an auto-bid. UCF is also going to be without 3rd overall draft pick Blake Bortles. Finally Bortles wasn't the only high draft pick UCF lost. Yes the game is still in Florida, but this won't be the test everyone is thinking it will be. Outcome: A solid Byu showing gets everyones attention.

Week 8

Utah @ Oregon State - Of all of last year's oh so close games, this one was arguably the closest. The Utes lost 51-48 in overtime, as the winning touchdown pass from Sean Mannion went through the defenders hands for a missed interception. Despite the high scoring, it wasn't bad defense, but exceptional passing by Sean Mannion and his receiver Brandin Cooks. Mannion is back, Cooks isn't, that could be just enough. Outcome: Another close matchup, but the Utes fall on the road.

Byu vs Nevada - Unlike last year, I doubt the Wolf Pack can rely on Byu having four more penalties (9) than first downs (5) in the first half. Nevada will be in year two of it's post Pistol era, and despite the possible Ackbar Alert potential for this game, and the Middle Tennessee game, Byu is home. Outcome: Remember earlier when I said Byu wins the games it should, this is one of them.

Week 9

Utah vs Usc - Surprisingly enough, Utah has matched up okay with Usc during it's first three years in the Pac-12. Not surprisingly enough Utah has lost all three. Usc is entering year three of it's scholarship sanctions, and depth is starting to be an issue, especially when players hurt themselves by not rescuing family members. Usc will be without Lane Kiffin this year, which was their biggest weakness the last few years. The good news is they didn't really upgrade that much with their new coach. Outcome: Utah finally manages to pull off the victory against the men of Troy.

Byu @ Boise State - The Cougars travel to the smurf turf to face the Broncos for the first time without Chris Petersen at the helm. It'll be interesting to see if the Broncos can remain relevant post Petersen. After all, everyone originally thought it was Dan Hawkins who was the architect, but we know how that turned out. There seems to be a tendency by many to write off the Broncos, but that could be dangerous. Outcome: A laissez-faire seeming attitude by the Cougars leads to more pain on the Smurf Turf.

Week 10

Utah @ Arizona State - No team's Pac-12 resurgence has been as damaging to the Utes as the Sun Devils. Typically making short work of Utah. No team, not Oregon last year or Usc in 2012 when they were flat out better than Utah, has made the Utes look like they don't belong more than the Sun Devils. Outcome: Utes finally look like they belong on the field with the Sun Devils, but still come up short.

Byu vs Middle Tennessee - Sadly this is the best opponent left on the Cougars schedule. Truthfully this is probably the 4th or 5th best team on all of Byu's schedule this year. When that is an average-at-best C-USA team, you know your

schedule sucks. Outcome: Byu rolls

Week 11

Utah vs. Oregon - So do you remember in 2011 and 2012 when everyone said how lucky Utah was not to be facing Oregon and Stanford? Do you realize that no matter what happens this year, Utah can't do any worse than what they did against Cal and Washington the first two years. Outcome: Ummm.... Nope

Byu Bye - Well at least it's not the weakest November opponent....

Week 12

Utah @ Stanford - The reason Utah was able to beat Stanford last year, is because Stanford is probably the best matchup for the Utes in the Pac-12. It's a Pro-Style power run offense, which plays into what Utah's defense likes to do. Defensively the Cardinal are a little bit lacking on the edges, which allows Utah's offense to get into space. That said, there's a reason that Stanford has been as good as they have been recently. David Shaw is a great coach, and he doesn't get out coached very often, I really wouldn't expect it to happen twice in a row. Outcome: Utah survives an early first rush, holds on tight, but eventually the Tree gets their revenge.

Byu vs Unlv - I've never understood why a team in Las Vegas hasn't ever been able to recruit very well. Unlv should be at least a little better than it's been in the past. The Rebels finally made it back to a bowl game last year, but expecting anything more than average is asking a lot. Outcome: Byu begins installing packages as part of Bowl Game prep into the game plan.

Week 13

Utah vs. Arizona - Arizona has been the biggest fraud of the Pac-12 the last two years. Despite not being very good, they've managed to win 8 games, and pull off a couple major upsets. But truthfully they aren't that good. They've been helped a lot by Ka'Deem Carey who has been among the nations best runners each of the last few years. Outcome: Utah remains bowl eligible.

Savannah State - Really? Really? Can't they just pay Savannah State, get the W on the record, but not actually have to play this game? Outcome: Will anyone actually show up to this game?

Week 14

Utah @ Colorado - The last time Utah and Colorado played each other with something actually on the line, the Buffs ended a 20+ game road losing streak. It's still not a rivalry game, no matter how many times we're told otherwise during the week. A loss by Utah might add a bit of hostility towards the Buffs, but it still won't be a rivalry. Outcome: Utes go bowling

Byu @ Cal - Believe it or not the Buffs won't be the worst team in the Pac-12 for the second straight year. That would be the Cal Bears. It's got to really irk Byu fans that Cal counts for the SEC/ACC schedules but they don't. Outcome: The beginning of Byu fans bragging about their 10 win season, top 15 ranking, but trying to dodge the strength of schedule argument. Seriously, MWC schedules were better than this.

Final Records: Utah 6-6, Byu 10-2

Games most likely to lose that they shouldn't: Utah - Fresno State, Washington State, Colorado. Byu - Utah State, UCF
Games most likely to win they shouldn't: Utah - Usc, Arizona State, UCLA. Byu - Texas (It's not that I think they'll win this game, it's the only game on their entire schedule you could say they shouldn't.)

Plausible best case scenario: Utah - 8 wins (Beating what turns out to be a sub-par Michigan, and 1 of OSU, UCLA, ASU.) Byu - 11 wins

Plausible worst case scenario: Utah - 4 wins (Mid season slides has losses to Arizona and Usc.) Byu - 10 wins.

Seriously, if Byu loses more than 2 games this year, Bronco should be canned.

Games least comfortable in predicting: Utah - Usc, Byu - None.

Jake Heaps Watch

Well Jake Heaps fell flat on his face last year at Kansas, and thanks to the rule about having graduated was able to transfer to Miami and be eligible to play this year. He celebrated by promptly losing a QB battle to a redshirt freshman, so unless something happens, there will be no schadenfreude at the expense of Mr. Silver Spoon.

Where to Watch, What to know

Utah kicks off the season at 5:30 p.m. Mountain Standard Time. It will be the second annual Stripe the Stadium game.

Blog Export: Annals of the Homestarmy, <http://www.thehomestarmy.com/s9y/>

It will be televised on the Pac-12 Networks.

Byu kicks off the following night at 5:00 p.m. Mountain Standard Time, and can be viewed on Espn.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 15:56

Thursday, October 24, 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Sometimes, I just hate being wrong. This past weekend was one of them. All that good will Utah got for beating Stanford. All the replays on ESPN all week long, it's gone. Tossed away by a dreadful, unprepared, flat performance on the road in Arizona this past weekend. In the end Utah let Stanford beat them, now they have to avoid letting Arizona turn the Stanford win into two consecutive losses.

Meanwhile, I'm not sure if the Cougars (both of them) couldn't get large enough modes of transportation to get their teams to the game, or what. You remember those signs that kids hang up on their room saying "No Boys Allowed", or "No Girls Allowed", well apparently Houston, and Byu both thought that the defenses would give them Cooties, because it was apparent that Reliant stadium had a "No Defenses Allowed" sign on the door.

This week, though, the Cougars better find their defense if they want to pull off Division 1-A history on Friday. Road Woes

There was always a concern that the Utes would not respond well to their first game out of state. While the first 6 games being in the state of Utah was a good thing to help such a young team develop, it also meant that this young team might just get too set in their ways. They wouldn't be used to the changes in routine when someone hits the road. The curfew, the hotel, missing school, missing friends, etc.

Combine that with such an emotional game the week before, and all the signs were there for a team to come out flat, and mentally unprepared.

Flash forward to the first quarter in Tucson, and that's exactly what happened. Arizona marched all over the Utah defense in the first quarter, and super stud running back, Ka'Deem Carey had nearly 100 yards in the first quarter. While the defense eventually got their heads into the game, there was something clearly wrong with Travis Wilson.

Wilson's passes were way off, he wasn't crisp, and in the 2nd quarter, Wilson put the Utes in a damaging hole when over the course of three passes, two of them were intercepted, including one very brutal, very ugly, completely incorrect read, that was returned for a pick six.

Eventually Wilson would leave the game, as the injury suffered against UCLA, that crept up again at the end of the Stanford game, was clearly too much for him. Wilson left the game, and the Utes were in a desperate 20-7 hole, with their backup QB coming in.

Fight, Fight, Fight

There is something that sets this Utes team apart from any Ute team since 2008. Simply it's that this team has heart, and fight. And once again it came through on Saturday, for a little bit. Down 20-7, with a backup QB coming in, the Utes took advantage of the confusion that defenses can sometimes have when a new QB comes in. An Arizona turnover led to a quick score by the Utes, and then the defense responded with a 3 and out.

On the next play the Utes went with some trickery, and a Flea Flicker touchdown put the Utes up 21-20, and it looked like this team had finally woke up.

Instead, the Utah coaches let the offense go into a shell under Schulz, and put too much pressure on the defense to stop last year's nation leading rusher. With the play calling ultra conservative, the Arizona defense was able to adjust to Schulz. Andy Phillips missed two field goals, and in the end, with Utah down four, desperately needing a stop, Carey busted through the Utah defense for a 44 yard touchdown to finish off his 236 yard performance.

A week after shocking Stanford, the Utes came into the game mentally flat, and seeming still hung up on the previous game. They let Stanford beat them after all, and that's all on the Coaches, as is the massive fetal position they let the offense take in the fourth quarter after finally fighting back.

Men Of Troy

The Utes failed to fight off the hangover of the big Stanford victory. Had the Utes beat Arizona, it would have been

bigger than the Stanford win, only because it would validate the Stanford win. Instead the Utes got curb stomped by the Wildcats, and must now hope they do a better job fighting off the hangover of a bad loss. That task won't be easy, as the Utes travel to Southern California to play the Trojans in the Coliseum.

Now, it may be true that the combination of Hubris, which led to severe NCAA sanctions, of which the worst are only beginning to start, and lunacy, which led Pat Haden to somehow think Lane Kiffin should be head coach of USC, has caused the Trojans to be a shell of their former selves. While that is true, there is still some power in the name of USC and in the Coliseum, especially for a team like the Utes who are still struggling to show they belong. And while NCAA scholarship sanctions, has seriously hurt USC's depth, and injuries have forced USC to use said depth, what few scholarship players they get, are still big time, 4 and 5 star athletes.

(One quick sidebar, speaking of Pat Haden. The names of the 13 member College Football playoff committee have been announced. Is anyone else concerned, that the man who thought hiring Lane Kiffin to coach USC, is now in charge of determining who will be in the playoff?)

To make matters worse, is the question of Travis Wilson. Wilson's hand was clearly bothering him. There were rumors at the beginning of that depending on the results of his X-Ray could be done for the year. Apparently it didn't come to that, as now it's rumored he will start, with a glove, similar to what Ben Roethlisberger wears, and Kurt Warner wore in the NFL, to protect his damaged digits. Either way it's still a major concern. Especially if Wilson falters. How much time and preparation are the Utes going to give Schulz this week. Are the Utes going to adjust the gameplan, so that it can also take into account Schulz' strengths and weaknesses should he have to come in. If so, is it going to hurt the overall offense by hedging bets. It's not an easy position for the coaching staff to be in.

From a matchup standpoint, the Utes actually match up much better against the Trojans, than they do against the Wildcats. The Trojans are more of a Pro Style, power run to setup the Passing game style of offense. They like to attack the middle of the defensive line. This is the same type of offense that the Utes faced against Stanford, with decent success. Much like the Stanford game though, the Utes are going to have to play great.

The Trojan offense centers around a running game led by Silas Redd, and an air attack to get Marqise Lee open. If there is a weak point on the offense, it's the Quarterback position, which is unusual for USC. If the Utes defense can get pressure on QB Cody Kessler, he has shown a tendency to struggle and fade during the course of the game.

In the end though, this game will come down to Travis Wilson, or Adam Schulz. How healthy is Wilson? If he can't go, did the Coaching staff get Schulz adequately prepared. The coaching staff let this team down immensely last week by not getting them over the Stanford game. This week, the coaching staff has their work really cut out for them, let's hope they do a better job.

Return To The Wacky WAC

Byu's matchup against Houston this past week looked more like the old days of shoot 'em out, high scoring affairs of the old Wacky Wac days, than a Bronco Mendenhall era battle.

The two Cougars combined for nearly 1200 yards of total offense and 93 total points. Byu tied an NCAA record with 115 offensive plays. Houston wasn't far behind with 95 plays of their own. Fittingly, in a game where defense was far and few between, Alani Fua clinched the game for Byu with a defensive interception in the final minute. While I'm sure Bronco Mendenhall is happy to get a win, you know that he had to be hating this type of game where his defense was getting torched.

Credit though, must be given to Taysom Hill, who has made dramatic improvement in the last three games, compared to his first 5 and a half games of his career. At the beginning, Hill was a guy who couldn't read a defense, was easily confused by a defense, and couldn't hit the broadside of a barn. In the first four weeks the best, most accurate pass he threw in his career was the one that hit Matthews in the back of his jersey, as Matthews was on the ground after yanking down the Utah defender, on the final hail mary of the rivalry game. Now, Hill is reading defenses, and more importantly, is confident in his defenses. His accuracy has also improved.

He's still hit or miss on his decisions, and the Houston game was a good example of this. One moment, he'll roll out to avoid a sack, not pay attention to his position, and step out of bound while attempting to throw. Or he'll mis read defenses and throw three interceptions, including one early that let Houston in the game in the first quarter when Byu looked like they were about to put some distance on their opponent.

Unlike earlier this year though, Hill rebounds well. Like he did on that final drive of the game, when Hill led the Cougars

44 yards, and found Sklyer Ridley in the end zone with 68 seconds left.

Most amazingly of all this, Hill is making this improvement, with an offensive line that still sucks.

Bust The Broncos, Bust History

Last year, the Cougars met up with the Boise State Broncos on the smurf turf, for the front end of a 2 week stretch of some of the worst, most boring football in recent memory. This was the game that Taysom Hill came in at half time and took over an offense that was dormant. In the end the Cougars lost the game thanks to Bronco Mendenhall's ridiculous decision to go for two, instead of kicking the PAT and going into overtime.

This year, it's the Broncos who will be having to rely on a backup quarterback. Starting quarterback Joe Southwick broke his ankle on the first series against Nevada last week, and their backup, Junior Grand Hedrick came in to lead the Broncos to victory. In Hedrick, the Broncos have a quarterback very similar to Taysom Hill. A guy who prefers to be on the move, instead of sitting in the pocket. Someone who can make just as many plays with his legs, as he can his arm. The big difference for the Broncos, is that while Byu's defensive weakness may be in the secondary, their strength is the front seven, who will probably be extremely angry after last week, and who also tend to give running quarterbacks a hard time. Much like the Byu offense, who uses the run to set up the pass, so do the Broncos. Byu knows their secondary stinks, which is why they compensate by locking down the run game

Boise State's defense however, really struggles against the run. If Jamaal Williams is able to play, the Broncos will struggle to be able to stop both speedy running backs in Williams and Hill, which will then open up the passing game for Quarterback Hill. If Williams can't go, it's an easier task, but the Byu running game may still be too much for Boise. This game will be a tough test for a rebuilding Bronco defense.

If the Cougars can pull off the victory though, they will make history on the Division 1-A level. No team from the Beehive State has ever beaten a Division 1-A Boise State team. In fact, the Broncos have not lost to a Beehive State team since November 1, 1997, when as a member of the Big Sky, they lost to Utah State. The Broncos are currently riding a 21 game win streak against teams from the Beehive State. This matchup is the best chance for that streak to end in a long long time. A win also means Byu fans can start booking their travel arrangements for the Kraft Fight Hunger Bowl.

Jake Heaps Tracker

Being gone on vacation made me forget about the Jake Heaps Tracker last week. This is a shame, because it appears the Jake Heaps Tracker is not long for this world. This past week Jake Heaps combined running and passing for a grand total of -3 yards of total offense. Heaps was 5/13 for 15 yards passing and 1 Td. He was also sacked 3 times for 19 yards lost.

Heaps was so bad, that with a minute to go Charlie Weiss pulled the redshirt off a true freshman to let him get his first game action. While it was only 3 runs, and Heaps played the rest of the way, this is a bad sign for Heaps' future. Talk out of Lawrence is that Weiss is wanting to start giving the redshirt more playing time, and begin a move to the future. This means at best Heaps splits time the rest of the season, and loses his starting job next spring or fall. More likely as Kansas continues to lose, and eventually get disqualified from bowl eligibility, Weiss will make the move this year, and Heaps will be benched.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 07:29

Wednesday, October 16, 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Well that just happened!

As fans of Utah and Byu, we've seen plenty of National Championship hopes and dreams die on our own home fields. But that's because, if we're being honest, any national championship hope was false to begin with. Especially in today's climate of College Football.

Last Saturday at Rice-Eccles Stadium, we saw an entirely different National Championship dream die. And it was glorious!

But before we get to last Saturday's major upset for the Utes, there was another unexpected event down in Provo last week, and no not the outcome of that game. Where Has That Been

The fact that Byu beat Georgia Tech isn't that surprising. After all Byu embarrassed a superior Georgia Tech team last year at home. Plus there isn't a better coach in the country when it comes to defending the Triple Option than Bronco Mendenhall (Something I forgot in my pre-season predictions).

No the surprising aspect of the game was the performance of Taysom Hill, both from an efficiency standpoint, and an accuracy standpoint.

I've said before, that I have seen nothing from Taysom to make me think he's anything more than a faster, smarter Riley Nelson. In other words, a 1 Read, Huck and Pray, or Take off running type of Quarterback.

For once, Taysom actually showed the ability to sit in a pocket, make a couple reads, and actually throw some nice passes. The first Touchdown pass to Cody Hoffman was beautiful, not just because it was a long pass, but because it was dropped perfectly for only an in the process of being absolutely mauled Hoffman to catch.

There were other passes as well. On the next drive, Hill threw a perfect pass down the field that hit Ross Apo square in the bread basket. Although Apo didn't catch it, and was bailed out by a pass interference call, doesn't change that Hill made a beautiful throw.

On the day Hill was 19/27 (70%) for 244 yards (9.0 ypa) and 1 TD.

Now granted, Hill wasn't pressured much, and that will change in the future when the terrible Byu offensive line faces tougher defense such as Notre Dame and Wisconsin, but for the first game Taysom actually looked like he could be a decent QB.

Of course the fact that the Go fast, Go hard, has slowed down just a bit helps Hill out as well.

An Intriguing Stretch

At the halfway point of the season Byu sits at 4-2. Which is better than I expected. I am 2-3-1 in my pre-season predictions for the Cougars. As expected they loss to Utah, and Beat Middle Tennessee. I predicted both Byu and Utah State would lose the USU game, but I thought it would be closer, and might have been had Byu not decided to blast the Aggies back into irrelevance by ending Keeton's season. Where I missed was the Georgia Tech game, and of course the two surprising outcomes of the season, the Great win over Texas, and the embarrassing loss to Virginia.

What comes next for Byu is a very intriguing stretch of games. Of the next 5 games, only 1 game is without a doubt, the annual prostitution game, this year against Idaho State. Of the other 4, All of them are up in the air. Byu could go anywhere from 4-0, to 0-4 in them, and I wouldn't be all that shocked.

First up is a road game against untested, and undefeated Houston, Than a wounded Boise State Broncos team comes to Provo, after that is the biggest remaining test of the year for the Cougars as they travel to Wisconsin. Idaho State follows that before Byu goes back to Notre Dame for another matchup.

While the Cougars do have one more game following this stretch, the perception of the season, and of this year's squad will be written over the next six weeks (Bye week between Boise and Wisconsin). 5 wins, and you can't help but think of this season as a resounding success. Even if this schedule didn't end up as tough as it looked before the year began, it's still a much tougher schedule than the Cougars are used to. 4 wins, and this season is still a success, 3 wins, and it'll depend on which games were won or lost.

But that's the story still to be written, and the ink begins to flow Saturday in Texas.

Who Are The Cougars

Byu travels to Houston to face the Houston Cougars. Houston, has in previous years been known for the high powered, high scoring offense that former Head Coach Kevin Sumlin is now unleashing upon the SEC. Last year, Houston fell flat ending the season at 5-7. This year has been different.

Currently the Cougars are sitting undefeated at 5-0, averaging 287 yards passing and 188 yards rushing per game, while scoring 40 points and giving up only 19.

The only problem is, that we have no idea if they are any good. The level of opposition they've faced up to this point, have been dreadful. Their 5 opponents have 0 (Temple), 1 (Memphis), 2(UTSA), 3 (Division 1-AA Southern) and 4 (Rice) wins. Byu will be the best defense they've face, and represent the start of an great increase in schedule difficulty.

Byu's defense will be the toughest test to date for Houston, but one also has to wonder. The key to this matchup will be how the weak point of the Byu defense, the secondary, handles an extremely potent passing threat. This is the best passing team that Byu has faced since the rivalry game.

Hunting For That Elusive Win

The University of Utah is in it's third season in the Pac-12. During each of it's first two season, the Utes never beat a Pac-12 foe with a winning record. It's best win since joining the Pac-12 came against Georgia Tech in the 2011 Sun Bowl, and it's best win in each of the past two regular seasons was the victory that year over Byu.

Utah has been in dire need of getting a victory over a winning Pac-12 conference mate. A win that would say to the rest of the conference we aren't just a doormat. Unfortunately, they've gotten more laughable losses (2011 Colorado), than quality wins.

That's not to say they haven't been close. In 2011, in their first every conference game in the Pac-12, the Utes were lining up for a final play, game tying field goal against Usc in the Coliseum. Only to see it blocked and returned for a touchdown. Last year, in Travis Wilson's first game, the Utes lost by 7 to Ucla, and lost a close game against then 8th ranked Oregon State.

This year, they again lost to Oregon State in a nail biter in overtime, and despite 5 turnovers, the Utes had the ball in the final minute looking to tie the game up against Ucla, before Wilson threw his sixth interception.

Utah has been close, but had never been able to get over the hump. They had never been able to get that statement win. That changed Saturday night.

Statement Made

Saturday night the 5th Ranked Stanford Cardinal came in with National Championship aspirations. They came in with a 13 game winning streak. Their quarterback came in, having never lost a game as a starter in his college career. They left having suffered the biggest upset of the year in a 27-21 defeat, and were the biggest upset ever by the Utes at Rice-Eccles Stadium.

The Utes meanwhile, finally had their statement game.

A statement made all the louder by the way they won the game. This wasn't simply a lucky win by an underdog. This was a team that came out against a bully, and owned the game.

Although, that doesn't mean Utah didn't have to survive the initial wave of the game. On their first drive, Stanford marched down the field for a quick Touchdown. When Utah answered with a Touchdown drive of their own, Stanford followed it up with a Kickoff return for a touchdown. Utah teams of the last few years would have folded, but not this

one. From that point on Utah's offense was almost unstoppable, and the defense held the Cardinal power offense in check.

Credit goes to Defensive Coordinator Kalani Sitake who's called three great defensive games in a row since his defensive line crapped the bed against Oregon State. The line pressured Kevin Hogan, and kept running back Tyler Gafney in tow, never letting either get comfortable.

With the defense doing it's part, the offense took care of it's side of the ball. Offensive Coordinator Dennis Erickson must have seen during film study that Stanford didn't have the speed to protect the edges, because they attacked the edges all game long. Wether it was Bubba Poole and Lucky Radley running to the outside, or Travis Wilson picking apart Stanford's defense with Bubble Screen and quick slants on the edges, the Utah offense moved down the field drive after drive.

That said, what good is a statement, without a little bit of intrigue, and with 40 seconds to go, Stanford down by 6 on the 6 yard line. 4th and 2. Utah sends a blitz, and pressures Hogan. Two plays later, Wilson snaps the ball, takes a knee, flashes the U, and the Utes finally, after oh so many close calls, and moral victories, finally have a victory that counts.

Building On The Progress

So now that Utah has their statement victory, it's time to forget all about it. It was great, it was arguably the greatest regular season victory in Utah history, but it means nothing if Utah doesn't answer the bell the rest of the year. Don't forget the last time an unranked Utes beat a near top 10 pac-12 team at home, it followed it up the next week by losing 27-0 to an eventual 2 win Unlv team.

The good news for the Utes is that Unlv isn't on their schedule. The bad news for the Utes is every team left on their schedule is better than those old Unlv Team.

Utah sits at 4-2 just like Byu. Right where I thought they'd be, only I figured they'd swap the Oregon State and Stanford results. And while it's tempting to want to bask in the glow of the Stanford victory and raise the expectations for this season, they still are the same. This team has to get bowl eligible first, and then move on from there. Of their remaining 6 games there's only one that Utah will be the clear favorite (Colorado), and only one they'll be the clear underdog (Oregon). The rest of the games are close to even.

The hard part of the second half of the season, is this weird thing the Utes have yet to discover this season. It's called an out of state game. That starts with this week's game against Arizona.

The View From The Red Zone

There was a strange feeling at the game. The crowd started the game extremely tight and tentative. It seemed like they knew that Utah could possibly keep the game close, but also very easily let the game get away from them and it turn into a blowout. I think that's why it also took awhile for the crowd to feel in.

The first quarter really had the sway of emotions in the crowd. When Stanford scored, you could feel the crowd sinking. Utah's quick answer gave the crowd some hope, that was quickly dashed by Montgomery's kick return. There was almost a feeling the other shoe was going to drop. Utah's ensuing quick drive and punt didn't help. It wasn't until Stanford missed a field goal, and Utah tied it up, and the 2nd quarter reached the midway point before the crowd really started to get into it. As the crowd began to realize they were about to see something special, the stadium began to reach it's normal levels of loud.

And then with about 7 minutes to go in the game Utah went three and out giving Stanford the ball with a 6 point deficit. Fans who had been beaten down by those close calls could sense "it happening again". The final drive was a true roller coast, as Utah would force third down getting the crowd into it, and than allow Montgomery to get a first down, deflating the crowd.

In the end the crowd was ecstatic, but throughout the game the desire to believe, combined with the shell shock of the close calls made for one of the more roller coaster crowds in recent memory.

Wait Not All Football Games Are Played In Utah?

For the first time this year, the Utes leave the state of Utah as they face the Arizona Wildcats. Last year the Wildcats

ended the Utes bowl hopes in a 34-24 victory at Rice-Eccles. In that game Travis Wilson had the best game of his young career with 311 yards and 2 Td's, but it was all for naught as Ka'Deem Carey ran for 204 yards, while the Rich Rodriguez spread offense absolutely took advantage of Utah's overmatched line backing corps with Matt Scott running the zone read option to perfection and adding in another 74 yards rushing.

This year, the Cardinal offense has struggled in finding it's footing. This year, it's all about Ka'Deem Carey for the Wildcats. Quarterback Bj. Denker often struggles with efficiency in passing, and is more a running threat than he is a passing threat. In truth the Wildcats offense is very similar to that which the Utes saw against Byu. And much like that game, the outcome of this game is going to come down to how well Utah's defensive line is able to contain Carey, and stop the run option. Much like the Byu game, if Utah can turn Arizona into a passing team, it plays into their favor.

However, if Utah's defensive line isn't able to get pressure on the QB, and the Utes line backing corp, which will most likely be without Jason Whittingham (much like the Byu game) don't play their angles, and contain their responsibilities, Carey and Denker will run all over the Utes defense.

Weird as it is to say, this game can earn the Utes more respect than the Stanford victory did. Any team can beat another on any given Saturday, but if the Utes can continue and build upon the Stanford victory by going on the road, and beating an average Arizona team, it can show that the Utes may finally be making the turn in their whole transition in the Pac-12. A loss, and it's just the Utes will be much like the Aggies, still struggling to be relevant.

Schedule Notice

The Utah game in the Coliseum against Usc has been schedule for 2p.m. Mountain time and be displayed on the Pac-12 network.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 09:28

Monday, September 16, 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Well here we are. This is the week that originally inspired me to start writing this series. This is the game that always has a little something special to it. It's always my favorite entry to write. I'm of course speaking of Rivalry week.

This is a special rivalry week because it's the last one we'll get until 2016. Which means it's the last time I'll get to write my favorite entry until 2016.

First things first though, there were games this past weekend, and have to do a quick recap before we move full on into the Rivalry Game To End All Rivalry Games (Until 2016). Dammed By The Beavers

What happens when one team decides it doesn't need to show up for the first quarter of the game? It spends the next three quarters trying to climb out of a hole. That's essentially what happened to the Utes on Saturday. The Utes failed to show up for the first quarter of the game, being outscored 10-0, being out gained 172-12, and forcing the boo-birds to come out early at Rice-Eccles Stadium. What followed in quarters 2 through 4+ was an offensive outpouring by both teams.

The Utes eventually outgained the Beavers 539 yards to 491, but unfortunately wasn't able to overcome them where it matters most, as they dropped the game in overtime 51-48.

While the offensive output was great for the Utes, it's the defensive lapses that cause problems. And while one would be tempted to look at Mannion's 443 yards passing and 5 TD passes and come to the conclusion that the secondary was bad, they'd be mistaken. While the secondary play wasn't up to the level Utah has grown accustomed to, as years and years of having to constantly reload the secondary has finally taken its toll, the reason the Beavers were able to have such a successful passing night, was because of the big uglies up front.

A great throw, will always, always beat great coverage. Especially for a great Quarterback. Sean Mannion is exactly that. Add in that Brandon Cooks is arguable the 2nd, or 3rd best WR the Utes will face all year (Marqise Lee being #1, and the the other one in the conversation coming up this week), and the secondary was always in for a fight. What they really needed, was for our front 7 to get pressure on Mannion and make him feel uncomfortable. Something they just weren't able to do all night. Give someone like Mannion time in the pocket, and you'll be left scrambling all night. That's just what he did, as more often than not, the Corners were in good position, the ball just ended up in better position.

The Blessings Of Youth

The Utes are in a Youth Movement, and at the top of that movement is Travis Wilson. It's easy to forget that last night was only his 8th start. All that being said, there were moments in the game he looked like a seasoned upperclassmen, and moments when he looked absolutely dreadful.

Those three hideous, costly interceptions in the second half, were a great case of Wilson's youth. He made poor reads, and mistakenly thought he could squeeze the ball by the defender. After all, it's a throw he'd have made without any problems in high school.

Last year, I was against putting Wilson in when the coaches decided to. I still think it was at least a week early. However, without that training last year, I'm not sure Wilson is able to lead the team the way he has so far this year. Without that experience last year, I don't think he is able to bounce back from all three interceptions, with three touchdown drives immediately after.

Saturday was, in my opinion, Wilson's most impressive game in his career. It wasn't the numbers. It wasn't the way he ran past Pac-12 defenders. It was the way he led the team. The Utes haven't had leadership like that from the QB position since 2008. If Wilson can finish getting it together between the ears, he has the capability of having a couple great seasons.

Lessons Learned

Last week, and essentially all year, I've mentioned how we really still didn't know a whole lot about this Ute team.

Things began to clear up a little this week. There are still many questions to be answered, but we're starting to get a feel for the Utes.

First Lesson: This team has heart. This team may end up with a 5-7, or 4-8 record, but it's still going to be my favorite Ute team since 2008. Last year, this team would have easily folded when faced with the adversity in the first half, and even with the adversity of the three Wilson interceptions. Instead, they fought, fought again, and fought one last time, eventually tying the game up and forcing overtime.

Second Lesson: This isn't your father's Ute Secondary. While I'm not as down on the secondary as many after last Saturday, it's clear this secondary isn't what Ute fans are accustomed to. Of course this is a very, very young secondary, and defense altogether, but consider going into the season that Eric Rowe was the only member of the secondary to start a college game at their current position.

Third Lesson: Utah's turnover problem is big. No the Utes aren't giving the ball away willy-nilly, despite Travis Wilson's day. The problem for the Utes is they just aren't forcing turnovers. This has actually been a problem the last couple years. The Utes aren't able to force the turnovers and get off the field.

Fourth Lesson: Bubba's the best of the Poole. James "Bubba" Poole, has won the running back job, and he deserves it. He works great with Wilson, and he doesn't hesitate. Not only that but he's fast. Again he's young, so he's not the best at reading holes and blocks, but he could end up being a nice replacement now that the Wolfman is gone.

Jake Heaps Tracker

Jake Heaps still sucks. As was pointed out by Rhett, and noticeable in what little I actually watched of the Kansas Game, Heaps is still afraid of contact, as he panicked a couple times as it looked like he was about to take a sack. On the day, Heaps was pretty poor going 13/28 for 157 yards 1 TD and 2 Interceptions as the Jayhawks lost to Rice by a score of 23-14.

One Final Note, Then It's The Holy War

I'm calling my shot now. After close road calls the last 4 years in Auburn, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Provo, and Salt Lake City, the Aggies finally put it together on the road this week, and cause the chants to Fire Lane Kiffin get louder, and louder.

Sometimes You Must Lose Something, To Truly Appreciate It

Utah and BYU have played each other non stop since World War II. In a time where traditions, and rivalries are getting put aside, it's sad to see it go. And with the College Landscape being in such turmoil, it's hard to guarantee exactly what College Football will look like in 2016.

The Holy War really is one of the greatest rivalries in the nation. There are so many magical moments, on both sides of the rivalry, especially over the last 20 years. Some would argue that there is too much vitriol in the rivalry anymore, which there is a lot of it, but some would say it's only a minority, and that the majority of the rivalry is just right.

Either way it really will be missed over the next two years.

The reason I started writing Red, Blue And Pigskin was because I wanted an excuse to write this breakdown between the two teams prior to the 2009 meeting. Not sure about how it is to read, but it's always the entry I most enjoy writing. I will miss it the next two years. But why be concerned with the future. We can always burn that bridge when we get there, for now it's all about Holy War 2013.

Schedule

For the third straight year, the Utes lost the game prior to the Holy War on the last play of the game. The Utes have faced in-state opponents Utah State, and Weber State, as well as Pac-12 conference mate Oregon State, and enter 2-1.

Byu lost to Virginia, and then royally thumped then-ranked #15 Texas. While Texas then lost badly again this week to Ole Miss, for name, and name only Texas is enough to tip the scales BYU's favor.

Advantage: BYU

Statistics

As usual the caveat: Stats don't lie, statisticians do.

Utah is 16th in the nation with 539 total yards per game, 27th nationally with 248.7 rushing yards per game, and 29th with 290.3 yards passing per game. They're also scoring a lot better than last two years, currently 9th with 49.3 points per game.

Defensively the Utes are 72nd in points allowed, with 28.0 per game. 62nd in passing yards per game, giving up 225.0 a clip. They are much better against the run, giving up 96.7 per game to be ranked 14th, and in Total defense the Utes are sitting at 62, giving up just shy of 400 yards per game (394.3).

After their first two games, BYU ranks 20th nationally with 520.5 yards per game, 2nd nationally with 368.5 yards per game, 102nd at 152 passing yards per game, and 65th overall in points at 28.0 per game.

Defensively the Cougars give up 334 total yards per game to be ranked 32nd. They allow teams to run for 120.5 yards per game, good enough to be 29th, and teams pass for 213.5 yards a game, ranking them 56. Opponents are able to get only 20 points per game, good enough for 39th nationally.

Because there's such a small sample size for both, and each team has had that one game that will really skew early sample results. It's a push.

Advantage: Push

Quarterback

For Utah, the Utes actually enter the Holy War with something of a warm pulse at the Quarterback position. While Wilson is young, and is still liable for some youthful mistakes, his progress from his freshman year, to his sophomore year has been great. While Wilson showed ability with his arm last year, he's added a new wrinkle this year, with his proficiency in the zone/read option. He may not be Taysom Hill on the ground, but he's definitely forcing defenses to account for him both on the ground and through the air.

Meanwhile for the Cougars, I'm still waiting for anything from Taysom Hill to tell me he isn't simply a faster, smarter Riley Nelson. While Hill is a major threat on the ground, we've seen absolutely nothing from him in the passing game. Much like the last two years when Riley was under center, Taysom is too willing to just make a single read and take off with his legs, or simply throw up a prayer to Cody Hoffman.

Of course Hill is only starting his 4th game this week, but his inability to pass, and the fact that I give him more credit in the next section, makes this a huge red advantage.

Advantage: Utah

Running Backs

After two games of giving York the try to win the starting job, it's clear the Utes have moved on from him, giving Bubba Poole the starting job. Bubba Poole has 208 yards on the season, having only been spot duty for the first two games. After Poole the Utes have Karl Williams, Lucky Radley, and still have York at their disposal. Travis Wilson has also shown effectiveness the last two weeks, gaining nearly 200 yards in each game, from the zone/read option play.

While I'm hesitant to believe that BYU is even half as effective of a running team as they showed against Texas, which by the way, half of what they did against Texas is still a really good running team, they still have the two best running threats in this game. Jamaal Williams nearly gained 1000 yards as a freshman, despite not starting until the 6th game of the year. Quarterback Taysom Hill may also be just as fast as Jamaal Williams. Neither player will juke themselves open much, they'll both definitely outrun a defense.

While BYU hasn't shown to be much of a threat through the air, as Texas learned, if a defense isn't assignment sound, Hill and Williams will rack up the yardage on the ground. BYU's running game is a Home run threat each time they touch it.

Advantage: BYU

Wide Receivers

Here's an age old question for you to ponder: Quality or Quantity? That's what we get in the Wide Receiver matchup. Top to bottom the Utes have the better corps. Even without Kenneth Scott. Dres Anderson is the Junior leader of the corps, and is the speedster on the team. The one thing stopping Anderson from making the jump from good to great, is his proclivity to drop too many passes. Although there seems to have been some improvement in this area this season, he's still not a 100% reliable. While Anderson is the edge guy, the Utes like to have Anthony Denham be the big, tall threat in the middle. Sean Fitzgerald is another tall guy the Utes like to use as the third selection.

For the Cougars, the entire depth doesn't match up to the Utes. Skyler Ridley, and JD Falslev are the slot guys, and while both are wiry, and slippery, neither one will wow you with any of their abilities, and instead leave you wondering how in the world they can make a play. Ross Apo is now failing with his 3rd quarterback, and is starting to show that the common problem is him. Apo should be a more dominant force than he is, but just doesn't seem to want to work hard. Where the Cougars excel is with their #1 option. Cody Hoffman is a legit stud at the WR. Cody Hoffman may be the best WR to ever play at BYU. While other star WR's such as Austin Collie had decent passers throwing to him, Hoffman has had to play his career with a rotating crap factory at QB. Despite this, Hoffman's on pace to break Receiving records at BYU.

It's a tough choice, and one I'm not sure I can make right now.

Advantage: Push

Tight Ends

Neither team uses their tight ends enough. The last two years Jake Murphy has absolutely enjoyed torching the team that didn't have a scholarship for him after his mission. He and Westlee Tonga are both big fast TE's that can get open in the middle of the field, and are difficult to bring down. Unfortunately the Utes haven't been using either one of them enough so far this year.

For the Cougars, a good Tight End might be just what the passing game could use, especially as part of the zone/read option game Byu runs. Last year Kaneakua Friel had a good start to the season, but disappeared as the season went on, and has continued to be non existent this year. Brett Thompson has been the TE used so far this season but he has only 3 receptions.

While both teams don't use the TE enough for their offenses, the fact that the Utes actually know who their TE's are gives them the advantage.

Advantage: Utah

Offensive Line

The Utes offensive line hasn't been nearly as bad as they were to start 2012. They also haven't been as good as they should be so far this season. While they've done a decent job opening some holes for the running backs, in all three games the Offensive Line has been slow to start. True Sophomore Cedric Poutasi came in last season during the USC game, and help lend stability to what at that time had been a mess. The Utes offensive line has stability going for them, but should be better than they are.

As for Byu, I'm once again left to wonder just how much of the Texas game to take seriously. And if that improvement really is legit, why didn't those guys win the job to start the season against Virginia? Or is the Virginia performance more true to how this team will be?

While the Texas performance was impressive, there is just too much that still unclear about the BYU Offensive Line.

Advantage: Utah

Defensive Line

So far throughout the season the Defensive Line has at times been an effective beast for Utah, and a great disappointment. Nate Orchard, and Trevor Reilly have been on an absolute tear through the first three weeks. Although he was relatively stifled last week Tenny Palepoi has lessened the loss of Star in the middle by causing havoc with pressure up the front. This year's line moves laterally much better than any line in recent Utah memory. While the Utes

don't have the depth of year's past, they do have a lot of youngsters on the team providing valuable depth for the future, but there is a drop off after the 1's.

For BYU they have a mix of three things. The Steady Vet, The Promising Youngster, and The Big Hole. The Steady Vet is Eathyn Manumaleuna. He's doing what he does. Nothing flashy, but is a steady force on his side of the line. It should also be noted, that he sometimes has his best games against the Utes. The Promising Youngster would be Bronson Kafusi. Kafusi is a year or two away from being an absolute beast of a 3-4 defensive end. And now while he will still make the occasional play, through the first two weeks he still seems to be adjusting and has seemed lost at times. The Big Hole is whoever they have at Nose Tackle. Unfortunately for the Cougars it hasn't been good. Both Texas and Virginia would frequently find success running the ball when they would just go straight up the gut, and frequently it was achieved by blowing up the Nose Tackle position.

Neither side is really great, but the Utes are more Athletic, and the Cougars have more question marks.

Advantage: Utah

Linebackers

The Utes are in better shape than they were last year with their Linebackers, as they don't seem to always be five steps behind and five steps slow, but they still aren't anything close to a strength of the defense. Jason Whittingham, and Jared Norris are the anchors. Trevor Reilly and Nate Orchard will occasionally drop out of their DLine position and act as a roving linebacker. LT Filiaga, VJ Fehoko, and Jacoby Hale are the rotation for middle linebacker. The dark horse at this position is Pita Taumoeopenu, who is a late season addition to the team, but as a true freshman appears to be athletic, yet raw.

The Cougars they have this guy you may have heard of. Goes by the name of Kyle Van Oy. Van Oy will be the best player on the field during this game. He's improved from last year, and just continue to make play after play, and is someone the offense has to account for on every single play. In fact his best play of the year, is one he'll receive zero statistical credit for. With Texas on the two yard line looking to run the ball in for a score, Van Oy recognized the hole, and just threw his body in it. He wasn't trying to make a tackle, he was just plugging a hole. The running back changed direction and lost yards.

Van Oy isn't alone, as Spencer Hadley returns for his senior year, and they are joined by Alani Fua. Fua especially enjoys the fruits of Van Oy's labor, as he gets to make the plays caused by the offenses worrying about Van Oy.

Byu's Linebackers are a fast, gambling squad. They are the reason why you can't run side to side on the BYU defense, and why you can't have any long developing plays. Their pure athleticism makes up for all of the other flaws on the BYU defense.

This is a major, major mismatch.

Update: Spencer Hadley has been suspended by Bronco for a violation of team rules, so this category is now downgraded to a major mismatch.

Advantage: BYU

Secondary

As mentioned earlier, the Utes have a young, and semi inexperience secondary. Eric Row returns as an anchor, but the rest of the positions are manned by players who entered the season having never played their position. As such, the Utes secondary is more susceptible this year, than they have been for almost a decade. As such, the Utah defense has had to revert to more zone this season than they have in year's past, although it looked like in the OSU game, that Sitake and Whittingham were more willing to leave them on an island.

BYU meanwhile has had major problems finding bodies at Cornerback. BYU's Cornerbacks have to line up 5-7 yards off of their WR's simply because they are outmatched. Senior Safety Daniel Sorenson can occasionally bail out his corner backs, but isn't something you'd want to rely on often. BYU's biggest area of concern is the secondary, but as I've noted before, it's nothing new to BYU. They always have a bad, slow secondary.

Advantage: Utah

Special Teams

Reggie Dunn is gone, and the Utes haven't found his replacement yet. Although Delshawn McClellon showed some speed as the Kick Returner each of the last two weeks, and seems to be the choice as the main return man. Punter Tom Hackett is a good directional kicker, adept at pinning teams inside the 20. Place Kicker Andy Phillips entered the season having never kicked in a football game in his career, and so far has answered every bell, in every pressure situation. Phillips has yet to miss a kick. Even so, I'm still not sure he's 100% trusted by Ute fans who spent the last two years being burned by Coleman Peterson.

BYU Returns JD Falslev as their returner. Falslev always manages to make one or two returns a game that sets his team up in great field position. Justin Sorenson, who had a disastrous season last year in the place kicking duties, has seemed to be improved this year, but again I wonder how much he's trusted.

There's just not quite enough trust to go around, but the Utes barely squeak this one out.

Advantage: Utah

Coaching

It seems every couple years Bronco and Kyle switch positions of which coach gets the most national recognition. Right now Bronco seems to be the popular guy due to his success on defense last year, and the dismantling of Texas. This is just more evidence that these two will always be linked while in their current gigs.

Bronco is 75-30 in his career, slightly better than Kyle's 73-33.

Kyle is now 5-3 in the rivalry Game

Postseason Bronco has won 6 of his 8 bowl games, Kyle has only lost 1 of his 8 attempts. (Kyle is recognized as co-Head Coach for the 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). With this criteria in mind Bronco is 17-23 in big games, while Kyle comes in at 21-16.

High point for Bronco is still 2006-2007 and 2 consecutive undefeated years in conference. 11 wins both seasons, and beating Oregon and UCLA in consecutive Vegas Bowl.

Kyle's high point also hasn't changed, but it's hard to top 13-0 and beating Alabama in the Sugar Bowl to finished as the 2nd ranked team, and only undefeated team in the nation.

Low Point for Bronco is the ridiculous decision to go with, and stick with the two QB system in 2010, and then trying to distance himself from any responsibility for the decision. For Kyle it's hard to get lower than being shut out by UNLV in 2007.

Coaching Staffs have changed dramatically over the last couple years, as the Utes have brought in Dennis Erickson, to spur to life an offense that was dreadful each of the past two season, with success so far in the early season. Defensively, the Utes are still led by Kalani Sitake.

BYU meanwhile went back to the old girlfriend by bringing back Robert Anae, after having suffered through the Brandon Doman experiment the previous two season. Results of Anae's "Go Fast, Go Hard" have been mixed to drastically varying degrees through the first two weeks. It's also important to note that Anae was 3-3 during his previous stint with BYU against Utah. Bronco still is the mastermind of his fast, attacking defense.

As is typical, this game will come down to coaching, and while Byu had the great Texas win, I still don't think Bronco makes good in game adjustments, while Kyle has actually made great adjustments in two of his first three games to help the Utes overcome a slow start.

Advantage: Utah

The Crowd

While I usually like to take shots at the BYU crowd, and most of them deserved, I think this may be the most hyped up

crowd at LaVell Edwards Stadium in a while when you factor in the game two years ago, this being the last Holy War before the hiatus, and the emotion from the Texas game, the fans will be amped up high. It'll be something the Utes will have to overcome, should they want to win the game.

Advantage: Byu

X-Factors

There is a lot going on in this game. Obviously the Hiatus adds something new to the fire as neither team wants to lose the last game to be played until 2016. On top of that, the BYU Seniors are attempting to avoid being the first class swept in the rivalry since BYU's class of 2005. On top of that, a loss would also mean, it's the first Redshirt Sweep, and Missionary Sweep in the rivalry since Utah lost 9 straight between 1978 and 1987.

It's really really hard to win 3 games in a row, let alone 4 as Utah is attempting to pull off.

For BYU they've put a lot of eggs in this basket. Kyle Van Oy and Cody Hoffman both admitted that one of the reasons they came back for their senior seasons was that they didn't want to leave school having never won this game. Despite the score last year, each of the past two games haven't really been that close of a matchup, so BYU is really trying to exercise some demons this time around.

BYU enters the game coming off of a bye last week. While that has some advantages, such as extra time to scheme, and get players healthy, one has to wonder if it also didn't leave BYU with too much time to deal with the emotion of the Texas game, and the emotion of the upcoming rivalry game.

And let's not forget the revenge factor from the last time they played this game in Provo. I'm sure Arby's will be more careful about their promotions.

Turnovers have absolutely killed BYU the last two years, having given up 13 of them. However this year, the Utes haven't been able to force many turnovers so far. Will it change this week?

Something else to watch out for, will be the new targeting rules. It's not a stretch to say these two teams hit each other, and hit each other hard. BYU actually seems to hit the opponent harder in this game, than they do any other. Both teams, usually have one or two hits that are borderline, if not flat over the line, illegal hits during the game. This year those hits are more costly. The new rule states, if a player is deemed to be targeting, they get the usual 15 yard penalty, and are ejected from the game. If they are ejected in the first half of the game, they miss the rest of the game obviously, but if they are ejected during the second half of the game, they are suspended for the first half of the next game. So far, neither team has been subject to this ruling, but it wouldn't surprise me if it comes into effect. That may be one advantage of Blechen not playing for Utah, and Travis Uale having left a couple years ago. If they were both still playing, I'd almost guarantee the rule to get used.

Advantage: BYU

When Utah Has The Ball

As weird as it is to say, I'm not sure this matchup is all that important to the outcome of the game. Both Utah's offense and BYU's defense will do their thing and make plays. For Utah, they need to attack the corners on the edges through the air, and when they try to run, it needs to be up the gut. What Utah will have to avoid is the passes to the running back in the flat. The Cougars defense excels at shutting down plays on the edge. What they'll want to do is try to identify where the pressure from the line backers is going to come from, and pass to the vacated area. Most importantly they need to not make Texas' mistakes, and be sure to take what the Cougar defense is going to give them. There will be room for the WR's to work, Utah just has to be willing to take, and not try to force the issue, as Erickson has sometimes seemed to want to do this year.

When it comes to the running games, quick misdirection plays will work fine, as long as they are not of the draw variety. To beat the BYU defense, you must attack the BYU defense, and especially up the middle.

For BYU's defense, the key will be for that front 7 to get pressure and not allow the WR's to work against the BYU secondary. If they can pressure Wilson, and force him to scramble, and not make his reads, he has been apt to make bad passes, that can cause the offense to stall.

When BYU Has The Ball

This is the matchup of the game. The game will be won and lost on how well Utah can maintain the BYU running attack. From a defensive scheme standpoint, the Utes will need to play assignment football, as well as bring the safety up to stack the box with at least 8 defenders on almost every play. Dare Taysom to beat you throwing the ball, you just can't let them beat you on the ground.

Jamaal Williams, and Taysom Hill will both have positive running plays. The key will be, much like when playing a triple option attack like Air Force, to brush off that play and go back to gap control, and assignments on the next play. Option teams really succeed when a defender gets greedy. Utah's defense will need to play under control.

From a passing stand point, the Utes will probably want to just man up the wide receivers, so that they can focus more on the running attack. On the obvious passing downs, they'll probably roll a safety to help out Hoffman. Where the corners for Utah will have to be smart, is not peaking into the backfield when Taysom looks like he's going to run the ball. Let the line backers and the defensive line take care of Taysom.

Essentially the Utes will want to stack up the front, stop Taysom and Jamaal, and take their chances with the passing game, unless/until Taysom shows them that the passing game is something to fear. Although, an interesting rivalry tidbit for you: the last time BYU beat Utah by more than one score, it was with a similar offense. In 1996 they ran for 366 yards, passed for 70, and won 37-17.

Final Thoughts

This is probably the most evenly matched up Rivalry game in a while. Each of the past few years, one team or another has had a glaring advantage in multiple spots. This year it's quite a bit of strength on strength (Utah's run defense versus BYU's running attack), and weakness on weakness.

Add into that the magic that always seems to surround the Holy War, and we could be in for a heck of a fight on Saturday. Plus there's almost a sense that BYU might be "due", though of course I still think it's Utah's game to win.

Enjoy it, because it's gone for a while after that. Who knows, maybe absence will make the heart grow fonder. Those fans on both sides, who think their team doesn't need the other, might realize how much they miss the game. Then again, there is always the chance the latter happens, and it's just not missed that much during '14 and '15, and comes back even more bastardized than moving it to early in the season has already done.

All I know, is I will miss it. I love this game. Even if I absolutely loathe the game for the 210 minutes or so it's happening.

Bucket List Item Being Crossed Off

No matter who wins, there isn't going to be much of a recap next week, if there's anything. I'm leaving early Monday Morning to go to St. Louis for my first ever NFL game, as I'll be in attendance during next Thursday St. Louis Rams game against the San Francisco 49ers. Therefore, I seriously doubt I'll have time to get much of my thoughts up before I leave, and won't have time to do it while I'm gone. That also means, there might not be much of a preview of the following weeks games when Utah takes on UCLA during the annual marketing gimmick blackout game, or when Byu takes on cream puff Middle Tennessee.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 15:41

Sunday, September 8, 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin

I have no idea, no clue. Three days later and I'm still not sure what that was in Provo last weekend. It defies explanation. No one could have predicted that. Not even the most blue goggle wearing, Bronco Kool-Aid drinking, fireside attending, Cosmo loving, Max Hall worshipping Cougar fan. (I say this with confidence because he also told me yesterday he had no idea what went on Saturday.)

The most overused cliché after week 1 is that "a team makes it's biggest improvement from week 1 to week 2." That certainly held true in this state as Utah State, Utah, and BYU rolled to victories and were all running much crisper than in week 1. But if week 2 is about making your best improvement, weeks 3 and 4 are about figuring out what is real, because only 1 improvement from this week should be taken at face value. Yeeeeeeeeee-Huh?

So the experts were mostly right. Texas was going to go into Provo, with their 5 star athletes, bigger faster players, and a royal beat down was going to follow. But what the experts, and everybody else, didn't expect was the beat down was coming from the Cougars.

That's not to say that a Cougar victory wasn't unreasonable to expect. It's just that no one expected Texas to get ran over like they have never seen. Literally. This isn't hyperbole. BYU ran all over the Longhorn defense to the tune of 550 yards rushing. Most given up in Texas Football History. BYU QB Taysom Hill ran for 259 yards (not a Byu Record). Super Soph Jamaal Williams added 189. Paul Lasike was close to making it a third 100 yard rusher for BYU with 85 of his own.

After Taysom's second touchdown run, the sideline reporter overheard Taysom telling a coach "I'm just taking what they're giving me." Turns out that was the theme of the night. Taking, or not taking, what was being given.

Ego-Ball

You could say that I've criticized Bronco Mendenhall for his coaching abilities on occasion. However, the coaching display put on by Texas Head Coach Mack Brown and his entire coaching staff on Saturday, makes Bronco's worst coaching performance look like Vince Lombardi's best by comparison.

Last week before the game, I heard someone mention on the radio, how when it comes to recruiting, Texas doesn't really need to recruit players. They can basically sit back, decide which Texas grown 5 star recruit they want, offer, and that's it. This same person also said, he thought it's why Texas also misses out on a lot of really good players who are 4 or even 3 star guys, because they go mainly after the elite, top recruits. Because Bigger, Faster, Stronger, always equals better.

It was that attitude that was on full display Saturday night. Texas came into this game expecting to win, and expecting Byu to be afraid of them. Looking back, it's telling that when asked about the BYU offensive coordinator during the week Mack Brown didn't know who he was.

Problem for Texas was that Byu wasn't afraid of them. Byu actually hit Texas in the mouth first. Texas never adjusted. Mack Brown and his staff were so stubborn of beating BYU their way, they absolutely refused to adjust to what BYU was or wasn't doing.

All game long, as is obvious by merely glancing at the stats, Byu was able to run at will on Texas. Meanwhile Taysom Hill was not having a good game throwing the ball. A week after going 13/40 for 175 yards, Hill went 9/26 for 125 yards. Yet despite the lack of production in the passing game, and the abundance of production in the running game, by not just Hill, but all Byu RB's, Texas refused to load the box with more than 7 guys, and dare Hill to beat them through the air.

In fact, multiple times in the third and fourth quarter, Texas would line up on first down with only 6 guys in the box on defense.

In addition to a complete refusal to adjust to the Byu run game, Texas treated the zone/read option of Byu, as though they had never seen it before, which would be okay if it was indeed something never seen before, and not the current

hottest trend in not only College, but NFL football.

The hubris wasn't relegated to the defensive side of Texas' gameplan.

The weak point of the BYU defense has long been the secondary. This year isn't much different, especially with the problems the Cougars have had keeping corners healthy. On the ground, the area to attack is straight up the gut where the Nose Tackle is. What you don't want to do is attack the edges. Kyle Van Oy and Uani Fuga are too fast. Similarly you don't want any long forming runs.

This was the case Saturday as well. Whenever Texas had success it was through the air. Byu was frequently giving up 5 to 8 yards per pass against the Longhorns. But that wasn't what the Longhorns wanted to do, and since they were the Mighty Texas, they insisted on trying to run against the stout BYU defense. There were multiple drives, where Texas would get a quick 20 to 30 yards through the air, and then run two straight QB draws, or edge rushes. Not surprisingly those plays would get stuffed, leaving Texas in 3rd and long, and giving the green light to Kyle Van Oy to come after them.

Not to belittle everything BYU did on Saturday, because they played great. They took what Texas gave them, and ran it down their throat. Texas meanwhile came in unprepared, expecting BYU to roll over, and once it was clear they were in a fight, they never adjusted.

I commented on Saturday that with the problems Mack Brown has had the last 4 years (Brown lost 16 games his first 9 years at Texas, Saturday was his 17th lost in the last 4), the utter incompetence showed by Brown and the entire coaching staff was deserving of Brown being fired. Well Mack Brown wasn't terminated, but instead of letting defensive coordinator Manny Diaz on the bus, he threw him under the bus and backed over him on the way out of town.

Yes Diaz' defense was astoundingly awful. Again how a team like Texas could act as if it's never seen the hottest trend in football (zone/read) amazes me. But the truth is, even as absolutely terrible as their defense was, Texas was in the game in mid 4th quarter, but an absolute refusal to take what was being given to them on the offensive side of the ball led to their downfall. This was a terrible coaching job all the way around, not just on defense.

Questions For The Cougars

Who are you?? Are you the team that was absolutely horrific offensively, and average defensively against Virginia? Or are you the unstoppable option juggernaut we saw on Texas? Is the Texas win a sign that the team got it together, or is it a perfect storm of events like say in 2007 when an 0-2 Utah upset the 11th ranked UCLA 44-10. Or to continue the 2007 comparison even further is this like an eventual 2 win UNLV team beating Utah 27-0 (The game after Utah's UCLA Win?)

We honestly don't know if last Saturday is a blip on the radar, or a sign of things to come. Truthfully the Cougars probably aren't as bad as they seemed in week 1, and aren't as good as they seemed last Saturday.

Which brings me to my next question for Cougar fans. This week you are on bye, and the Holy War follows the week after. Kyle Van Oy and Cody Hoffman have both essentially admitted that beating Utah was one of the main reasons they came back for their senior year. So are you glad for this week off so you have the extra week to gameplan for Utah, which would also mean BYU has two weeks to sit and think about it's emotional game, and hear about how great the victory was, or would you rather take the emotion from the big victory this past week and roll right into Holy War this week?

Jake Heaps Tracker

Heaps redemption tour didn't get off to a strong start against a Div 1-AA foe. Heaps was very pedestrian on Saturday going 10/20 for 110 yards and 1 TD in Kansas' victory. For Kansas fans though, they saw a WR catch a Touchdown pass for the first time since November of 2011, which brings up another question? How truly terrible must a WR corp be to go an entire season without a TD Reception?

Exercise In Futility

There isn't really much to say about the Weber State game for the Utes. They did what they were supposed to. They went out, took care of business and got to bench their starters at halftime.

Of course, they've had these prostitution games each of the last two years, and weren't able to fully take care of

business in those games, so maybe just the fact that they did what they were supposed to do is good enough.

Yes Wilson was efficient, and the offense was on fire. Even though it's Weber State, Wilson did put enough tape on, to make other teams respect the zone/read a bit more.

Outside of that, there's not much that can be taken away from this game, other than live game reps for younger players.

Still Some Concerns

There are still some concerns for the Utes though. The offensive line hasn't been getting as much push as they should be. That could partially be blamed on USU's scheme in week 1 and being very vanilla in week 2, but if the Utes are going to try and have a strong season, the Offensive Line needs to start being nasty.

Along the same lines as the OL, York just doesn't seem to have it. He seems tentative when rushing the ball. Slow to get to the holes. James "Bubba" Poole has been much more effective, and in my opinion should be the starting back. I also think that Lucky Radley should see more times with the ones.

The biggest concern to me though, is an overall lack of turnovers. Through two games, the Utes have two fumble recoveries and zero interceptions. This is a continuation of an issue last year, where they just weren't forcing turnovers that frequently. With no Riley Nelson on the upcoming schedule, the Utes defense needs to start forcing some turnovers to help setup the offense with short fields.

Time To Buck The Trend

I know it's extremely early, but one of the biggest games of the year is this week for the Utes. Not necessarily because of the opponent, but because of recent seasons for the Utes. In both of the Utes first two seasons in the Pac-12 they started out 0-4 in conference play, and were left scrambling the rest of the season. In 2011 they were able to get a bowl game, last year, not so much.

That's why it is very important for Utah to win this week, and get a positive mindset. While a win won't guarantee a winning season, or even bowl eligibility, a loss could be very damaging for the psyche of a team trying to overcome the past couple seasons, and earn some respect in conference.

The Utes have a good opponent this week for those tasks. The Beavers match up really well to the Utes, as both the games the last two years have gone down to the wire. Last year, the Utes had momentum in the second half and were looking to tie the game up before DeVonte Christopher got involved and fumbled on the goal line.

The Beavers will look to pass frequently and test the unproven Ute Secondary, however they seem to have had problems running the ball ever since Jacquizz Rogers left, and aren't helped out by an offensive line that has suffered major injuries.

Defensively, the Beavers are looking for help in the middle, as both their Defensive Tackles, and their Linebackers have struggled early on this season. This could be a good opportunity for the Utes Offensive Line to get their legs, and start opening up some holes.

However, as Cougar Fans know from last year, this is not a team you can sleep on, especially since it's a team who tends to start seasons out slowly under head coach Mike Riley.

The game each of the last two seasons has been very close, and came down to whichever team didn't make the big turnover. In 2011 the Utes only had one turnover and won the game. Last year 4 turnovers was their downfall. This game looks to be much of the same. If the Utes can play their gameplan, and get some offensive consistency, they may finally start a Pac-12 season 1-0.

Holy War Kickoff

The time for the Utah/Byu game on the 21st has been announced. Kickoff will be at 8:15 pm. Of course that's assuming that yet another BYU game gets delayed by weather.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:00

Tuesday, September 3, 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin

The state of Utah houses 5 Division 1 football teams, with Utah, Utah State, and BYU in 1-A and Southern Utah, and Weber State in 1-AA. 4 of those teams played division 1A opponents this past week, with 3 of those games being against out of state foes on the road. 2 of them lost, but it was in against an in-state opponent, leaving just 1 of the 5 division 1 football teams in this state to lose to a non in state opponent.

And with that countdown out of the way, let's review what went down in the first week. Beware The Cupcake

First things first, big props to Southern Utah, and the 7 other members of Division 1-AA who proved why these crappy prostitution games are a terrible idea. Southern Utah beat 1-A transitional South Alabama, Samford beat 1-A transitional Georgia State. In more traditional upsets Towson beat UConn by 15 points, Eastern Illinois beat San Diego State by 11, McNeese State beat South Florida by 31, and Northern Iowa beat Iowa State by an 8 point margin.

There's a tossup though for biggest upset of the week.

First up Eastern Washington, who had given Washington and Washington State, finally moved out of the state of Washington and found success against a BCS team. Eastern Washington defeated 25th ranked Oregon State 49 to 46 in a game where they managed to accrue 625 of the 1152 total combined offensive yards in the game.

The other option is two time Division 1-AA defending champion North Dakota State Bison, trailing Defending Big XII Champion Kansas State by 4 points with just over 9 minutes to go in the game, in Manhattan Kansas. The Bison received the punt and put together a 18 play 9 minute drive down the field to punch in the winning TD with just seconds left in the game.

While there were plenty of examples of Division 1-A teams digesting their cupcakes without any heartburn, these 8 above show that unless you are an Oregon against Nicholls State, or Georgia Tech against Elon (Elon actually requested, and received a running clock for the fourth quarter), there's plenty of risk in these crappy games, with very little upside. This is particularly of interest to the Utes this week.

Five And A Half Hours Later

The honeymoon's over. I'd say that didn't last long, but anyone who was forced to wait out the 2 plus hour weather delay during the BYU/Virginia game, and then actually watch the rest of the game would probably disagree with me. Entering the season there had been a lot of talk about BYU's new "Go fast, Go hard" offensive philosophy. But as I warned a little while ago, the Cougars had already been down this road with Robert Anae, and they already knew what his offense was. Go fast, Go hard, are great buzzwords, but essentially all it meant, was the same offense, just more of it.

Now granted there were some extra issues in this game that may have had an effect on the offense. The big one, was Cody Hoffman being out with a hamstring injury. This should be worrisome for Cougar Fans as WR's and hamstrings can end up being an all year issue. Second the obvious, the two hour rain delay, the wet field, wet ball, and rain during halftime and third quarters. The problem with these excuses is that the offense was pretty bad in the first quarter before the delay. After about the first 20 minutes, real time, or so the physical effects of the delay are gone. The real problem with the wet field, and wet ball, is that the Cougars never took advantage of what those two effects can give you.

Contrary to popular belief, a passing game has a better advantage on a wet field than a running game does. The reason for this is it's hard to make quick changes, and while WR's would still have a problem with cuts, defenders have an even tougher time, because not only do they make the cut, but they have to do it reactionary. With a running game, it's mostly about angles. If you are going to run it though, take advantage of the wet field with misdirection plays, reverses, etc. Get a defense going one way, and switch directions (reverses work great because the runner isn't changing direction.) With no footing you'll get slippage on the defense.

Byu could never get much of a passing game together with Taysom Hill going 13-40. A good reason for this might be because of their absolutely horrendous OL. Their OL was consistently getting blown up at the line of scrimmage. The defenders were constantly getting a push multiple yards in the backfield. This could also be why the Cougars didn't

want to call any misdirection plays. They may have worried about the OL's ability to sustain blocks.

All of which makes Jamaal Williams' day all the more impressive. He had plenty of runs that got stuffed, but eventually he was able to fight his way to an 144 yard day on 34 carries. Williams did have some ball handling issues, with a couple fumbles, and the most important missed drop of the day. We'll get to that later.

A Tough Hill To Climb

Hill was dreadful during the game. Not just his numbers (13-40 175 yards 1 TD, 1INT), but just his overall performance. While he did have a couple good runs, overall in the run game he wasn't as explosive as he was last year. It seemed like his knee brace was bothering him. Because of the porous OL he, and Williams both, ended up taking some big hits.

In the throw game, he was worse than the numbers suggested. Many of his passes were just bad, and he never really went through read progressions. Of course this is only his third game of action, and he was without his #1 WR, and in pretty terrible weather conditions.

With the aforementioned caveats mentioned, and re-emphasizing the small sample size, I have to wonder if Hill is what he is.

We've seen him for 2 and a half games now, and all those seem to have gone through the same pattern. For most of each half, the offense with hill seems to sputter, with the occasional good gain before a punt. Mostly Hill runs, but when he does pass it's sporadic, and very hit and miss. Give Hill credit because he doesn't consistently under or over throw, he's very good at mixing up the over and under throw.

And then approximately once per half Hill gets into a quick rhythm. He'll start with some quick passes, and all of a sudden he gets a drive going that scores. The next drive though, it's back to the inconsistency. Which leaves the ball in the hands, and mostly Kyle Van Oy to try and save the game. Against Virginia, BYU was the one who got Van Oy'd by Virginia Anthony Harris who was a beast. Harris blocked a punt, and intercepted a pass, which led to Virginia's two Touch Downs. He also was in the backfield during the fumble that led to Virginia's Safety.

Speaking Of That Interception

All of the above issues with the offense, and the yet mentioned issues with the defense aside, this game turned on a very terrible coaching decision. I don't know if it was Bronco, or if it was Anae who decided to call the pass play with just over 3:00 to go, up by 4, and at their own 34. Before I begin explaining why it was such a bad play call, I'll get the qualifiers out of the way. It was a good pass, and Jamal Williams should have caught the ball. Had it been completed, first down or not, nobody would really be saying much or even thinking twice about the play. Nobody would be saying anything even if it had just gone incomplete. Coaches call the plays, but Players have to execute, which they didn't.

Now that's out of the way here's why it's a terrible decision to make that play call. Obviously players didn't execute, and instead of catching the pass, the ball bounced off of Jamaal Williams' hands, into the arms of a Anthony Harris, who lateraled to a teammate who was then able to set the Cavaliers up at the 12 yard line.

Secondly, Virginia had no offense game to speak of. Early on in the game, the Offensive line for the Cavs were pushing around the defensive line of the Cougars, especially up the middle, to get good chunks on the ground game. However once the Cougars realized that the Cavaliers passing attack was less effective than the Cougars own passing attack last year with an injured Riley Nelson, they were able to shift some linebackers and stuff the run. There is a reason both teams punted at least 11 times, and it wasn't really because of the rain. It's because both offenses were in a competition to out suck each other, and Virginia was clearly winning that battle.

Virginia also only had 1 timeout left in the game. You run the ball, you keep the clock moving, you punt the ball the next play and Virginia, whose longest drive of the game was 47 yards at the end of the half aided by a prevent like defense for BYU, would then have to go around 70 yards to score a TD, with only 1 timeout and probably less than 2:30 to go in the game.

Yes it was a low risk pass, but with the ball as wet as it is, crazy bounces happen. The ball should have stayed on the ground. Bronco should have put his trust and the game in the hands of his Defenses, instead of in the hands of a Sophomore QB playing his 3rd game, who had been pretty bad that day.

Moving Forward

I mentioned last week how much like two years ago BYU Follows up a trip east against a bad BCS team with a game against the Longhorns. Much like two years ago, it was a pretty crappy game that was just begging for Kyle Van Oy to take over the game and save BYU. Unlike two years ago, Van Oy wasn't able to produce the miracle, as Anthony Harris beat him at his own game.

Maybe that means the Longhorn game might have a different outcome?

Unfortunately for Byu that different outcome is likely to be Texas still wins, but by more than a point. Granted not a lot can be taken from Texas' 56-7 victory, because in all honesty New Mexico State should be in the lower half of Division 1-AA. That being said, Texas still looks to be much improved over the mediocrity of the past few years. For the first time since Colt McCoy left, the Longhorns have an upperclassmen quarterback they like in David Ash. Of Course this is the same David Ash who was part of the trifecta of terrible the Longhorns put out at Quarterback two years ago, As was the one who seemed to inspire the offense the most back when he was a freshman.

The other big difference between this game and two years ago, is it's being played in Provo, but then again the psyche of the BYU fan base may be a bit wounded right now, so I'm not sure how much of a home field advantage it will be in the long run. I do think the BYU Fan will help power the Cougars early, and may even see the Cougars holding a 3 to 7 point lead entering the second quarter, before they eventually get overtaken by the Longhorns, making the Cougars enter the bye week prior to the Holy War with an 0-2 record.

Better Than Advertised

Turns out Aggie fans had good reason to put their faith in Chucky Keeton. Entering the season Keeton was the consensus best qb in the state, but that was mainly due to Wilson's lack of experience, and nobody really knowing what Hill had. If Keeton continues to perform the way he did against Utah he'll easily retain the title. Continued performances like that will also mean he'll have to think hard about whether he wants to come back next year to defend that title.

We all know Keeton was dangerous on the ground, and last Thursday was no exception, as Keeton ran for 85 yards on 15 carries. Keeton also managed to turn multiple sacks into "you can't get me" positive plays for the Aggies. Utah's defensive line had a pretty good game, especially Nate Orchard, Trevor Reilly, and Tenny Palepoi, who were all over the field, and quite often in the offensive backfield. Unfortunately for them Keeton kept their nights from being great, simply because they couldn't keep a hold of him.

The biggest difference between Keeton last year and this year, though, was with his arm. He's a much more confident passer than he was a year ago. He also was looking downfield as he scrambled to try and keep the passing options open. On the night he was 31 of 40 for 314 yards and 2 Td's. The Utes may have won the game, but Keeton stole the show.

It's too bad that Keeton plays for the Aggies, and his chances to make a national splash are limited. He'll get another opportunity in three weeks against USC, and one more chance against Boise State, but other than that, he just won't get the publicity he deserves. Whereas if he were in, say, Kyle Station, he'd probably have a nickname, like maybe Chucky Football, but definitely wouldn't be such a head ache.

Steps Forward, Steps Backward

Utah meanwhile saw improvement over many areas than the matchup a year ago. Especially at the quarterback position. While Wilson had good numbers on the night (17 of 28, 302 yards, 2 Td's) the biggest improvement came in the throws he was making. There were multiple times where Wilson made a pass that a year ago he wouldn't even have attempted. A few times he even managed to throw the WR open by passing to a spot, instead of passing to a man.

That's not to say that Wilson didn't still have his struggles. During the middle portion of the game, when the Utah offense seemed to stall, it was partially because Wilson was still having troubles making a read quick enough. Part of it was due to the relentless, not stop blitz pressure of the Aggies. Wilson spent a lot of time scrambling, and much like Keeton, Wilson was always looking downfield to make a pass until the last possible second. The negative though, was that Wilson seemed to struggle when passing on the move, and many times would under throw, or throw behind a target who had come open.

I will say though, that I was impressed at just how difficult Wilson was to bring down, not because he'd escape with his legs, but just that he is a force and a half to get to the ground, even when the defense did get their hands on him.

Another area on the team that saw great improvement was the defensive line. I mentioned earlier how Nate Orchard, formerly Fakahafua, Nate Reilly, and Tenny Palepoi actually did a decent job of getting pressure, despite the lack of sacks. What I also noticed was that this defense did a good job of moving laterally from side to side, something that had given them fits quite a bit in past year.

But one giveth, and one taketh, and the takeaway from the improved lateral movement seemed to be that the Utes were getting absolutely slashed by the slot receiver running up the field. Two of Utah State's scoring drives were fueled by the TE, or Slot Receiver getting down the field and finding the soft spot in the Zone. Utah better hope it's secondary can get it together so they can go back to the Man press they prefer, because that zone could get torched by the speedier spread teams in the Pac-12.

The biggest disappointment of the night though, was the Utes inability to get the hard yards when necessary. Their first score they failed twice within the five to get a TD on the ground before going to the air. Late in the game they were stuffed on three consecutive runs from inside the 4. If the Utes don't find a way to grind out the tough yards, they will really struggle with third downs, and in the red zone.

Adjustments Galore

This was a very entertaining game. Utah came out early, and pounced on the Aggies. But credit goes to Matt Wells and his staff, as they made some nice adjustments in the second half. They slowed the Utah offense, and were even able to take a 17-14 lead at the half, which they quickly came out in the second half and expanded to 23-14.

But Utah wasn't going away. Unlike last year, when the team seemed to have no heart, this year's squad was resilient, and the coaching staff made some great half-time adjustments. They tightened up the secondary, and moved them closer to the line of scrimmage, and started to force the Aggies into quick 3 and out drives. Wilson found his rhythm again and answered the final Aggie Touchdown with a field goal drive.

Then Utah decided it was time to turn the game their way and called, and executed a brilliant onside kick. New kicker Andy Phillips, who had a great game going 3 for 3 on field goals, and 3 for 3 on extra points, made the best kick of the night by trickling the ball just hard enough that it had only enough strength to tumble 11 yards. The Aggies were so caught off guard that by the time the front line had stopped their back pedal, the Utes had recovered the onside kick.

The Utes then Scored a Touchdown, and out kicked the Aggies on field goals the rest of the night 2 to 1.

Four Minute Offense

The area that felt like the biggest difference was the play calling. Dennis Erickson called a good game. Although it seemed like it took him too long to call the first down play action pass that he had been setting up all game. The place where this was most obvious was after the Utes took a 24-23 lead. The Aggies quickly bounced back with a field goal, and Erickson switched gears.

The Utes answered with a field goal, and then got a defensive stop, at which point the Utes employed their 4 minute offense. The Utes ran the ball down the Aggies throat, kept the clock running, and eventually just ground the game out.

So Glad That Didn't Come Back To Bite Me

I wrote this two years ago when Byu came back and beat the Aggies in a one point game, after losing the year before.

So any BYU fan that said there wasn't a rivalry with Utah State saw their argument go out the window when fans at the stadium rushed the field following the game.

Look that was an exciting game, with an exciting ending, but really BYU, have you fallen so far that squeaking past a team that has beaten you only once in the past 15 years, and has not beaten you at home in 33 years is really a cause for storming the field?

So imagine my relief when as the clock wound down, not a single Utah fan even pretended like they were going to rush the field. I'm proud of the Utah fans, for knowing that a close victory over the aggies, is clearly not a rush the field worthy game.

Of course, we all know Ute fans have had their moments when it comes to rushing the field.

Remember Those Div 1-AA Upsets

Utah moves on from the Aggies of Utah State, to the Wildcats of Weber State, in a game that will give the Utes absolutely nothing. I hate these games. There is nothing in it for Utah outside of a W. They can't win by enough to get any respect, and if they do manage a blowout, well then it was against Weber State. Also, as we saw in week 1, there is that ever present threat of the upset.

Any film the Utes get from the game isn't really of value, because the Wildcats aren't anywhere near the level of any opponent they'll face this season.

About the only thing the Utes can get out of this game is more injuries. I'll be so happy when the playoff is in effect, and these games begin to go by the wayside.

At least the Utes are helping out an in state team this year.

View From The Red Zone

I was ready for football on Thursday. I'm sure you were finally ready for football on Thursday. The teams sure were ready for football on Thursday. I'm not 100% convinced that Rice-Eccles was ready for football on Thursday. The sound system in the stadium was terrible last week, worse than normal, with sound cutting in and out, and going from too loud to too quiet. The Video board was showing it's age, as for about 5 minutes in the second quarter half of the screen wouldn't refresh. Heck, they didn't even have all the garbage cans in place until the second quarter.

While the stadium wasn't ready the fans were, and they brought a lot of noise and energy with them. The stripe the stadium marketing gimmick looked cool, but can we please stop with them. The MUSS, and the North End Zone were pumped and ready, which makes the Utah State Offensive Line's performance all the more impressive. You can tell this is an experienced group, with 4 seniors and 1 junior, as despite the noise and the atmosphere they didn't have a single false start all game, and for the most part played disciplined football. The rest of the Aggies, not so much, but the OL was impressive, and is definitely a benefit for Keeton.

Jake Heaps Tracker

So I didn't realize when I looked at the schedule last week that Kansas' game against South Dakota wasn't until this week, but Heaps still won the first week simply by not being involved in that offensive mess in Charlottesville. Heaps gets to officially begin his post BYU career with a walk over game against South Dakota that will tell us approximately zero about the rest of his season.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:15

Monday, August 26, 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin

It's Game Week! There's an extra hop in the step of football fans everywhere because we are finally, finally, FINALLY in Game Week. There's one guarantee for this week, somebody in the state of Utah will not make it to week 2 undefeated. After Chucky

The Utes are currently favored in this game by 2 points over Utah State. When you factor in the 3 point home field advantage, essentially Vegas thinks on a neutral field, the Aggies would win by 1 point.

There is a lot of trepidation from Utah fans regarding this game. Many fans calling this a statement game for the rest of the season.

There is an extreme amount of enthusiasm coming out of Logan for this game. Many thinking this will be a sign of the Aggies picking up right where they left off.

In the media, this game is being referred to as and extremely tough test for the Utes to start the season.

There is a common theme among all parties for their particular reasoning. The Aggies won last year, and they have Chucky Keeton.

I briefly mentioned this in last week's preview but last basing this game off of last year isn't exactly wise. Last year was a perfect storm moment. The Aggies, with their best team arguably ever, had a chip on their shoulder, fighting for in state relevance played their absolute best game.

Utah with their worst team of the past 10 years, admittedly by some players, were too busy overlooking the Aggies, played one of their absolute worst possible games, and lost their Quarterback to injury during the game.

And yet the game went into overtime before Utah State won the game. Not to take anything away from the Aggies because they were the absolute better team last year, but I don't think the Utes will be overlooking them.

So essentially the hope of the Aggies rely on Chucky Keeton, because after Chucky, there isn't a lot in this matchup that favors the Aggies. It's certainly not the coaching staff who is filled with a lot of first year coaches. About the only matchup that you can point to is the Aggies returning all 5 starters on the OL against a DL filled with 4 new starters.

About Chucky

That's not to say that Chucky Keeton isn't the type of player to rest your hopes on. During last year's game he torched and embarrassed the Utah defense. There were many plays, where a defender would get their hands on Keeton just to see him escape and extend the play. The Utah defense was never able to adjust to Keeton.

And despite the best efforts of the MUSS, the North End Zone, and the rest of Rice-Eccles Stadium, I wouldn't count on the crowd getting to Keeton. This is a kid whose first game in college was on the road against defending National Champion Auburn. This is a kid who has played in Norman against the Sooners, and in Wisconsin against the Badgers. In all three matchups, while his team eventually lost, it wasn't due to Keeton struggling.

Keeton is the best Quarterback in the state, and while that's partially due to the fact he's also the most experienced, a lot has to do with his ability to keep plays alive. It will be up to the Utah back seven, to make sure to stay on their assignments while Keeton is running around back there.

Debuting The New Offense

Stop me if you've heard this one before, but the Utes are entering the season with a new play caller. This will be the 6th play caller since 2008. After Ludwig in '08, Dave Schramm in '09, Aaron Roderick in '10, Norm Chow in '11, and Brian Johnson in '12, the Utes are really really hoping that Dennis Erickson can not only be successful in '13, but that he'll stick around for a while.

Dennis Erickson is trying to bring in a fast temp no huddle offense. (Consider USU is going no huddle, as is BYU, Matt Wells said it best, Huddle is a four letter word.) And while Erickson was a disaster at this latest couple coaching stops, his offenses at those places were still top notch.

The problem Dennis Erickson had as head coach was a lack of overall team discipline. Look no further than Vontaze Burfict as an example. During his time there Burfict was just as likely to get a 15 yard penalty as he was a major defensive play. At Utah this isn't an issue for two reasons.

First, let's be completely honest, Utah hasn't been an overly disciplined team for quite a while. Secondly, as Offensive Coordinator, team discipline, and making sure your players go to class aren't as much Erickson's concern, nor is making sure you have something resembling a defense. All Erickson has to focus on is the Offense, and mentoring Brian Johnson.

One Thing Is Correct

For all the hand-wringing and teeth gnashing from Utah fans about this game, they were right about one thing, or half right. This game is a statement game for the Utes, but only if they lose, or struggle.

If the Utes win, it shows that last year was a fluke in regards to the Aggie game, and it's what they're supposed to do. It doesn't say a dang thing about whether the Utes are ready for Pac-12 play this season, or if they'll be much improved from past season.

However, if the Utes lose, or if the Utes even struggle with the Aggies this season, Utes fans will long for last year's 5-7.

Kudos To Tom Holmoe

I've given BYU and their Athletic Director Tom Holmoe a lot of crap the past few years about their scheduling since going Independent, but there is one thing I must give Holmoe props for. Each of the last three years, Holmoe has done a great job of being a schedule Houdini with the first game of the year, and playing the media for all they've got.

Since going Independent, the Cougars have had season openers of @Ole Miss, Home versus Washington State, and this year they open @Virginia. Those three teams all have two things in common.

First, all three teams royally and completely sucked at the time the game was played.

Second, and most important for Byu, all three of these teams were in a power conference. Since media tends to prioritize teams as such: Power Conference Good Teams > Boise State > Power Conference Terrible Teams > Everybody Else, a win by Byu would easily allow them to pull the wool over the medias eyes with a victory, and guarantee that for at least a week, the Cougars would be talked about in a favorable light.

So to Tom Holmoe I tip my hat. While everyone else around the country is busy doing either crappy, prostitution games against FCS teams that will do the team absolutely no good, or has scheduled a massive showdown kickoff game against a really good team, he has figured out how to work the system for the most bang, with the least amount of risk. It really is a smart move.

And while Byu Does open with Wisconsin at home in 2017, and At Nebraska in 2016, the rest of their season openers between now and 2019 consist of Virginia, Connecticut and Arizona, so it's a trend that Holmoe doesn't intend to stop.

Victory In Virginia

In truth there really isn't much that should prevent the Cougars coming out of this game with a victory. While it may not be as definitive a victory as it was last year against Washington State, the Cougars should win this game by at least two touchdowns.

Much like last year against Washington State, and the year before against Ole Miss, a victory won't really tell us anything about how well the Cougars will be prepared to face their schedule.

Virginia really is not that good of a team. They are coming off a 4 win season last year, and are expected to once again be a cellar-dweller in the ACC.

The Cavaliers lost both of last year's quarterbacks, and have major question marks on both sides of the ball. While

many think that head coach Mike London is the right man for the job to rebuild the Cavaliers, it's not expected to be this season.

Add in Bronco's propensity for some of his best coaching of the year to happen in game 1 of the season, the Cougars should be able to get some good work in, to prepare for a visit from the Longhorns in week 2. Of course, if this game ends up a lot like the 2011 game against Ole Miss, where Kyle Van Oy heroics were required to escape with a victory, than the Cougars may be in for a rough time.

However, much like Utah versus the Aggies, not much will be learned from a victory.

Jake Heaps Tracker

Speaking of prostitution games, the Kansas Jayhawks, led by Saint Jake Heaps, open the season against the University of South Dakota. The Jayhawks, whose own coach referred to them as a dumpster fire, figured wins may be in short supply this year so they went and schedule South Dakota who went 1-10 in the Missouri Valley Conference last year.

Of course, this means that Jake Heaps, who racked up great stats against crappy crappy teams as a freshman in 2010, should put up some impressive numbers, even if Kansas has a dearth of talent.

If you're interested in following along with the Jake Heaps tracker, be sure to tune in to the Kansas Jayhawks channel Saturday at 5 p.m.

Yes there really is a Kansas Jayhawk channel. Although in truth it's simply a specially branded Espn 3.

Best Way To Spend The Weekend

Since it's the first game of the week, it takes a moment to fall back into proper habits, so with that said I present a guide to opening week.

On Wednesday, treat the wife to a nice dinner. At the end of the night, mention you look forward to seeing her again in 5 months.

On Thursday, catch a little bit of the North Carolina @ South Carolina game, starting at 4 on ESPN, as you wait for the Aggies and Utes to kick off at 6 p.m. on Fox Sports 1 (219 on Direct Tv, 150 on Dish). When the game gets over, you can listen (if you are on your way home from the game), or watch the Usc at Hawaii game to finish the night off on CBS Sports Network at 9. In truth that should be a terrible game, so I'd recommend, ending with Rutgers @ Fresno State on Espn instead.

Friday offers nothing of quality to watch, with the only game featuring two 1-A teams being Western Michigan at Michigan State, so you can recover from staying up late the night before.

Saturday it really begins. Get up at 8 for College Gameday on Espn (the first hour on ESPN U just isn't worth it.) Take advantage of the lesser early slate by flipping through the games. Inevitably there will be a game that's closer than it should be. The most likely candidate for non blowout will be Purdue at Cincinnati on ESPN U at 10, but that's mainly because it's two evenly matched, i.e. bad, teams.

At 1:00 as the first round of games end, kill the last 30 minutes before BYU and Virginia, by watching Mississippi State vs. Oklahoma State, an on the rise, but still mediocre and probably overrated SEC team, vs a top 15 Bix XII team. It'll be on Abc/Espn2. At 1:30, start flipping to EspnU and add the BYU game into your rotation of games. Also keep your eye on the Syracuse/Penn State tilt on Abc/Espn2 starting at 1:30.

The true meat of the day should begin before the Byu game ends, and that starts with two time defending national champion, Alabama versus perennially overrated Virginia Tech on Espn starting at 3:30. Sadly the Alabama hype train is the only decent game during the midday.

After the Alabama snoozer, when the media gushing and love fest on ESPN gets to be too much, switch over to Abc at about 6 for the Georgia vs. Clemson game. It's the only top 10 matchup this weekend, with two legitimate dark horse contenders to the National Championship game. Enjoy that by itself for an hour, because at 7 on ESPN, LSU takes on TCU, and an hour after that at 8 Boise Tate plays their annual first week, "Look we don't just play scrubs" game at Washington on Fox Sports 1.

When those games end, you can finish off the night with the end for the Nevada/UCLA game on the Pac-12 Network.

On Sunday, since the NFL hasn't started, there are actually two options to choose from after your Sabbath day duties are fulfilled. Ohio at 9th ranked Louisville at 1:30 on Espn has some upset potential to it, while the day ends with a horrible in state rivalry between Colorado and Colorado State on Cbs Sports at 4.

Monday, go back to work, and put off as much actual work as you possibly can while you dissect the week that was. Since it's opening week their is actually a game available, as Florida State and Pittsburgh plays at 6, but truthfully, much like the Sunday games, all that matchup will do is make you really happy that the NFL begins next weekend.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:53

Thursday, August 15, 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin

I present for your perusal 6 highly important numbers:

272
250
245
227
200
7

Their meaning? The first five numbers represent the length of our long national nightmare. They are the total days since the last football game played by the Utes (265), Aggies (243), Byu (238), Any College Team (220) or since any relevant football of any kind at the Super Bowl (193).

The final number? That is the amount of days we must endure before the nightmares all come to an end (Well except for BYU who has to wait 2 more days..

So with only one week to go, Red, Blue And Pigskin makes it triumphant return. Since Last We Met

All three teams met with coaching turmoil during the offseason. Utah State saw their head coach bite off more than he can chew by going to Wisconsin. Offensive Coordinator Matt Wells was rewarded with the job, and will try to keep the upward momentum going in Logan as they enter a new Conference.

Last year, Utah conducted a months long nationwide search that resulted in Brian Johnson becoming the Offensive Coordinator. Many were left scratching their heads wondering how you can conduct a nationwide search for that long and come to the conclusions that the best man to be your Offensive Coordinator is a 25 years old kid who has never called plays before. After a year of evidence, Kyle Whittingham decided that Brian Johnson may not be quite ready. This year, without a nationwide search, ended up with Dennis Erickson to become Co Offensive Coordinator with Brian Johnson. And By Co Offensive Coordinator, he meant. Erickson is the offensive coordinator, but Whit doesn't want to admit he was wrong about Johnson, and Johnson is still part of the plan, so let's throw him a bone while Erickson mentors him.

Fans in Provo would love to be mocking Utah for bungled misstep at Offensive Coordinator, if they themselves were busy seeing BYU trying to make up for their own OC mishandling. In 2011, tired of seeing the same old stale predictable offense, Robert Anae was ran out of town in favor of Brandon Doman. After 2 years of crappy offense, and an extremely messy QB situation, Doman was let go, and the Cougars are desperately trying to make it work with Robert Anae again. It's like being in a long term relationship with your girlfriend, that you find a bit boring. Then your job hires a hot, sexy new secretary that for some reason is into you, so you dump your girlfriend. Then you find out that your new fling is a little bit psycho, and a lot bit crazy, so after some serious grovelling (in this case telling Anae he could be the next Head Coach) you talk your old girlfriend into trying things again. Pretty sure that always ends well.

Speaking of changes, both Kyle Whittingham and Bronco Mendenhall have both gone through major personality changes this offseason, or in the case of Bronco, he actually got one. Both have been more jovial in the media, and Bronco even joined Twitter. Most amazingly Bronco was even found socializing with fans. Of course the more cynical among us will think how funny it is that both coaches get a softer personality (or any personality at all) after such disappointing seasons, with both possibly coaching for their futures this year. As for me, I'll just lament how I won't be able to make fun of Bronco for his personality during my annual Holy War right up.

Of Course, Bronco being the giving person that he is, made up for that with Tradition, Honor, and Spirit.

Building On Success

The most successful team in the state in 2012 unsurprising faces the least turmoil going into 2013. The Aggies had their best season is program history in 2012, and has a large amount of returning starters, including the current best QB in the state, though he'll have more competition for that title this season, in Chucky Keeton. For the Aggies the big

changes came on the sideline, and off the field.

On the sideline, the mastermind of the Aggies return to decency left for Wisconsin, and Offensive Coordinator Matt Wells takes over. While I think Andersen was a good coach, if not a bit overrated, and think Matt Wells actually deserves a large chunk of credit for the Aggies finally making the jump last season, listening to interviews with Wells during the offseason lead me to believe it may be a bit of an adjustment being the main man.

To make his job tougher, the Aggies will no longer be playing against WAC Teams. While they will forever be the reigning WAC Football champions, now that the WAC is no longer in the Football business, the Aggies will see a bit of an uptick in on the field competition as they enter the Mountain West Conference. Sure the Mountain West has it's share of dregs (New Mexico, Unlv), but the top end is an increase over what was the top dog in the WAC, as Boise State, and San Diego State both decided to remain in the Mountain West.

Tradition, Honor, Spirit

While BYU may finally be done with the nightmare of the Riley Nelson era, there are still a lot of questions for BYU on the offensive side. Many of these revolve around Taysom Hill. While all accounts seem to indicate that Taysom is healthy after last year's disastrous knee injury, we are still left with a question as to just what kind of QB Taysom is. In very limited action last year, results were mixed, aided greatly by Utah State going full on prevent at the end of the first half last year.

If Hill is accurate and able to get the ball downfield, maybe some of BYU's many offensive weapons, like Cody Hoffman and Ross Apo might finally get some use. However, in what we saw last year, Hill seemed many times like he was all too willing to just tuck the ball and run. If that's the case, then that will make Hill as slightly faster Riley Nelson.

Defensively, BYU had arguably it's best defense in program history last season. Surprisingly enough Super Stud Linebacker Kyle Van Oy decided to return to the team for his senior season to complete unfinished business (Beat Utah). This could end up being a mistake for Van Oy from a draft perspective because BYU's defense also lost a lot of players throughout, including top 5 pick Ziggy Ansah. One of the major losses, especially as it relates to Van Oy and his production will be at the Nose Tackle spot where Romney Fuga graduated.

In the backfield BYU may very well start holding open tryouts at the Cornerback positions as they have been devastated by injuries through fall and spring camp. Of course, BYU never has good cornerbacks, so it's questionable how much that will hurt BYU. Once again, it will all come down to how well the front seven is able to provide pressure. Again the key to the front seven will be the Nose Guard.

In addition to all the questions surrounding the DB's, QB's, OL, and DL for BYU, they also will face the toughest schedule in recent memory, and some are saying their toughest in school history. Gone are the early independent days of beating up on Idaho State, New Mexico State, San Jose State, and Idaho. Instead this year, the Cougars have Texas, Wisconsin, Notre Dame, and Georgia Tech. This is a heavily loaded schedule. A schedule better suited for what Holmoe and Bronco believed this team was going to be, (A senior heavy class being lead by Senior stud Jake Heaps), but may be too much for what this team actually is (A young team with question marks up and down the roster.) At least it'll be fun for BYU fans.

You've Got Questions, I've Got.... Well More Questions

While BYU is faced with a lot of questions on their team, no state team has more questions, without real answers that the Utes. After seeing their season derailed by another Jordan Wynn shoulder injury last season, the Utes punted on the year mid season in order to give Travis Wilson valuable playing time. While the results were mixed, this is when we'll find out if it was a worthy gamble. Or will Utah be doomed to another season of inconsistency at QB.

Unlike BYU, who also has questions at the QB spot, Utah has questions at both RB, and WR. Top to bottom Utah very well could have the most talent at both positions, but they are also extremely thin on experience. And while on paper talent looks good, talent on paper alone means diddly squat.

To top it off Utah is moving to an uptempo style of offense that dominates the Pac-12 conference, thanks to the higher of Dennis Erickson.

Defensively Utah suffered major losses as well this season. All 4 players who started game 1 for Utah last season are gone, including the beast in the middle Star Lotulelei. Although his replacement, Tenny Palepoi, was involved heavily at the end of last season, when you lose someone that other teams were devoting 2 and sometimes 3 players to block, it's

always a step back.

Taking Star's place as the leader of the defense will be Trevor Reilly, who injured his ACL in summer camp last season, and still managed to lead the team in tackles. Fully recovered Reilly looks to have a monster year, and may even have eyes on Van Oy's Best LB in the state title.

Speaking of Linebackers, what do you do when you couldn't field 3 halfway decent linebackers last season? Reduce the number of linebackers you need. Mostly to deal with the spread offenses throughout the Pac-12, but also I believe to help deal with the fact that the Linebackers in 2012 were a steaming pile of crap (and that might be an insult to steaming piles of crap everywhere) Utah is moving from a 4-3 base defense to a 4-2-5 base defense.

To aid in this, the Utes are finally moving Brian Blechen from Safety to that rover safety/linebacker spot. Of course, one problem that comes with moving to a 5 DB standard set, is the need for that many DB's. As is becoming routine at Utah, the Utes find themselves once again looking to rebuild their defensive secondary.

As you can see a common theme pretty much up and down the roster is a lack of experience. The Utes are hoping that the past two recruiting classes will finally pay off, as they have lots of young talent. But until that talent hits the field, we really have no idea if it's good or bad. Truthfully, anybody who is willing to tell you they are confident in Utah doing anything win or lose, is full of it.

Speaking Of Prediction

Remember how I reference how futile it is to try and predict anything in regards to Utah's season. Well I'm about to embark on said futility. Not just Utah, but BYU and Utah State as well. For Each game I'll give a reason of hope, reason to fear, and predicted outcome.

Let's start in Logan.

Week 1 - @Utah: Reason for hope: Aggies derailed Utah's season last year by getting their first victory against the Utes in nearly 20 years. Reason for fear: The players may be similar for the Aggies, but they have a lot of coaches coaching in their first game. Prediction: Matt Wells doesn't begin his coaching career with a victory.

Week 2 - @ Air Force: Reason for hope: Aggies offensive line should be able to dominate the undersized defensive front seven of Air Force. Reason for fear: It's Air Force, and that means cut blocks and the triple option. Prediction: Matt Wells get his first victory, and Utah State's first Mountain West victory.

Week 3 - Weber State: Reason for hope: It's Weber State. There is nothing but hope in this matchup. Reason for fear: Power Outage causes all of the Aggies to sleep in and miss kickoff. Prediction: Blowout Victory

Week 4 - @Usc: Reason for hope: Aggies are no stranger to big time venues having taken Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Arkansas to the wire on the road the past three seasons. Reason for fear: They lost all three of those games, and once again figure to be out-manned. Prediction: Once again down to the wire, once again coming up short.

Week 5 - @San Jose State: Reason for hope: Even being a surprise last year, San Jose State was still a lesser Utah State. Reason for fear: 4 road games in their first 5 can wear on everyone. Prediction: Aggies start 2 -0 in the Mountain West.

Week 6 - BYU: Reason for hope: Utah State has outplayed BYU in each of the last three meetings, and come into the season with many fewer questions. Plus this game is at Logan where the Aggies won the last time the two teams played there. Reason for fear: Aggies have manage to snatch defeat from the Jaws of victory the last two years. Prediction: A close hard fought loss, but just barely.

Week 7 - Boise State: Reason for hope: Game is in Logan and not on the smurf turf. Reason for fear: The Broncos have had a year to move on from Kellen Moore, and look to be getting back to form. Prediction: Remember when the Broncos were the class of the WAC, and the Aggies were just a bump in the road? Aggies may be a bit better, The Broncos might night be what they used to be, and the conference is now the Mountain West, but the result will be the same.

Week 8 - @New Mexico: Reason for hope: The Lobos are still struggling to get out of the dumpster they've been in since Mike Locksley was hired. Reason for fear: Bob Davie is in his second year, and the Lobos could very well be frisky. Prediction: An angered Aggies team rebounds from the previous week.

Week 9 - Bye

Week 10 - Hawaii Reason for hope: Hawaii has been struggling the last few years, and looks to still be one of the bottom dwellers of the conference. Reason for fear: Norm Chow has had a full year to convert to a pro style offense. Prediction: Aggies may not get to enjoy the islands this year, but they'll enjoy a victory.

Week 11 - @Unlv Reason for hope: What more do you need, other than being better at every position? Reason for fear: Chucky Keeton gets mixed up with some bad people after an all night Texas Hold 'Em spree. Prediction: Despite no victories over good teams, the Aggies are in position for another good year.

Week 12 - Bye

Week 13 - Colorado State Reason for hope: CSU is deep in the middle of a multi decade slump. Reason for fear: Towards the end of the season injuries, of which USU was fairly lucky at avoiding last year, can start to pile up. Prediction: Aggies get their 4th straight.

Week 14 - Wyoming Reason for hope: By this time in the season any Wells and company will be really comfortable. Reason for fear: Wyoming seems to alternate good and bad seasons under Christensen. They are due for a good year. Prediction: It's not enough to get in the MWC Championship game, but Aggies win their finale.

Final Record: 8-4

Games most likely to lose that they shouldn't: San Jose State, Wyoming, San Jose

Games most likely to win that they shouldn't: Utah

Plausible best case scenario 10 wins (Beating Utah, and Byu)

Plausible lowest win total: 5 wins (Losing to Air Force, Wyoming, and San Jose State)

Game least comfortable in predicting: Byu, Utah

Byu

Week 1 - @Virginia Reason for hope: Despite being a Big 5 conference member, Virginia isn't good. Also Bronco is really really good at winning first games of the season, whether his team is good or not, whether his opponent is good or not. Reason for fear: Long travel, New QB, New Offensive system, major replacements on defense, are all things that can cause problems in week 1. Prediction: Sloppy close first half, BYU pulls away in second half

Week 2 - Texas Reason for hope: BYU will point to their one point loss two years ago in Texas. This time the Longhorns are in Provo. Reason for fear: Even if in name only, Texas is one of Football Royalty, and that always brings a different atmosphere. BYU typically struggles in big games, and games against a top 15 Texas are big. Prediction: BYU hangs tight for most of the first half, before Texas turns it on.

Week 3 - Bye

Week 4 - Utah Reason for hope: It's the Holy War. They're at home. Riley Nelson and Jake Heaps aren't involved. Kyle Van Oy came back specifically to win this game. Bronco's pretty good with extra preparation, and Robert Anae was the last BYU offensive coordinator to notch a win. Reason for fear: It's the Holy War. Enough said. Prediction: Since it's the Holy War it'll probably be a memorable ending, but Van Oy retires without a victory in it.

Week 5 - Middle Tennessee Reason for hope: 3rd straight home game. Kinks should be worked out of new system transition, and they're just a better team. Reason for fear: Win or lose, the threat of a Holy War hangover is always around. Prediction: When your schedule is filled with these games, it's a joke, when it's a change of pace game on a tough schedule this is good scheduling. Byu pulls out the victory.

Week 6 - @Utah State Reason for hope: The defense absolutely stifled Utah State's offense last year in the back half of what was the absolute worse two game stretch of football game I've ever watched in my life. They absolutely stuffed everything the Aggies wanted to do. That game made Ziggy a first round pick. Reason for fear: That said, they were still outplayed last year for the third straight time in this series. Prediction: Prediction: A close hard fought loss, but just barely. But ask me again in five minutes and I'm sure it'll be different.

Week 7 - Georgia Tech Reason for hope: If the Utah State game made Ziggy a first rounder, it was the Georgia Tech game last year that made him a top 5 pick. (Since he didn't do anything really in most of the other games.) Plus Bronco does unbelievably well against the triple option. Reason for fear: Yellow Jackets have admitted they took BYU for

granted this year, and seem pissed. Prediction: The guy who gave this awesome speech gives a pregame speech to the Jackets and they get revenge for last season.

Week 8 - @Houston Reason for hope: With Kevin Sumlin gone, Houston was a dumpster fire last year, having to fire their offensive coordinator three weeks in. Houston was always a system team, and the system left with Sumlin. Reason for fear: Houston is still one of those teams that could shock you, and being sandwiched between Georgia Tech, and the Boise State/Wisconsin is begging for Admiral Ackbar involvement. Prediction: It's over by halftime, as BYU gets their best game of the year.

Week 9 - Boise State Reason for hope: If Utah State was the back half of the terrible two game stretch, Boise State was the front half. That said, BYU was a momentous coaches blunder away from winning the game. Reason for fear: Boise typically learns from its mistakes, and Southwick is more comfortable as the QB. Prediction: The Boise dominance of the Beehive State continues.

Week 10 - Bye

Week 11 - @Wisconsin Reason for hope: Despite a third consecutive Rose Bowl trip, Wisconsin was quite average last year. Plus this late into the season we'll start to see just how much, if at all, Gary Andersen is in over his head. Reason for fear: This is a brutal schedule and being late in the season attrition should be heavily in force for BYU, plus Andersen doesn't like BYU, and you know he won't want to lose to them. Prediction: Wisconsin's hogs push BYU around and Andersen takes the game.

Week 12 - Idaho State Reason for hope: Go back last year, and two years ago to my rants about Proposition games. Idaho State has 6 wins in the last 5 years combined. Reason for fear: Nothing to fear, except injuries. BYU could fail to show up and still win this game. Prediction: If BYU first stringers play a down in the second half, this game was a failure.

Week 13 - @Notre Dame Reason for hope: A Riley Nelson overthrow stood between victory and defeat last year for BYU. Everett Golson, last year's Irish QB is no longer there. Reason for fear: The Irish were National Championship runner ups last year, and figure to be in the argument again this season. Prediction: Another defensive battle like last year, Notre Dame once again pulls away in the 4th.

Week 14 - @Nevada Reason for hope: Nevada is in the midst of a transition season after Chris Ault retired this past offseason. By this point BYU may just be ready to get the season over. Prediction: BYU wins and ends the season on a high note.

Final Record: 6-6

Games most likely to lose that they shouldn't: Utah State, Houston

Games most likely to win that they shouldn't: Boise, Notre Dame

Plausible best case scenario: 10 wins (Beating Utah, Boise, Notre Dame, Georgia Tech)

Plausible lowest win total: 4 Wins (Losing to Nevada, Utah State)

Game least comfortable in predicting: Utah (Holy War, Georgia Tech)

Utah

Week 1 - Utah State Reason for hope: Last year, Utah State best team ever played their absolute best game, Utah's worst team in 10 years, played one of their worst games. Saw their starting QB go down with injury, and still only lost in overtime. Reason for fear: First game with so many unknowns could lead to problems. Prediction: A 4th quarter score pulls the Aggies within 10, but that's it.

Week 2 - Weber State Reason for hope: The Utes usually start the season with the FCS opponent, this year they're a tuneup game before Pac-12 play the following week. Reason for fear: Massive food poisoning strikes the entire team. Prediction: Utah uses the game to work out kinks discovered previous week in preparation for the next week.

Week 3 - Oregon State Reason for hope: For whatever reason, the Utes still trusted Devonte Christopher during the game last year, as he fumbled away the Utes chance for an upset last year. Utah and Oregon State matchup extremely well together. Reason for fear: Because they matchup so well, it also means there's not much separation between the two teams. Also Utes have started 0-4 in conference play last two seasons. Prediction: Brian Johnson isn't calling plays, Devonte Christopher isn't involved, so there's not goal line Reverse fumble to lose the game for Utah.

Week 4 - @BYU Reason for hope: It's the Holy War. Last year without their starting QB, their starting RB, and their starting SS, the Utes dominated before Holy War magic kicked in. Reason for fear: It's the Holy War. Utah plays hits the

road for the first time this season, but at least it's only Rice-Eccles South. It is extremely, extremely hard to win 3 games in a row in this series, let alone 4. Even with Riley Nelson last year, BYU almost won the game. Prediction: This time the game only has one ending, but it'll be a typical Holy War ending. Utah sends the rivalry on hiatus with a victory.

Week 5 - Bye

Week 6 - Ucla Reason for hope: Last year in his first start, Travis Wilson kept the Utes in a close game. This year he's more seasoned and he's at home. Reason for fear: Ucla has won the South the last two years, and this may be their best of the three teams. Prediction: Another woulda, coulda, shoulda game for the Utes is another loss.

Week 7 - Stanford Reason for hope: Stanford uses a power running game, which Utah's usually stout defensive line tends to keep in check, especially against a team like Stanford that doesn't go deep. Reason for fear: Also Stanford is really, really good, being defending Rose Bowl champions, and national title contenders, and all that rot. Prediction: Surprising the game is closer than anyone thinks it would be. That still means Utah lost by double digits.

Week 8 - @Arizona Reason for hope: Arizona is as much a question mark as Utah, and have been hit hard by the injury bug in the offseason. Reason for fear: Ka'Deem Carey demolished the Utah defense last year. Prediction: A third straight loss for the Utes leaves them reeling.

Week 9 - @Usc Reason for hope: The Trojans are coached by Lane Kiffin. The first two years in the Pac-12 the closest thing the Utes have to a quality win is almost beating Usc both years. Lane Kiffin might not be fired yet. Reason for fear: It's the Trojans, and the Coliseum which is powerful mystique for a young team full of recruits who would have loved to have been recruited by USC. Kiffin may be fired by this point of the season. Prediction: Once again Utah holds it close, but just can't quite overcome the Trojans.

Week 10 - Bye

Week 11 - Arizona State Reason for hope: Finally Utah gets one of the Arizona teams at home in November. Plus Arizona State should be in their annual swoon by now. Reason for fear: Sun Devils are one of the favorites to win the South, and Graham has them much more disciplined than before he got there. Prediction: Utah gets vengeance for their worst game last season, by surprisingly destroying the Sun Devils.

Week 12 - @Oregon Reason for hope: Chip Kelly has left the Ducks, and we don't really know if Helfrich can maintain the ship. Reason for fear: It's still the Ducks, it's probably still going to be the blur, and the Ducks will still probably be in the National Title Picture. Prediction: Despite a 7-3 end of first quarter lead, the Utes still lose, and Oregon still puts up points in bunches.

Week 13 - @Washington State Reason for hope: Other than reputation, we haven't seen anything that tells us Mike Leach is going to be able to implement his Air Raid offense in Pullman. Reason for fear: Two years ago with True Freshman Halladay playing, the Cougars took the Utes to overtime in Pullman. Prediction: Utah wins handily, Washington State is looking at another 3 or 4 win season, and yet, everyone still remains convinced that Leach can do it in Pullman because he was able to do it in Lubbock.

Week 14 - Colorado Reason for hope: Colorado is bad from the top down. A new coach isn't going to change it when the core is what's rotten. Reason for fear: Despite being so bad, Colorado is 1-1 the last two years against Utah, and Utah has struggled with them. Prediction: Utah wins by double digits. The Pac-12 continues to try and force this as a rivalry.

Final Record: 7-5

Game most likely to lose that they shouldn't: Washington State

Games most likely to win that they shouldn't: Ucla, Arizona

Plausible best case scenario: 8 wins (Winning one of the Ucla/Arizona Games)

Plausible lowest win total: 3 Wins (Losing to Utah State, Oregon State, Byu, and Arizona State)

Game least comfortable in predicting: Any game not against Weber State.

Podcasting This Season

Last year marked the first season where I did semi-occasional podcast to correspond with the Articles. While I got absolutely zero reader/listener participation from anyone I had fun doing it, so I will try to do some more podcasts this season. Though it will be a bit more difficult than last year, due to my wife working weekends.

That said if anyone has any comments or even topics for discussion, please by all means send them to me at redblueandpigskin@gmail.com or leave them in comments below. Even if it's not about something podcast related please leave comments, especially you Rhett, I always like discussing how wrong you are.

And Finally, Just Because I'm A Jerk

In the past 4 years Jake Heaps went from High School kid at an Iggy's press conference claiming National Championships for Byu, to Saint Jake Heaps the savior, to Weak minded, weak hearted blunder, to Riley Nelson's backup, to Kansas Jayhawk transfer, to player who got screwed by Bronco's Riley infatuation.

After sitting out the mandatory transfer year last season Jake Heaps is poised to be the starting QB for Charlie Weiss and the Kansas Jayhawks.

This provides me with endless amounts of joy, and a great no lose situation.

Either Jake Heaps continues to be the crappy unable to read a defense, make a check down Quarterback who flinches before the hit even comes, and stinks up the place in Kansas, in which case I get to enjoy seeing him continually brought down to earth.

Or, Charlie Weiss is able to get Heaps to realize his potential, and Heaps has an amazing season therefore causing BYU fans to regret the missed opportunity of the last two season even more, in which case I get to laugh at BYU.

To this end, this season will also have a new feature called the Jake Heaps Tracker.

Should be fun.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:26

Wednesday, April 17, 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin: The Lost Pigcast

A little while ago, Joey, Pete and myself got together to discuss a few things. Events then converged, and the podcast got extremely delayed. Well here it is now. Fortunately most of what was discussed wasn't too time relevant.

So what was discussed?

We spent some time breaking down the move of Dennis Erickson to be "Co-OC" of the Utes, including a little bit of time disparaging the Alma Mater of one of our own. Then we gave BYU's schedule equal treatment to what we gave the Utes schedule when it became official.

Finally we moved on to the NFL where we discussed the Blackout Haurghbowl. I unleashed my full QB rankings, and finally we spent a good chunk of time talking about our the coaching moves we were most interested in.

It's about a month late, but still worth a listen.

As always, feedback is always welcome at redblueandpigskin@gmail.com

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 07:13

Monday, February 11. 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin: College Coaching Carousel Pigcast

When we got together for a Super Bowl related Pigcast a couple weeks ago, Joey and I had to wait on that slow poke Pete to get home from his occupational related duties. What better way to kill time than a podcast to discuss the Coaching Carousel that's gone on the local college ranks.

It was done before the news of Dennis Erickson to Utah broke, but it was interesting to go through and discuss the inbred coaching ties that entangle the three universities.

Also we went through Utah's 2013 SEC-like (in the sense they don't leave the state for 8 weeks) schedule.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:44

Tuesday, January 29, 2013

Red, Blue And Pigskin: Super Bowl Sunday

In recent months we've celebrated Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas. We rang in a New Year. Heck we've even celebrated my birth. But now it's time to celebrate the only national holiday that matters: Super Bowl, and what better way to celebrate than with a Super Bowl Centric PigCast!

Joey, Pete and I take a look at this battle of brothers, and break down matchups for the Harbowl. We also examine the places of Ray Lewis, Joe Flacco, and return to the Colin Kaepernick conversation.

We also make our picks for the Super Bowl winners, as well as some of the dumb prop bets Vegas has available.

Agree or disagree with any of our picks or thoughts? Leave a comment or email redblueandpigskin@gmail.com and share your thoughts, or to just reminisce about the season that was as we prepare for the long, cold offseason. Afterall, after Sunday, there's no competitive football for more than 6 months.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 07:16

Wednesday, December 19, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin: The Pigcast

The end of the season, mainly needing a colossal blunder in Colorado kicking to Reggie Dunn to avoid a second loss in two seasons to the Buffs, was just too painful to write about, so I delayed it and included it in this podcast.

In this edition of the Red, Blue And Pigcast, we begin to say goodbye to College and ramp up our excitement for the people who get paid (above the table) to play this game we love.

But first, a little postmortem on the Utes season, including how we are going to miss Star Lotulelei absolutely dominating guys like Khaled Holmes, and a brief preview of the Poinsettia Bowl.

Next I am joined by both the host, and guest host of Trek West 5, (You guys can debate which is which), as Peter, Joey and I discuss the current state of the NFL, Harbaugh hurting concussions, a great two years of drafts, and why Jim Schwartz is a jerk.

Please give a listen, and interact via comments or email.

The tentative recording schedule between now and the beginning of next season will be as follows. We'll try for the beginning of playoffs, and also the week before the Super Bowl.

Sometime around April for a draft podcast, so we can discuss which local guys may get drafted, and which local guy may end up getting drafted way too high, based purely on speculation over his potential (Ziggy).

Maybe again as Spring Camps wrap up, and Then as Fall Camps/Training Camps begin and the new year is upon us.

Finally one last question. This just went down on Tuesday Night, so after the recording had been done, but Gary Andersen, after telling his team he was staying, has decided to take the Wisconsin head coaching job. This means that in the past week Utah State stole a recruit from BYU, Came oh so very close to stealing a recruit from the Utes, won their bowl game for the first time since 1993, and finished ranked for the first time in possibly ever, and then lost their coach.

Was it a good week, or a bad week for the Aggies?

Also want people's thought on the name of Red, Blue And Pigcast for the Podcast edition of Red, Blue And Pigskin. (Thanks Joey.)

P.S. In case you didn't know, I'm also finally in iTunes, so subscribe to the podcast there.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 06:51

Saturday, December 1, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Just a couple quick updates.

First this week's article will be up next week.

Secondly the podcast is finally available in iTunes, so please subscribe.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:50

Wednesday, November 21, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Well if you live in Logan you were probably celebrating at the airport around Midnight Sunday Morning when your team flew in. The rest of the state however was feeling pretty terrible. No Bowling For Utah

The Utes hope of getting to 6-6 and their 10th consecutive bowl game ended this past weekend, as the Utes were just unable to stop the Arizona Wildcats in a 34-24 loss.

The Wildcats were seemingly able to move the ball at will on a defense that has struggled all year long. Taking advantage of the terrible Utah line backers, the Wildcats used the Zone/Read option play to constantly keep the backers, and the D-Line guessing. When deciding to pass the Wildcats would stretch the line backers out, and take advantage of their lack of speed with crossing routes, drag routes, and out routes, designed to attack an extremely weak line backing corps.

Offensively the Utes made a show, as Wilson played well, and achieved the first 300 yard passing game for Utah since Jordan Wynn did it against San Diego State in the 11th game of 2010. Travis Wilson now has 25% of all 300 yard passing games in the post Brian Johnson era.

Despite all their struggles, the Utes were hanging in the game, but it was ultimately turned on a terrible decision to fake a punt around their own 40. Unable to convert the Utes gave the ball back to a hot Arizona offense, who went down the field and took the lead for good.

In the end, much like the season in its entirety, the Utes were simply outmatched. You could clearly see that the Utes haven't gotten enough Pac-12 level players throughout its roster. As was evident all season, the speed of the Utah players just isn't up to snuff. It puts Utah behind the 8 ball going into every game. Something that only gets worse as the Utes make mental mistakes, and show a lack of mental toughness.

Whit's Built Some Grace Up, But.....

Kyle Whittingham has built up a fair amount of goodwill at Utah with his performance. He's been the coach during the Utes most successful three year stretch, and his ability to keep things going after Urban left, is a big part of the Utes ascension to the Pac-12.

So I'm more than willing to give him a mulligan for his first extremely terrible season. Especially since he's warned fans, and their over bloated expectations, that the adjustment to the Pac-12 would be a process.

However, that doesn't mean that starting this next upcoming season, that his seat can't start to get a little uncomfortable, especially because he has hurt the process with some of the decisions he's made on his staff.

Hiring Brian Johnson to be the Offensive Coordinator was a small time move. Now I still think that Brian Johnson could turn into a good OC. There were changes in his play calling and his schemes throughout the season to point to him hopefully becoming more comfortable in the job. But the truth is, after a month long search, where Whit told us "You wouldn't believe the names of some of these applicants", you don't come out of that search and hire a 25 year old with zero OC experience, and only 4 years of coaching experience altogether. Somebody who still has players on the team he played with during his senior year.

There's rumors out there, that Whittingham is not a networking type of guy, that he doesn't like to expand beyond his circle of people he's already played or worked with. That he doesn't have the circle of contacts necessary, to go out and find somebody from outside of his group to bring in.

If you look at his hiring practices this seems plausible, as every member of the staff is someone he's played with, or coached with previously.

It also makes you wonder if Whittingham likes to surround himself with "Yes" men.

Whittingham has absolutely butchered the Offensive Coordinator position since Andy Ludwig left after the 2008 season.

After Ludwig's departure, there wasn't even a "nationwide" search for his replacement. Whit made it known right away he'd be promoting from within. Unable to make a choice he selected Dave Schramm and Andy Roderick to be Co-Coordinators. When Roderick left for Washington a couple weeks later, and then came back to the Utes, that left Schramm as the OC. 8 weeks into the season, Whittingham took away the playcalling duties and gave them to Roderick.

Roderick held onto those duties through the 2010 season, with middling success. The offense typically was stale. In 2011 when Whittingham had the chance to hire longtime legend Norm Chow he jumped at it. A Change to a more pro-style offense, combined with injuries and lack of depth at the QB position led to a struggling offense in 2011. When Chow took the Head Coaching job in Hawaii we were then left with our "nationwide" search that resulted in Brian Johnson getting the job.

Which has resulted is an offense without any identity, and a Coordinator trying to learn on the job.

The Utes have moved to the Pac-12, and want to stop being small time, than Whittingham is going to have to move out of the small time as well. That includes hiring people who aren't his friends. It especially means not hiring Lawyers, and part time Sideline reporters with zero coaching experience to coach the DB's, which only happens to be the most important part of your defense.

Moving Forward

It probably goes without saying, but next season will be Whittingham's most important season. The Utes finally look to have some QB depth, after Whittingham butchered the positions depth is first few years. The Utes also have upgraded the size on the OL. The last two recruiting classes have been the best in Utah history, and this year's is looking to be a good one as well.

Whit gets his mulligan for 2012, but the process needs to start showing some improvement next year. Now I'm not saying that expectations should be back to an 8 or 9 win season next year, but there are a few things that Utah fans can expect out of this team.

First let's point out that the Utes have only won two regular season games in the last two seasons against Division 1 teams with winning records. Both of those wins came against BYU. They did however beat Georgia Tech last year in a bowl game. The Utes need to start competing better and winning against the better teams in the Pac-12.

After winning 4 games on the road last year, the Utes are currently winless on the road this season, with one more chance on Friday. Much like in the competition against the better Pac-12 teams, the Utes need to get back to being competitive on the road.

The Utes have got to start being more mentally sound. The Utes have been riddled with personal fouls, and stupid mental errors, like illegal substitutions. This team has got to be more disciplined, and stop shooting themselves in the foot.

Finally, there needs to be some offensive improvement and growth. For two seasons the Utes have been in the bottom 20 in the nation in most offensive categories. This is what happens when you butcher the OC, and QB roles on a team for so long. Whit made his bed with Johnson, and now needs to do everything he can to help him succeed. If Johnson doesn't work out, Whittingham doesn't get the benefit of replacing him. His failure to find a solution at the OC position has led to this stagnant offense, and it now goes on him, if Johnson fails.

Now I'm not saying that Whittingham has next year or else. I'm just saying he needs to realize that his seat shouldn't be ice cold. I know it may seem weird, but one only needs to look at Cal and Jeff Tedford.

Tedford came in and not only made Cal relevant but led them to the heights of their success. But a few seasons of being unable to replace assistants, and stagnant football started a decline that has resulted in 2 missed bowl games the last three seasons, and a team that constantly seems like it can't compete with the upper half of the Pac-12. It ultimately lost Tedford his job this week.

I don't want to see Whittingham, or the Utes go down that same road, but it's a slippery slope the Utes sit on between trying to be competitive, and ending up a Pac-12 doormat. Right Colorado?

It Starts Friday, Black Friday

Because of the struggles of this season, and where the Utes are, this week's game against Colorado may be Whit's most important game in a few years.

It's important to see how this team, and these coaches are going to respond now that the season is lost. Are they going to come out angry, show that they have fight, and destroy a team that is truly and historically awful. Get revenge for the upset last year.

Or are they going to lay down, and get beat a second time.

A win, a dominant win, will show that this team has some fight left, and can build some forward momentum for 2013. It's always better to end a season on a win, whether that win makes your record 13-0, or 1-11.

But if they come out and struggle, and lose, it would not be a good sign for the Utes. It would mean they have lost to the worst team in the Pac-12 for two consecutive seasons. It would mean that they came out and essentially gave up. It would point to a mentally weak team. Something that can be attributed to poor coaching.

A win doesn't mean a successful 2013, but a loss could point to Black Friday becoming a Black 2013 season.

Okay Fine BYU, I'll Talk About You

Well one way to get me to talk about BYU during their final stretch of bad games is to go out there and lose. Apparently the Cougars were just tired enough of me ignoring them to do just that.

BYU went into their game against San Jose State, and played like a team that only had to show up in order to win. San Jose State meanwhile came out with a chip on their shoulder and took it to the Cougars early. The Spartans took advantage of what has always been the weak link in the BYU defense, and torched the Cougar secondary on their way to Touchdowns on each of their first three drives.

The Cougar offense meanwhile, scored on it's first drive, but then was unable to get anything going for it's next 10 drives. Riley Nelson was his typical terrible self, and was obviously hurting. Yet the coaching staff continued to send him out there despite an offense that couldn't do anything.

The only reason the Cougars were close at the end is because for some unknown reason the Spartans decided to take their foot off the gas pedal, and rather than continuing to play to win like they did early, instead seemed content to try and protect the lead. Something that was enough at the end.

San Jose is now 9-2, but they've built their record on the back of WAC Teams. They lost to Utah State 49-27, in a game where they were sacked 12 times. Improved or not, this is a team that BYU should have been able to dominate. Instead they came into the game overlooking the Spartans and got stopped.

A Truly Shocking Loss

The reason this loss is shocking, is that for all his faults as a head coach, the one thing BYU typically has not done during the Bronco era is lose to the teams they were clearly better than. Bronco's Cougars have struggled with teams on their level, or better, but you could always count on BYU to take care of their business and not have a let down against truly inferior teams.

Not so much anymore.

Next up is New Mexico State, who is truly awful. BYU Should be able to handle them easily, but if the Cougars enter that game with the same level of intensity (none), and amount of preparation (none) that they had for the Spartans, than it'll be a 10 point win instead of what should be a comfortable blowout win.

Poinsettia Roundup

Nothing really changed this week and San Diego State, and Fresno were both on bye, and Boise State beat up on Hawaii.

Boise State (8-2, 5-1) - Despite not being as good as in the past, they're still the crown jewel of the the MWC. They took care of business against Hawaii, and should do the same this week versus Colorado State. After that the only thing standing between them and their third straight Vegas Bowl appearance is Nevada.

San Diego State (8-3, 6-1) - Survived the Air Force option and must now travel to Laramie. A win wraps up a share of the MWC crown, but will still leave them as the likely favorite for the home game Poinsettia Bowl.

Fresno State (8-3, 6-1) - The surprise team of the bunch, and also the most likely to be dropped from the top 2. Like San Diego they can claim a share of the MWC crown with a victory this week over Air Force, but most likely they'll end up being the third selection of the three.

Utah State - WAC Champions

After two years of false starts, and close misses, the Aggies finally were able to close out an important big time game as they beat 20th Ranked Louisiana Tech 48-41 in Overtime. With the win the Aggies are now in the front runners seat for the final ever WAC Championship, and only need to beat Idaho this week.

Not only that but the Aggies are the 25th ranked team in the AP poll. Whoever thought we'd see the day where Utah would have a losing season, BYU struggles to stay above .500, while the Aggies could have a 10 win season and be ranked.

In Case You Missed It

In case you missed it the third Red, Blue And Pigskin podcast is now available. We're also currently under review with iTunes so hopefully we'll be added there soon.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 07:41

Monday, November 19, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin: The Jinxcast

Sorry this was so delayed, but please enjoy the third quarter podcast here.

The last time we did a podcast, we finished a mere hour before the Utah State game in which Utes lost, Wynn was forced to retire, and Wolfman and Eric Rowe both ended up missing some time.

Now I'm thinking that wasn't a fluke, as once again we do a podcast and multiple jinxes come to be. Utes get embarrassed in Seattle, and then later lose out on Bowl Eligibility, BYU ended up laying an egg against SJSU, we help the '72 Dolphins pop the champagne cork, Joey jinxed the crap out of Big Ben and the Steelers, twice, and I'm not sure if we jinxed the Rams or Jinxed the Niners. Was that a double jinx, or do they cancel each other out?

When not jinxing plenty of talk about the first three quarters of the season and the tough road to hoe.

This edition though has some extra reading that goes along with it, that I highly recommend:

New York Times writeup of Jordan Wynn

Why the NFL needs Chip Kelly, or Why you should root for an Oregon National Championship.

I look forward to hearing from the listeners.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 11:21

Tuesday, November 13, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Well we got the answer if the Utes had managed to turn their season around. It wasn't a pretty answer, as the Utes take a giant step back after a couple of forward steps. Now they are on the edge of the cliff with a mean looking cat nipping at their heels.

Meanwhile the battle to face BYU in the Poinsettia Bowl is down to three, and things are going to be messy. Like A Baby Learning To Walk

Have you ever watched a toddler as they are first starting to walk. They take those first couple steps and get so proud of themselves. But they have no balance so soon they fall on the rears. It goes like this for a while. They then get some balance, and are able to take more steps at a time without falling. Inevitably they end up going too fast, or too far, and then trip over their own feet.

This past weekend, as I watched the Utes struggle in all phases of the game. I watched a Utah defense so afraid of getting burned by a mobile Quarterback that they ended up missing basic assignments. I watched a freshman quarterback play exactly like a freshman quarterback, by which I mean terribly. I watched a young play caller who is learning on the job try to adjust to his struggling freshman quarterback. As I watched all that and more, as the Utes last chance at a meaningful road win this season, and possibly their entire season in general go down in flames, I couldn't help but think of a toddler learning to walk.

The Utes are that toddler. They are still struggling learning how to walk in this new Pac-12 world where they are no longer the big dogs. Whittingham has always referred to this adjustment as a process, and it's clear this year, that it's a process that will take time. Much like learning to walk is a process with it's fair share of falls along the way. This week the Utes tripped on their own feet, and fell face first into the ground. The question will they get back up, or will they be content to stay on the ground and cry.

Fear Made The Problem Worse

Defensively the Utes were just flat out unprepared. It seemed like the Utes were so worried about letting Washington QB Keith Price beat them with his mobility, that they overcompensated. This caused the Utes to miss basic assignments. It allowed Washington to open up holes in the running game.

Trying not to let Price beat them, our Linebackers and Secondary were constantly keeping an eye on the back field. As they watched the back field they missed the receivers running behind them.

As the game wore on, and the Utah defense began to scramble since they were being beaten all night, the thing they feared most began to happen, as in the second half, Price started to scramble, keep plays alive, and finally kill the Utes.

Play Like A Freshman

Just because Travis Wilson hadn't had that disastrous, terrible, horrible, true freshman game, didn't mean that he wasn't going to have it. Unfortunately for Utah he chose a terrible time to have it. With their backs up against the wall, and desperately needing Travis Wilson to continue making strides, Wilson went out there and royally sucked it up.

The Utah offense gained a total of 55 yards passing the entire game. Wilson never looked comfortable. When he did throw it, he clearly wasn't making correct reads as he was more likely to throw into triple coverage than he was to make the correct read.

This was Wilson's worst game as starter. This was also a game that could be expected. It was only a matter of time before the moment and pressure got the best of Wilson. It's why when the Utes decided to start Wilson for the rest of the season, they were effectively punting on this year, in the hopes that Wilson will be better prepared in future seasons.

To make the loss even more difficult, John White was running strong, and running well, finishing with 146 yards. White was running well enough to take pressure off of Wilson. Wilson was just unable to hold up his end of the bargain.

Trapped, Staring At A Ferocious Wildcat

And now the Utes are backed up to the edge of this season's cliff. Coming at them is the Arizona Wildcats. The Wildcats are in the top 20 in most statistical offensive categories. Last weekend Arizona running back Ka'Deem Carey rushed for a Pac-12 record 366 yards in a single game.

In his last four complete games, Arizona QB Matt Scott is averaging 380 yards through the air and 3 Touchdowns. Against Stanford last month Scott threw for 491 yards.

This offense is potent.

One of the few saving graces for the Utes this weekend is that it will be a night game, and should be around 35 degrees at kickoff, which will be a difficult adjustment for the Wildcats who are used to 80 degrees this time of year.

But when you are having to rely on external elements such as weather, it only shows how desperate a team really is.

Senior Send Off

Being the last home game of the season means it's also senior day. This will be the last chance for fans to see the seniors on this team.

It means it's our last chance to see possible top 5 pick Star Lotulelei dominate the interior line like no one we've been able to see. It means it's our last chance to see the single season rushing leader John White run through holes. It's our last chance to revel in the special teams magic of Reggie Dunn

But for the most part, it's also our chance to say goodbye to a group of seniors who have mostly disappointed this season. Highlighted by the failures and lack of effort of DeVonte Christopher. Coming into the season, Christopher was in a position to make some noise with scouts if he had a good season. Instead Christopher spent the majority of the season giving as little effort as he can culminating with his game costing fumble against Oregon State. Christopher was then benched for the Cal game, and didn't see the field against Washington State till Utah was playing their scrubs.

The defensive senior disappointment has to go to Dave Kruger. I don't know how you can start alongside a dominant tackle such as Star Lotulelei and still not manage to get pressure on the QB, or be able to make plays whatsoever, however Dave has shown that it is possible. Thought to be the season where he finally lived up to his pedigree Kruger was part of a defensive line who wasted the senior season of a dominant Defensive Tackle. Unlike his brother Joe, Dave doesn't have an injury to blame it on.

Now all the seniors haven't been huge disappointments. Some have done what was expected like Ryan Lacy, Reggie Topps and Tevita Stevens. But on the whole this is a disappointing senior class that hasn't shown a lot of mental strength or heart as the season went on, and the struggles came.

Just ask Coleman Petersen.

Just So I Can Say I Talked About It

This weekend BYU managed to safely make it to the stadium for their game against Idaho. It was at that point the game was over.

This weekend the Cougars travel to play San Jose State. While the Spartans are improved over the past couple weeks, and will actually be a tougher competition than the Vandals, this game should still easily be in hand by the end of the first quarter.

The Competition Was Off The Field

While the Cougars haven't had to face any actual on the field competition since their victory over Georgia Tech, it appears that three players decided to look for conflict off of it.

News and video broke this past week about a brawl at a Provo Rancheritos involving three BYU players. Redshirt Sophomore Zac Stout, and Senior DB Joe Sampson have withdrawn from school over the incident (In one of the videos, Stout is the guy standing up with the backwards cap that threw the first punch, while Sampson can be seen hitting the guy who had wrestled Stout to the ground in the second video) and Jordan Johnson was suspended for the

Idaho game.

Stouts's departure from the school continues the down fall of the "Iggy Boys" and the vaunted 2009 recruiting class in general. Stout was one of the other two who joined Jake Heaps for their press conference at Iggys in June of 2009 to announce their verbal commitment to BYU. Heaps, of course, was the #1 QB prospect in the nations, while Apo had previously committed to Texas, and Stout was one of the higher sought after Middle LB recruits that season, though he had mostly disappointed so far at BYU.

Two of the three are no longer with BYU, and Ross Apo has seen his involvement in the offense dwindle as Riley Nelson, and even when Taysom Hill was in, favors Cody Hoffman.

Even outside of the Iggy Boys, the 2009 class has not lived up to success. While you could argue that Van Oy has been the gem of the 2009 class (who started playing in 2010), Van Oy was originally recruited the previous year, but a DUI caused his actual enrollment to be delayed.

The other high powered offensive recruit from 2009 was Joshua "Juice" Quezada, but he too has left the team due to lack of playing time, despite rushing for 505 yards on 99 carries as a true freshman.

Now I don't pretend to know or care what was said to start the fight, and while Stout threw a nice sucker punch that turned it from words to a physical altercation, at least they can still hold their heads high that they aren't creep who threw punches at the girl.

As we get towards the end of the actual on the field competition for this season, and recruiting begins to get into full swing, this incident, and the failures of that high powered 2009 BYU class serve as a reminder not to get to wrapped up in stars and ratings, because there really is no way to accurately guess how good a player, or collection of players will end up.

Poinsettia Roundup Down To Three

With two regular season weeks to go we are down to three competitors to play the Cougars in the Poinsettia Bowl. Since the three have already played each other (each winning one), it's likely that we're going to end the season with a three way tie at the top, with Nevada vs. Boise being the only likely chance at a monkey wrench being thrown into works.

Boise State (8-2, 5-1) - Despite not being as good as in the past, they're still the crown jewel of the the MWC. They took care of business against Hawaii, and should do the same this week versus Colorado State. After that the only thing standing between them and their third straight Vegas Bowl appearance is Nevada.

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Dropouts: Air Force, Nevada - Losses by both have effectively removed them from the chase for #2, but they'll each get a chance to play spoiler to one of the top three over the next two weeks.

Last Chance At Relevance

Ever since Gary Anderson left to coach the Aggies, he's seemingly had them on the verge of shedding their little brother label and actually becoming relevant. Close calls against national powers (Oklahoma, Auburn, Wisconsin) have made them semi-newsworthy, but they've never been able to get over the hump.

Despite in state victories over BYU (2010), and Utah (2012) the past few years, the Aggies have managed to undo goodwill that was seemingly theirs for the taking with collapses (2011), and flat out laying an egg (2012) against BYU, forcing them to once again accept their little brother fate.

This weekend the Aggies will get their last chance this season to prove they deserve to be relevant as they faced 20th ranked Louisiana Tech. Winner of this game will forever be known as the final WAC Champion. This is exactly the kind of game that the Aggies have had trouble closing out during Anderson's tenure. A win puts the Aggies on track for a

double digit win total, and may put Gary Anderson's as a top name for the next level (Top end Non-AQ, Low End AQ) of head coaching jobs, but a loss will once again condemn the Aggies to their little brother irrelevance, and may actually hurt Anderson's chances of moving up in the next year or two, as it will show a history of not making it over the hump.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:02

Tuesday, November 6, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

We weren't ever going to learn a whole lot positive about the Utes with this week's game against Washington State. But we could have learned a whole lot of negative, had the Utes not gone out and taken care of business. Instead a 49-06 blowout for the Utes, has them continuing with upward momentum as they prepare for a two game stretch that will save or sink their remaining season.

Of course, in typical Utah fashion this season, they manage to shutout their opponent for 60 minutes and still not end up with a shutout.

BYU continues preparation for the Poinsettia Bowl, but there was some intrigue in the competition to be their opponent. Complete Game

Admittedly, much of what is said about this week's game by Utah must be prefaced with noting that Washington State is a terrible, horrible team, that not only lost to Colorado, but seems to have given up this season. Utah DE Joe Kruger even said, you could hear the linemen arguing with their coach. So yes, Washington State is terrible, and no they aren't a good barometer for the quality of another team.

But the good news is Utah didn't just squeak by them. Utah flat out destroyed them. In so doing the Utes put together their best game of the last two years.

The Utes were rolling in all three phases of the game. Utah scored on it's 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and final drive of the first half, and after a mid 3rd quarter score, they subbed out to the 2nd string offense. Jon Hays received a very warm response when he checked into the game and led the Cougars to 3 points in his two drives. Finally the third string offense came in, led by redshirt freshman QB Adam Schulz and finished the scoring with a TD.

Defensively the Cougars' passing offense, which averages 324.2 yards per game, was locked down to merely 259 yards, and a pathetic Cougar rushing game (29.1 yards per game) was held to -4 rushing yards (In two games in the state of Utah, Washington State accumulated a total of -9 yards rushing), aided by 6 sacks by the Utes defense. Overall the the defense, all three strings, held a shutout for over 60:00, as the lone Washington State Touchdown came on the last snap of the game, and after the clock showed all zeros.

On the special teams side of the ball, Reggie Dunn did it again. In his only attempt, Reggie Dunn came out to receive the 2nd half kickoff. After getting the North End Zone behind him, and chanting, Dunn then took the kickoff, found the lane, and was off for his 3rd 100 yard kickoff TD in two games, and 4th of his career.

Things were going so well, that Coach Whittingham actually let Coleman Petersen attempt to chip shot field goals (a 20, and a 22 yarder), even more surprising, Petersen made both.

View From The Red Zone

I was surprised to see the offensive linemen for the Cougars absolutely drenched in sweat during only their second drive of the game. It was an unseasonably warm day, yes, but it was still just in the 70's. The Cougars also wore grey jerseys, and while I don't know where that falls on the absorbs heat versus reflects heat on the color scale, the Cougars just seemed extremely physically unprepared.

I will however give the Cougars credit for having the most interactive opposing Mascot of the season, as Butch the Cougar (Much cooler than that Cosmo guy), would enter the North End Zone often to interact with fans via pictures or just good nature hazing.

At least the mascot can find something fun about Washington State's miserable season.

Measuring Stick

As the Utes stumbled through the extremely difficult, front loaded portion of what has turned out to be the 9th ranked strength of schedule, I kept pointing out that the Utes weren't as bad as they seemed, and had been making strides

each week, and were competitive each week, except against Arizona State.

On the same token, the Utes aren't as good as they've seemed the last two weeks taking on a bad Cal team, and a dreadful Washington State team.

We can begin to find out more about this team with this week's matchup in Seattle against the Washington Huskies. Much like the Utes and the Cal Bears, the Huskies have struggled with consistency all season. That said, they give the Utes one of their only two remaining tests.

The Utes have also struggled on the road the past two seasons, being currently winless during 2012 away from Rice-Eccles stadium. While the Huskies have been better at home this season than they have been on the road, although they finally notched their own first road victory this past Friday against Cal.

The Price Of Victory

This game will come down to how well the Utes can handle mobile QB Keith Price, and on the flip side how well the Huskies can protect him. The Huskies have an absolutely dreadful Offensive Line, considered by many to be the worst in the conference, and it's shown as they lead the conference in sacks allowed. At first glance this should play greatly into Utah's strength.

However, the Utes have struggled this year with mobile, dual-threat QB's. In games against Utah State (Chucky Keeton), Arizona State (Taylor Kelly), and UCLA (Brett Hundley), the Utes have struggled to wrap up mobile quarterbacks. Unable to finish against the mobile quarterback, they've been able to slip out of tackles and sacks, keep plays alive, and eventually take advantage of Utah's diminished linebacker corps.

It will be important for Utah to not just get pressure with their front four, but also to stay disciplined as they do it. Especially for the Linebackers. They must fight the tendency to bite on the threat of the QB run. They will need to stay home, and not vacate the middle of the field, which will then allow Price to scramble for big gains.

If the Utes are able to not only pressure, but contain Price, their offensive progression from the past five weeks should continue. With John White finally healthy, and the Utes leading the conference in time of possession at 33 minutes per game, Utah should be able to keep pressure off of Wilson, and take advantage of what is still a lesser Husky defense.

With Utah needing to win against either Washington or Arizona, you can bet the Utes don't want to fall to the Huskies, and put so much pressure on the Arizona game. They would much prefer to leave some room for error.

This About Sums It Up

Speaking of Cougars and blowouts, BYU is a 37 point favorite for this week's Senior Day game against Idaho. This marks the second largest spread involving 1-A teams from Utah, trailing only Utah -42 vs Northern Colorado in week one.

Personally I'd say lay the points, that seems like too small a line. Yes that's how bad this game is.

Also I personally would set the Over/Under for Defensive/Special Teams TD's at 3.5. I'd take the over of that as I think there will probably be about 4.

Senior Moment

With this week's game being the only home game of the last 6 weeks of the College Football regular season for BYU, it also doubles as Senior Day for the Cougars. There are some notable seniors who will be playing leaving at the end of the year.

While there's been a lot of focus on Riley, I want to focus more on the other side of the ball, and look at who is leaving from this great defense. Graduating notable defensive seniors:

Ezekial Ansah, Romney Fuga, Preston Hadley, Austen Jorgenson, Uona Kaveinga, Brandon Ogletree, Eathyn Manumalenua (Although he's trying to get a medical redshirt), Joe Sampson, Russel Tialavea.

No wonder that defense was so good, just look at the experience on it.

So does looking at the sheer number of losses on defense, make the missed opportunities of this season more painful? What about when you add in the Kyle Van Oy factor. Van Oy will get some interest by scouts. You've got to think it'll be tempting for him to leave. Especially when he starts to weigh it versus coming back. BYU players haven't had a lot of luck coming back for their senior year, in recent history. Also you have to think that coming back to a defense that's losing so much experience, might make it more difficult next season, and have an adverse effect on his stock.

From a skill standpoint Van Oy could use the extra year, but from a draft stock standpoint, I'm not sure he can risk coming back.

Poinsettia Watch

An interesting week in the competition to face BYU in the Poinsettia Bowl, as the San Diego State Aztecs became just the third team to win in Boise in Chris Petersen's tenure. In so doing, they eliminated any slim BCS hopes for the Broncos, but also put the Conference championship in question.

Just a reminder that the Vegas Bowl gets top pick of MWC teams. If Boise is tied with any number of other teams at the top of the standings, the Broncos will be the selection, since they are the marquee team of the conference. However, if the Broncos are sitting behind one or multiple teams in the standings, things will get interesting.

Boise State (7-2, 4-1) - Beaten on the smurf turf by the Aztecs, and looking down at a frisky Nevada team to finish the season. Hawaii and CSU won't provide any difficulties. A win versus Nevada and it's Vegas Baby, but another loss and things can get interesting.

San Diego State (7-3, 5-1) - An upset of the Broncos on the smurf turf should pave the way for the Aztecs to claim a share of the conference crown. Air Force is always frisky, but the only thing stopping the Aztecs now would be the Aztecs. Not likely to get picked by Vegas if tied with Boise, but you gotta believe they'd be the favorite for the Poinsettia Bowl.

Fresno State (7-3, 5-1) - Trounced the Rainbow Warriors and now face Nevada. With Air Force after that, and having beaten San Diego already this season, Bulldogs are the surprise in the race for the crown. If Poinsettia doesn't want the home town Aztecs (who struggle to sale out Qualcomm normally), maybe the other California team in the race might be intriguing.

Nevada (6-3, 3-2) - Back to back losses to SDSU and Air Force have derailed a great season. The Wolf Pack aren't really much of a threat for the Conference championship, but could be the monkey wrench with a final week victory over Boise.

Air Force (5-4, 4-1) - On the list because they only have one in conference loss, but with 4 losses overall, including an embarrassing loss to Army this past week, Air Force will be removed from this list following their next loss, which should be this week against San Diego. Still can't imagine they'd be chosen ahead of any of the other 4 teams for any bowl.

I still think it's likely a SDSU matchup, which is probably the preferred matchup, since the Boise game would be a rematch. In all honesty, despite listing 5 possible candidates, it's a two horse race between Boise and SDSU. If Nevada wins on December 1st, it's Boise, otherwise it's the Aztecs.

So BYU fans which matchup would you prefer and why?

Podcast Recording

The third episode of the Red, Blue And Pigskin podcast will be recorded this Friday. This was supposed to be the mid season report, but real life intervened, and it's now the 4th Quarter report.

Please send in any comments, questions, insults, criticism, or other reader participation objects. If you don't, than you'll just make me feel lonely.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:46

Monday, October 29, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

For the first time all season, both Utah and BYU won on the same Saturday, it was only the second time all season, they had both manage to win during the same week (The previous being the opening Thursday), and the first time all season they both beat a division 1-A opponent during the same week.

After combining for an 0-4 record the previous two weeks, Utah and BYU both decided to open up a couple of cans on their opponents as they both notched wins and accumulated a combined score of 90-44. Which of course makes everyone wonder how these two teams managed 90 points?

For one of the teams, the win was a possible season saver, and could mark a turnaround. For the other, it's a season clincher, as their season has now been determined. Since BYU had the early game on Saturday we'll start with them. Rebound By Beatdown

We already know how the winner of last year's Sun Bowl has performed so far this year, as the Utes have struggled. This weekend the Cougars traveled to Atlanta to face last year's Sun Bowl loser, Georgia Tech, who has also struggled mightily this season. The Cougars were looking for their defense to rebound after two bad weeks, and specifically after being gashed on the ground last week.

The Cougars did more than rebound defensively. They completely dominated the Yellow Jackets. Want some context for how well the Cougars rebounded think about this for a minute.

The Yellow Jackets were second in the nation in rushing, averaging 338 yards per game coming into this game. After the game, their average yards per game dropped by 27 yards. The Cougars held the Yellow Jackets entire offensive output (157 yards) to less than half of their average rushing yards per game.

The Jamaal Williams Show

Offensively it was the Jamaal Williams show. Williams, the 17 year old true freshman running back, who is seeing more time thanks to Alisa's broken arm, is making the case that when Alisa comes back he should be the 2nd back. Jamaal Williams scored 4 touchdowns, three rushing, and one via a line of scrimmage shovel pass.

Williams has been breaking onto the scene the last few weeks, and has been the saving grace for this offense. Williams is an extremely dangerous, cut back runner. He's been extremely adept in the screen/shovel game, managing to get himself lost among the big boys, and then breaking the pass for a huge gain.

I fully buy into the philosophy that you shouldn't lose your job to injury. However, all that being said, when Michael Alisa comes back, I'm not quite sure he should become the primary back. This is partially due to the fact, that Alisa's style doesn't fit with Doman's offensive philosophy and play calling style, Williams does. As the thunder, to Williams' lightning though, Alisa could make a great complimentary in a two running back backfield. Especially with Taysom Hill as your likely starter in 2013, meaning even more option based football.

Regular Season Over

With the game against Georgia Tech now in the books, we can now begin analyzing the completion of BYU's regular season. They will finish the regular season with an at times respectable, and at times deceiving 8-4 record, and will face the Mountain West's 2nd choice in the Poinsettia bowl.

Now I know that there are still some technicalities ahead, such as the final three games being played, but that's all it is, a technicality. Not even the bad (a.k.a. normal) Riley Nelson could cause the Cougars to lose any of the next three games. And before people start mentioning that on any given Saturday any team can win, just look at Appalachian State going to the Big House a few years ago, I would like to remind you that Appalachian State would have beaten all of BYU's last three opponents, and only one of those games (San Jose State) would be close.

So rather than waste time talking about games that nobody really cares about, because they'll be over quickly, the rest of the regular season will be reviewing the season for BYU, and previewing their possible Bowl opponents.

With BYU's bye this upcoming week, I'd like to propose the following question? BYU fans, how do you feel about being 8-4, and the Poinsettia Bowl? I know there was a lot of talk about matching last season's 10 win feat. Is this a disappointment? How bothered are you by not beating Utah, and by not winning any of the big games on your schedule this year? For the second straight year it's looking like Utah State is going to be your best victory of the season, although I would argue the most impressive victory was this past weekend because of the way they shut down Georgia Tech. How bothered are you about wasting such a historically good defense this year, with such an anemic offense, mainly because your head coach had a weird fascination with a full back in the quarter back position? Is it okay to be perpetually one or two plays away?

Poinsettia Roundup

Here is a rundown of the most likely opponents for BYU in the Poinsettia Bowl. The Poinsettia Bowl opponent will be the 2nd choice of teams from the Mountain West Conference, unless it's champion is chosen to play a BCS game. A possibility this year, thanks to the Big Ten's utter failure at the game of football, and the rule that any non-AQ champion ranked in the top 16, and ranked higher than an AQ champion will be granted a BCS bowl. Currently Boise is ranked 19th, and the only B1G team ranked in the BCS standings is Nebraska at 20.

Boise State - Currently 7-1, and 4-0 in conference. Not nearly the team they've been in past years, and have struggled at times this season. They may be undefeated in conference play so far, but the game against San Diego State this week, and Nevada to close out the season are the most likely losses on their schedule. Currently the favorite to win the conference championship.

San Diego State - Currently 6-3, and 4-1 in conference. Aztecs have been a bit up and down this season, with an early year loss to San Jose State, but their overtime victory over Nevada put them in the driver's seat for the Poinsettia Bowl, and possibly the conference championship. They play Boise this week. If the 2nd choice comes down to SDSU and a bunch of other teams, the home field advantage will play in the Aztec favor.

Nevada - Currently 6-3, and 3-2 in conference. The Wolf Pack looked like they were headed to a season ending showdown with Boise for the conference crown before getting derailed with back to back losses the past two weeks. They have a bye coming up this week before facing off against Fresno and Boise, with New Mexico sandwiched in between.

Air Force - Currently 5-3, and 4-1 in conference. The always dangerous triple option of the Falcons just took down the Wolf Pack. They have an always emotional intra-military academy game this weekend against Army, and still have games against SDSU and Fresno on the schedule.

Fresno State - Currently 6-3, and 4-1 in conference. Probably the biggest surprise in the MWC this season after a dismal 2011, but the Bulldogs are the surprise fly in the conference ointment. They've already lost to Boise this season, but have a victory against San Diego State. Would probably also benefit from a little home state love if in the mix when the Poinsettia Bowl makes their invite.

Right now I'd say SDSU followed by Fresno and Nevada are your likely choices for an opponent. Boise would probably have to lose twice to not be Vegas' selection with the top pick. Besides, as dreadfully terrible as that first game between BYU and Boise was, I'm not sure we'd want a rematch of it. Boise State is also probably the only one of these opponents that could beat BYU.

That's Better

For the last three games, the Utes have struggled from the same issue. Progress made from previous weeks, able to hand around, but in the end the opponent was just too good, and the Utes would make enough mental mistakes to prevent them from pulling an upset. Utah's early season struggles weren't helped by the fact that they played an extremely front loaded schedule, and the Utes went into the Cal game behind the eight ball, with their season at a breaking point. How the Utes responded here, would say a lot about whether this team could turn it around.

Utah wasn't the only team this weekend watching their season circle the drain, and looking at a decision of whether to fight, or give up. The Cal bears were also struggling, and many are thinking that Jeff Tedford's seat is extremely warm.

Which team would fight, and possibly save their season, and which team would just give up quickly became clear. The Utes, for the first time all season, put together a good game in all three phases. We'll get to special teams later, a group that really earned the special designation this week. Offensively, the Utes may not have put up massive stats

accumulating only 344 yards. But where there was a difference was in the tactics. The running game got chugging along, racking up 188 yards. The Wolfman cracked the 100 yard barrier and plugged in two TD's, while Kelvin York was averaging almost 5 yards per carry before leaving with a high ankle sprain.

Brian Johnson even corrected past mistakes. He relied less on the screens, and QB Draws, and instead called plenty of run plays, including down inside the opponents 5 yard line. The running game even opened up room for QB Travis Wilson to scramble.

Passing wise, Wilson was efficient. You can tell that Wilson is starting to feel more comfortable. He's actually getting to the point, where you can see him start to read defenses. You can also tell that the game is still moving a little too fast, as he's far too willing to dump it off short, when something a bit deeper is open, but this is his third game.

All that said, Wilson definitely had the highlight of the night.

QB's Aren't Supposed To Block Like That

Wilson set the tone for the offense, and the entire game on their first offensive play of the game. With a reverse called Reggie Dunn took the flip from John White. Cal Linebacker Nathan Broussard was not fooled on the play, and look to have it snuffed out. What he didn't have snuffed out was Travis Wilson.

Now normally QB blocks are more of a fly buzzing around you nuisance that typically ends up being more of the QB laying down in front of the defender, causing them to reroute enough to allow the runner by.

Rarely do you see a QB delect a linebacker.

Pretty sure Broussard isn't going to hear the end of it at film review. I kind of wondered if Broussard wasn't looking for a chance to return the favor during the game, but he never got a chance.

To quote the 9 year old sitting next to me when the play happened: "Let's see Tom Brady do that!".

Very Special Teams

So how does a team averaging just over 20 points a game, and only 17.8 points a game against Division 1 teams, break out for 49 points? Well it helps if you get scoring from places outside of your Offense. While the offense put up 28 points in their own right, and the defense added 7, the night was book ended by scores from Special Teams.

After allowing Cal to score an opening drive field goal, Reggie Dunn took the kickoff about 3 or 4 yards deep in his end zone and off he went. 100+ yards later the Utes had their first lead in three weeks 7-3. A lead they would never relinquish.

Late in the third quarter Cal scored their first TD of the game (They'd eventually score two more against Utah's second stringers in garbage time.) Once again they kicked off to Reggie Dunn. This time it was about 6 yards deep. Once again Reggie Dunn fielded the kickoff and ran it out. Once again Reggie Dunn didn't stop till he crossed the goal line.

Reggie Dunn became the first Ute to score two kickoff returns in the same game, and the 16th player in all of college football to ever do it. It also gave him his 2nd and 3rd career 100 yard kickoff, a Ute record, which ties Brandon Boykins of Georgia from 2008-2011 as most in a career in NCAA history.

Where Reggie stands alone though is he is the only player in NCAA history to have two 100 yard kickoff TD's in the same game. A truly remarkable feat. It's hard to return one kick in a game, let alone two. And in this day and age, with the starting kickoff moved up five yards, many worried these kind of plays wouldn't be seen any more.

Add in Reggie's other return for about 22 yards, and Dunn also set the record for average kickoff return in a game (74 yards).

Of lesser note, Utes specialty punter Tom Hackett had two punts downed inside the 5 yard line. One towards the end of the first quarter, where Cal was so worried about the noise in the North End Zone, they preferred to let the time run out, instead of running a play.

Place kicking, Petersen hit all 7 of his extra point attempts, and didn't miss a field goal. The latter due to the fact that Whittingham has said he's not going to attempt field goals anymore, but hey gotta start somewhere, right Petersen.

Though the night on special teams, belong to Dunn and his extremely special achievement.

View From The Red Zone

Travis Wilson is a freaking giant. Got there early enough to welcome the team to the stadium during the Ute Walk, and was just shocked by how big Wilson looked in person. The Utes say he's 6'6", and he easily that, if not more. The Utes should never fail on short yardage, 1 yard or less situations, because he simply needs to lay down and he gains three yards.

I'll be honest, one of my concerns going into this game, would be flagging fan support due to the team under-performing this season. And as the game got closer to kickoff, it looked like my concerns would be valid as it appeared there would be a lot of empty seats. Instead, the crowd was just running late, and eventually would turn out to be a sellout, the Utes 16th straight, and turned out to be a pretty loud, and electric atmosphere. The Utes, and the fans, definitely have grasped onto this yearly money grab that is the Blackout game, and have turned it into an electric atmosphere each season.

This was a good time to have such a great crowd, as it was a big recruiting weekend. Many top recruits were in town for the game, headlined by JoJo Mathis, a Rivals top 250 recruit who due to family connections took an unofficial visit here this summer, and enjoyed it so much Utah made it into his top five, and he took an official visit this past weekend. Of the other recruits, the Utes solidified their status with one of their higher recruits, as well as happened to steal who was the tied as the top ranked 2013 recruit, so far, for BYU, causing Davion Orphey to flip from BYU to Utah.

Skid Stopped, Bring On Momentum

Finally the Utes got their first conference victory of 2012, and while winning the south is a pipe dream, although still mathematically possible, the Utes must now try to build momentum to save a possible bowl bid. They have a hard road to accomplish said goal, but they have a great chance to build momentum this weekend facing the Washington State Cougars.

WSU has found difficulties adjusting to Mike Leach's system, as they are the only team in the Pac-12 not to win a conference game. Washington State is a bad team. They are equally as bad as last year's Colorado team. However as all Ute fans will remember, a bad Colorado team pulled the upset in Rice-Eccles last season.

This game will mark the Pirate Mike Leach's second trip to the state of Utah this season. With the Utes showing dramatic improvement over the last month, and finally getting on the right side of the scoreboard, this represents a good time for the Utes to take care of their business, continue improving, and start building momentum for the next two weeks at Washington, and home for Arizona. Those two weeks will make or break what's left of this season, but before the Utes can start thinking about that, they need to take care of a struggling Cougar team this week.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:48

Monday, October 22, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

This past week the Utes and the Cougars took their combined 6-7 record to play two teams who were a combined 11-0, and ranked 8th, and 5th in the nation respectively. Not surprising the win totals for one group of teams stayed static at 6, while the loss total for the other group remained a goose egg.

What's of more concern for both teams is how the games unfolded. One team saw the story of their season play out the same as it has all year, while the other team flipped the script on what had been ailing them. The Best Team Of Utah

Looks like we finally have the answer to the broken transitive property that tries to figure out the best team for the state of Utah. It's clearly the Oregon State Beavers after they have beaten both BYU and Utah in consecutive weeks with a backup QB.

This week said backup QB came down to earth a bit from his amazing debut the previous week against the Cougars, but in the end he was still able to lead the Beavers to a 21-7 victory over the Utes.

Same Story, Different Week

For the Utes, the loss to the Beavers was a sickening case of Deja Vu. For the third week in a row, the Utes we're hanging tough late in a game they could have, only to eventually be undone by stupid, costly, mental mistakes. Two costly first quarter turnovers by Travis Wilson led to 14 of the Beavers 21 points.

Down 14-7 to start the 2nd half, the Utes got the ball and drove down to the Beavers 3 yard line, only to have DeVonte Christopher, who was also partially at fault for Travis Wilson's early interception, fumbled a pitch on a reverse. Beavers recovered.

Still trailing 14-7 in the fourth quarter, Beavers ball around mid field, facing 3rd and long, Brian Blechen, clearly, and blatantly lowers his helmet to spear an OSU receiver, personal foul, first down, drive extended and ends in a touch down.

Utah's defense played arguably their best game of the year. They kept a Beaver offense, that just got done toasting the BYU defense the week before, in check, only giving up one score to the Beavers on a drive that started farther than the Utes 40 yard line. The Offense played one of their better games as well.

Just like they did the week before against UCLA, and the week prior against USC, the Utes are showing they have the ability to hang in their during these Pac-12 Conference games. What they are also showing, is that they don't have the ability to overcome mistakes, and self inflicted wounds, against the better teams on a week in and week out basis.

And to make the mistakes on the field even worse, is when their are blatant terrible mistakes up in the booth

$8 + 0 = 1/2 = 0-2$

I knew when he was hired Brian Johnson was going to have to grow on the job, and there would be some struggles. I'll even admit there's been signs of growth for Johnson so far during the season. However his struggles have really come to light in some crucial spots. Most notably the last two weeks at or inside the opponents 5 yard line.

The last two weeks the Utes have been able to run 8 plays at or inside their opponents 5 yards lines. During those plays John White and Kelvin York accumulated zero touches. In fact, only once during those 8 plays, was a call even sent in that could possibly have given a touch to White, it was on first and goal this week when a Zone/Read was called in. Unfortunately Wilson made the incorrect read, and kept the ball. The other 7 plays though, consisted of 2 QB draws, 3 passes by Wilson, 1 TD Pass by Jon Hays, who was in due to the helmet rule, and the aforementioned disastrous reverse that DeVonte fumbled.

It's just inexcusable not to give your running backs any more than 1 possible touch in 8 plays when you are that close to the goal line.

The Rudest Welcome

Now it's time for Utah's annual money grab, gimmick Blackout Game as the Utes face the Cal Bears. The same Cal Bears who gave the Utes the rudest welcome to the Pac-12 last year in a 34-10 blowout that was closer to 70-0 than it was to 34-10. That game last year was by far the worst performance of the season. The Utes were held to 13 total rushing yards, 178 total yards, turned the ball over 4 times, and were in a 34-0 hole before garbage time scores prevented the shut out. If there was anything the Utes could have done wrong during that game last year, they did it.

This year the Cal Bears are struggling much the same as the Utes and come into the game with an identical 2-5 record. The Bears started the season with a Grand Reopening of their stadium that saw them lose to Nevada. And while they've had some bright spots, beating UCLA, they've been inconsistent all season, and are coming to Utah after losing their Rivalry game, "The Big Game" to Stanford last week for the 4th consecutive season.

Now both teams come into the weekend looking for a win to possibly turn around their season. They've both struggled through difficult first half schedules, Utah with the 2nd ranked strength of schedule, Cal with the 17th, and are both hoping that a win this weekend, will give them momentum as they go to an easier stretch of games.

Now I'm not one for crazy predictions, but because both of these teams have shown improvements the last few weeks, and have been oh so close. And because both teams have played difficult first half schedules, and heck even because both teams have their rivalry games over with, I'm going to make a prediction right now.

The winner of this week's game will go on to become bowl eligible.

Flipping The Script

I know I've mentioned before that having Riley Nelson as the Quarterback for the Cougars meant they probably wouldn't beat a decent team all year, due mainly to the fact that he's a fullback, and not a quarterback. I also know that most are putting the Notre Dame loss on his, battered, back. I for one am not.

In a flip of the usual script for the Cougars this year, I don't think Nelson was the reason that the Cougars were unable to spring the Ackbar Alert against Notre Dame. In fact I think the bigger reason for the 17-14 loss, was the defense, and more specifically the rush defense.

Don't get me wrong, Riley had his usual mistakes. Specifically a brutal interception by Manti Te'o early that led to the first score for the Irish, and late he completely missed a wide open Cody Hoffman, who would have walked, untouched, into the end zone to put the Cougars up 21-17. The latter being a pass that Riley says will haunt him forever. The truth is though, that game was about as good as anyone can expect from not only Riley, but the current iteration of the offense. If you are asking more than 63% completion, 2 TD's and only 2 Interceptions (1 of which was garbage time), with no fumbles from Riley, than you are expecting too much.

The real reason the Cougars lost this game, was because, for the second week in a row, their defense got gashed. Only this week, it was their run defense that got gashed. The Irish ran for 270 yards on the Cougars, and senior running back Theo Riddick got a career high 143 on his own. Riddick wasn't the only 100 yard rusher for the Golden Domers as Cierre Woods also broke the century mark. All this running being done despite not having a passing threat all game.

And although the game looked close on the score board, let's not forget that the Irish twice moved deep into BYU territory only to come up with nothing, because as we've all learned, kickers in college suck.

Interesting Factoid

With starting Quarterback Everett Golson out with a concussion, the Fighting Irish turned to backup Tommy Rees. Rees' victory now makes backup QB's 3-0 against BYU this season, joining Cody Vaz of Oregon State, and Jon Hays of Utah.

Assignment Football

What's more troubling about BYU getting gashed on the ground is the team they face next. The Cougars take their show to the deep south to take on the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets, and their triple option rushing offense.

Now there's always the possibility that the Notre Dame game was a fluke. The Cougars also are very familiar with the triple option having faced it, with pretty good success, on a yearly basis in the Mountain West Conference when they

would play Air Force.

However, I think of all the defenses of Bronco Mendenhall's tenure, despite being his best defense, this is the defense least ready to face a triple option.

The reason being, defending the triple option defense requires sound assignment football. As a defender you have to take on your assignment, and only your assignment. Some of BYU's lesser defenses, were very assignment sound, which is why they rarely struggled with the option. This defense is different. Part of what makes them so good, is that they are a bit more reckless. Led by Kyle Van Oy, and Ziggy Ansah, this defense is a bit more of a gambling defense. Especially in the secondary, where they can get a bit nosy. They like to play on the edge, and sometimes over the edge. It's what's made them so effective all year.

It's also the exact same tendencies that can allow a triple option to break off some big plays. A secondary that likes to get nosy to begin with, will also start creeping up to the line of scrimmage to stop the run, and that's when a triple option offense breaks out those surprise passes over the top.

For example, just look at how Utah always struggled with the Air Force Falcons, despite all their good to great defenses. The Cougars play a style of defense this year, very similar to Utah's. Utah always got involved in tight slugfests with the Falcons. The Falcons also always seemed to have one of their best passing days against the Utes, because the secondary would get caught sneaking up.

That's the struggle the Cougars face this week. Only to make matters worse, their room for error is very slim with Riley and the boys on offense, and that's before you get to the offensive line that has now suffered it's 8th major injury of the year.

Riley's Legacy

As Riley's career comes to an end at BYU, and this weekend being senior day, the question of his legacy starts to come to mind. With only 1, possibly 2 depending on bowl opponent, game really left, what is Riley's legacy?

Will it be that he the hard working, gritty leader, with limited talent who was able to save the 2011 season?

Will it be that Bronco's love affair with Riley cost the Cougars three seasons, and possibly more?

Will his legacy be that he ran off Jake Heaps? Will the way the coaching staff handled Riley scare off future recruits?

Will his legacy be that he just couldn't win the big games, but was great against the scrubs?

Will his legacy just be that the rule that should be called the Manti Te'o Rule was incorrectly named after him?

We won't really know his full legacy till we see how Jake Heaps does the next two years at Kansas. If Heaps succeeds and lives up to the freshman hype, does that hurt Riley's legacy?

So BYU fans, I'll ask again at the end of the season, but start thinking about it now. What is Riley's legacy with really only one more game to write it. (The last three games are really just bowl practices.) Now that his careers coming to an end, are your memories of him fond ones, or has the turnover fest of this year soured them?

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:24

Wednesday, October 17, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

You know it wasn't that long ago, that teams in this state were fielding Heisman trophy winners, or candidates (Ty Detmer '90, Alex Smith '04), All-Americans (Smith, Sarkisian), and #1 Overall picks (Smith) at the quarterback position. Now we're relegated to fullbacks who can't throw (Riley), QB's better suited for the option game (Riley, Hill), Division 2 castoffs (Hays), or True Freshmen who are tentative, indecisive, and clearly overwhelmed by the game (Wilson).

What makes the situation all that worse is that for both Utah and BYU, the QB who most led each program to their most recent highest points, are the offensive coordinators, and neither one seems to have a full grasp on their own job.

This past weekend the program whose struggles are least because of the quarterback punted on the present to focus on the future, while the the program whose struggles are mostly because of the QB stubbornly grasps onto a broken present. The Future Is Upon Us

Last week I made the case why the future should not be now. Utah's coaching staff disagrees and made the decision to go with the future in true freshmen Travis Wilson. Wilson's performance in the UCLA game showed exactly why it was too early to make the switch, and why the problems with this Utah team are not because of the Quarterback.

Wilson played like you'd expect a highly touted true freshman to play. He showed enough flashes to prove that he may eventually be able to consistently lead a team, but for the most part was indecisive, tentative and overwhelmed, while showing the game was moving too fast for him, which prevented him from reading defenses, or sometimes even making decisions. To be fair, as the game went on and Wilson began to fill more comfortable he started to play better. Statistically, this was the best game Utah has seen out of a quarterback in over a year. Wilson broke the 200 yard passing barrier, something Hays has never done as a starter, and the Utes were drastically improved on their third down conversion rate.

But there was also the bad. An interception killed the first drive of the game because Wilson tried to force the ball into double coverage, and another interception that was dropped, because he didn't read that Scott was clearly covered and threw it to him anyways.

But despite all of the good and the bad from Wilson Utah was in exactly the same place they've been for most of this year.

This game was still winnable for Utah, despite not having an offensive touchdown for the first 55 minutes of it.

What ultimately doomed Utah, and what has hurt Utah all year long, had very little to do with the play of Wilson, but more with the play, and decision of those around him.

Feed The Beast

As a coaching staff, if your team is led by a Quarterback who is limited in what he can do with the offense, traditional wisdom says to take the pressure off of him by using your run game.

This is especially true if your running back is coming off of the best season in your program's history.

This is especially true if your running back is rushing for a greater than 4 yards per carry average. After all 3 rushes of 4 yards is a first down.

This is especially true if your backup running back is rushing for a great than 4 yards per carry average. After all 3 rushes of 4 yards is a first down.

So can someone explain to me, why the freak John White IV only had 11 rushes in the entire game. Why in the world did he only have 1 rush in the second half, despite having ran 10 times for 44 yards in the first half. And would someone please explain to me, that if you are going to be dumb enough not to give the ball to White, why aren't you giving the ball to his backup York more than the 4 times, for 18 yards he got during the UCLA game.

Last season, when Wynn went down and the QB situation was even more precarious than it is now, you know how the Utes eventually turned the campaign around? They fed the ball to White! Granted this season White was injured for a while, but it's clear from his running against UCLA and USC he's not injured anymore. Plus his backup York, has been running extremely well the past couple weeks.

It's time to keep feeding the beasts. Now moreso than ever. Travis Wilson is a freshman prone to do freshman like things. What better way to ease Wilson into a game, and take pressure off than with the running game.

Forcing 3rd And Long Is Supposed To Be A Good Thing, Right?

The Utah linebackers are bad. They are constantly out of position. They get tangled up in blocks too easily, and worst of all, they fall for jukes way too easily. This is all extremely evident when the Utes are playing against a Quarterback who can scramble like Brett Hundley did this last week. 3rd and 10? No problem, Hundley rushes for 9 yards, making the Bruins decide to go for it on 4th down. (They converted.) 3rd and 14. Hundley rushes for a first down.

Whenever the Utes get a rushing Quarterback to 3rd and long, not a single Ute fan feels comfortable about them preventing the first down. By the way, the first UCLA TD was a 12 yard rush from Hundley.

Fortunately for the Utes the Beavers don't have a rushing QB. This week the Utes face the Oregon State Beavers, who are being led by backup QB Cody Vaz. The Beavers do not employ a spread offense, like the types that have hurt the Utes all season. Instead they employ an offense very similar to the pro set offense, that Utah actually had good success against with USC. They also don't have to worry about first round draft picks at RB, WR, and QB.

Of course just because they aren't star studded, and are playing with a backup QB, doesn't mean the Beavers aren't a really, really good team. Isn't that right BYU?

Beaver Blackout

This past weekend those very same Oregon State Beavers played beat BYU. This game was BYU joining the groups of teams latching onto the marketing gimmick money grab Blackout fad in college football. Of course, with BYU's tendency for similar color related gimmicks, it's not surprising that they would join in on the fad. It's more a surprise that it took them this long.

The blackout uniforms BYU had though were at the same time really cool, and seeming just a little off.

Some Oregon State, State of Utah trivia for you.

In two weeks the Utes will debut their home blackout helmets during their annual marketing gimmick money grab blackout game. They debuted the black style helmets with their away version earlier this season against Arizona State. (Difference is color of logo on the helmet, white for away, red for home.). But did you know that the plan was to debut the blackout helmets during their marketing gimmick money grab blackout game last season against Oregon State. However when Wynn went down with injury they worried that having Utah wear the black helmets would only lead to more confusion for Division II QB Jon Hays, since Oregon State's helmets are also black.

This week's game against Utah was originally scheduled to be a marketing gimmick money grab blackout game for the home based Beavers, however it was scrapped because they were worried it was racially insensitive.

Peaking

That didn't take long did it. 1 drive, 2 minutes and 31 seconds into the game, out went BYU's quarters without touchdown's streak. It didn't end there. The Beavers kept moving up and down the field against the Cougars for most of the game. The Beavers became the first team to rack up 300 yards of total offense against the Cougars since... the Beavers did it last year.

Backup QB Cody Vaz completed 62% of his passes for 332 yards and 3 touchdowns. The Beavers, who are not a strong running team, ran for 118 yards and averaged 4.2 yards per carry. What happened to BYU's top 5, and highly ranked defense?

For one, the Cougars finally faced a top flight offense. So far this year, they've gone against offenses that haven't been installed, struggling offenses in transition, and just flat out bad offenses. This was the first time all year they faced an offense that was actually halfway decent. More importantly it was an offense that was really good in the passing game,

and was able to actually test the weak spot in the BYU defense, it's secondary. BYU's defense excels in the front 7. Where it still struggles is in the defensive backfield, and the Beavers attacked them there early, and often. Once that got the front 7 on their heels they were never able to fully recover.

Fortunately for BYU they were able to, surprisingly, muster an offense that was able to answer score for score, during the first three quarters of the offense. In fact, it wasn't until BYU settled for a field goal with 8:55 left, that this game felt like the Beavers took control. Some late game turnovers allowed the Beavers to blow it open.

This was by far the best offensive performance of the season by the BYU offense. Riley Nelson played within himself for most of the time, and did not resort to his usual dangerous gambling self, except for a one major instance as the Cougars were driving late in the first half. That all said, there is absolutely zero excuse for Riley Nelson throwing the ball 51 times in any game. That was just pure stupidity by Doman, and was just asking for the eventual turnover meltdown to come their way.

What's not so good for BYU is that this offensive performance also rates about as close to perfection as it can run in it's current incarnation. It doesn't get any better than that on Saturday. It's also not a performance you can expect to see very often. Riley will not play that way very often. His true, dangerous, self will come out. It will also only matter for two more weeks.

Touchdown Jesus And Golden Domes

This week the Cougars travel to one of the historic places in College Football, South Bend. While the Cougars as a program have played at Notre Dame before, none of the current players have. Notre Dame is one of those colleges that a lot of players grow up dreaming about playing at.

This year, they're also really really good. Especially on the defensive side. The Fighting Irish currently ranked #2 in total defense, led by super stud line backer Manti Te'o. We talked a bit about Te'o and his BYU history last week. Te'o has been the tackling leader for the Irish for each of the past two seasons. Te'o is the best linebacker in college right now, and is also a darkhorse Heisman contender. He'll never win it of course because he doesn't play on the offense, but that doesn't mean he might not deserve it.

What's especially troubling for BYU is that the Irish are 10th in the nation in turnover differential. They must be licking their chops at the turnover machine that is Riley Nelson.

Offensively the Irish are not world beaters. They've had to platoon their two quarterbacks throughout the year, and are still looking for the consistency at the position. They are very balanced however, and average nearly 400 yards per game.

This is a game that'll be very difficult for BYU to win, though it's not impossible. Especially since this has all the makings of a possible trap game for the Irish coming off of the Stanford game and having Oklahoma the next week. They just really have no margin of error.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 16:19

Wednesday, October 10, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Last week, all three teams had a chance to define their seasons. What did we learn about any of them? What will it mean going forward for the rest of the season? And can someone, anyone, please find a freaking kicker?

Also, the weekend, when BYU wasn't playing, was far more interesting for them, than the snooze fest of a game the Aggies and Cougars treated us to. But then again that's what happens when news comes out of a colossal coaching blunder that costs a kid at least a season.

Finally we have an instance of when sports and religion do belong in the same conference. You could even say that the Lord actually did help both Utah and BYU this weekend. Questions And Possible Answers

Last week I finished with some questions for the teams in Utah.

Are the Aggies the best team in state? Are they ready to flip the long written script in the state of Utah? Or are they still just a little brother who gets pesky once in a while, and still needs to know their place?

No, No, Yes!

Is Utah a team that struggled with inconsistencies because they lack talent to match up? Are their struggles mostly mental and can be fixed? Can they be a factor in the Pac-12 south?

Not Really, Mostly Yes, Probably Not!

Is BYU an offensively inept team? Have they finally found the answer to turn this team around? Can they actually turn in a legitimate good season or will they end up being a fraud with a good record?

Definitely, No, Not Really, Hard to say!

Is there any good football to be played in this State? Is it all just terrible and we should focus on High School?

No, How bout that undefeated Syracuse, they really came out of nowhere!

Answers to be clarified as the article continues on.

With All Due Respect To Dennis Green

Yea, that's pretty much sums up the Utah State Aggies. We want them to be improved. As Rhett mentioned in the comments last week (before proving that if you want gambling advice you should get it from me, not him), that even as Utah/BYU fans we root for Utah State to be improved in every game they aren't playing us.

Truth is, the Aggies, are still the little brothers in this state. Sure once in a while they get frisky and pull a fast one over, but essentially they are still the lesser team in the state. They just can't seem to get out of their own way. Two years ago they upset the worst Bronco era BYU team in Logan. Since that moment they agreed to only do 2 for 1's with the Cougars. Lost to former Aggie Riley Nelson in heart breaking fashion, and then submit a dreadful performance and lose to the Cougars 6-3.

Sure the Aggies upset arguably the worst Whittingham era Utah team earlier this season, and were sitting their with the opportunity to beat both Utah and BYU in the same season since 1974. Heck BYU even was trying to let Utah State win with their inept offense. But when it mattered the most, the Aggies employed the Prevent the Win defense. Those 25 seconds at the end of the first half, pretty much sums up the entire Aggies existence right now.

Not Your Father's Quarterback U

During their season opening game against Washington in 2010, the Cougars honored the 8 all american quarterbacks of their history. It brought up memories of glories past. Oh high powered offenses, record quarterbacks, and Heisman

trophies.

Memories that could not be possibly farther away when one watches the 2012 incarnation of the Cougars. This year's Cougars have absolutely nothing resembling an Offense. To call BYU's offense inept, is too kind. They just cannot get anything going. Against Utah State, the Cougars were able to get long drives, based on number of plays, but at no point were they ever a threat to turn any of those drives into any success. If not for the Aggies decision to go into the Prevent the Win defense, they would have absolutely been shut out.

And it all starts at the QB position. It doesn't matter if it's Taysom Hill, or Riley Nelson (And we know now, it has to be Riley, more on this later) the Cougars simply do not have a QB. What the Cougars should do is just abandon any pretense of having a passing game and fully adopt the Georgia Tech option offense, with Cody Hoffman in the Stephen Hill role.

Yes, Brandon Doman (who for some unknown reason is back on the field, instead of in the booth) needs to turn Quarterback U into Option U. Of Course, Taysom is more suited to the Option than Riley was because Taysom is more careful with the ball, faster than Riley, and less likely to call his number and let his running backs have the ball. In fact during the Utah State game, those long drives were successful when BYU went to the option, and they stalled when they tried to pass.

Hoffman is perfect in the Stephen Hill role, because he basically is playing that role now. That's the role of the just jump up and catch the pass.

Which begs the question, even with Sean Mannion out for the Beavers, how is BYU favored by 6 points, when we're not really sure they can even score 6 points?

A Game Of What-If

This BYU defense is unbelievably good. This is the best defense I can remember at BYU in, well, forever. It's easily the best defense in this state since Utah's 2008 defense, that produced 6 current NFL starters, as well as other backups. It's a defense that has not only gone 13 quarters without surrendering an offensive touchdown, but has only surrendered 3 points in those 13 quarters. (Shutout the 4th against Utah, Only Boise Score was a defensive touchdown, shutout Hawai'i, and gave up a field goal to Utah State.) This is a defense that will keep BYU in every game the rest of this season. It's just impossible to pick BYU to win any of those games (NOTE: The last three weeks do not count as actual games, and are instead considered practices) because of their ineptitude on the offensive side of the ball.

What's interesting to think about is the defense could have been even better. And not just a little better, but a lot better. Think about this if you will.

In 2010, Romney Fuga was having a good season before he suffered a season ending knee injury due to a cheap shot in the game against Nevada. Fuga was gone the rest of that season, and you could tell he was still trying to come back last season, and the early parts of this season.

Coming out of high school Star Lotulelei, yes the same one who is considered one of the best defensive linemen in the country, and talk of being a top 10 draft pick this season, committed to BYU. Star, however was unable to qualify academically and was forced to go to Junior College. After he finished Junior College, and got his grades up to snuff to qualify, Star let it be known that his preference was still BYU. However under Coach Mendenhall, the Cougars have a policy not to go after Junior College players who previously failed to qualify at BYU, so Star ended up at Utah.

Manti Te'o has been an absolute star at Notre Dame. He's led the Irish in tackles each of the last two years, is a for sure first round draft pick, and has been in the conversation for every line backer award during the season. Te'o also happens to be LDS. Losing Te'o to a mission, and then to BYU, was such a concern for Notre Dame, that they pushed the NCAA to institute what has improperly been labeled the Riley Nelson rule (Riley Nelson just keeps screwing BYU up.)

During his recruitment Te'o constantly had BYU at the top of his list with USC, and Notre Dame, and many think Te'o would have eventually picked BYU, if BYU had not told him not to bother. During his official visit, there was an on campus incident where Manti went to a party with his cousin, and then current BYU player Shiloh Te'o. It later came out that alcohol was involved at the party. Shiloh was released from the school for the honor code violation, and Bronco and company, in an extremely nearsighted moment then told Manti not to bother looking into BYU anymore.

I know that alcohol is not welcomed at BYU, and that the Cougars have the honor code to deal with. Here's the thing Manti hadn't agreed to the honor code yet. Heck, it's not even known if Te'o consumed the alcohol, or was merely

present while others consumed (also an honor code violation.) But here's my question. What about forgiveness and love? And if Te'o was struggling enough with his faith to be in that situation, which place would be better for him to grow his testimony, LDS based BYU where he'd be involved strongly with the gospel, well known party school USC, or catholic based Notre Dame? Te'o eventually picked Notre Dame, and thankfully has remained strong in the gospel. That doesn't change the fact, that Bronco missed a great opportunity to practice some of those values he preaches, by nurturing the kid. Afterall, it was later that same recruiting season that Kyle Van Oy got pulled over for drinking and driving, but still got to come to BYU.

But could you imagine this defense with Kyle Van Oy as it's third best player? What if in addition to Kyle Van Oy, and Ziggy Ansah, who has been playing completely out of his mind this season, the Cougars had a healthy Romney Fuga, Star Lotulelei, and Manti Te'o? Oh by the way, the Phil Steele mid season all american team was announced today, and Van Oy was 2nd team, while Star and Te'o were first team all americans. Oh what could have been.

A Colossal Mistake

Supposedly Riley Nelson was going to be the starter as soon as he was healthy, but it was always nice for BYU fans to know they had Taysom Hill if, and when, Nelson's bad, reportedly cracked, back ever got injured again. That is no longer the case.

With just over 1 minute left to go in the game, facing first down and 10, Utah State having only 1 time out, and victory assured as long as BYU didn't turn the ball over, the Cougars ran a quarterback draw.

This was a stupid decision before the full effect of it became known. The game is over. Take a knee, run out the clock. By running a quarterback draw you are only tempting fate, and increasing the possibility for a fumble.... or worse.

Turns out it was worse. On that play Taysom Hill injured his knee. He suffered damage to his LCL, and a torn hamstring. An injury that will require surgery and possibly 6 months before Hill will be able to practice. It's also the kind of injury that many report takes almost a year or two before the player starts feeling like they did prior. For a qb who relies on running the ball this is a devastating injury.

Bronco and Doman are blaming miscommunication, saying that after the initial play call, they had changed the play to instead be "Victory Formation" only Taysom had already turned from the sideline to make the call in the huddle. That brings up two questions? 1. Why was anything other than "Victory Formation" called to begin with, and 2. why didn't they call a timeout immediately?

Now the Cougars face 10th ranked, and undefeated Oregon State Beavers for their Blackout Game debut this weekend. Although, the Beavers themselves are suffering quarterback knee related issues, as their starting Quarterback Sean Mannion underwent knee surgery and will be out about 4 weeks.

Who's The Best

Okay, so Utah State beat Utah by 7 in Overtime. Utah then beat BYU three times in a single game. BYU then followed that up with a three point snoozefest win against the Aggies?

Obviously the transitive property is broken in this state. But one thing is clear. Football in this state is kind of bad. At least on the Offensive side of the ball.

Three Steps Forward, One Step Back

On Thursday the Utes lost 38-28 to the Trojans of USC. This despite two early turnovers gave Utah a 14-0 lead a mere three minutes into the game.

Unfortunately for the Utes, the Trojans were simply a superior team and outscored them 38-14 over the rest of the game, with 7 of those points coming in garbage time for the Utes.

The score, though doesn't tell the whole story of the game.

After being embarrassed and flat the game before the Utes came out with fire and passion. At Halftime the Utes trailed by 3, and were statistically even with the Trojans. The defense shut the Trojans out for the third quarter, and began to show some of the flashes that has been expected of them.

Star Lotulelei had a magnificent night. He forced All American Center candidate Khaled Holmes into multiple mistakes, and eventually caused USC to double and triple team him.

Offensive Brian Johnson called the best half of his brief career. Adding into the playbook multiple new plays, and showing elements of the spread that have been missing the last couple years.

John White was clearly healthy.

Unfortunately the Utes also made many mental mistakes. Dallin Rogers fumbled deep in his own territory that led to a USC touchdown. A borderline late hit on Matt Barkley extended what turned out to be another TD drive. An ineligible man downfield wiped out a TD play on a brilliant trick play for the Utes. Finally Brian Blechen must still be high as he had a terrible dreadful game. He dropped an interception in his own end zone, that would have stopped what ended up being a USC Field Goal drive. He also missed his assignment to help out Ryan Lacy on two of USC's Touchdown passes. Blechen has been dreadful since coming back from his suspension.

The Trojans are the superior team. While the Utes have Star Lotulelei who will be a first round pick, the Trojans could have five or 6 first round picks on their team. There is no shame in losing to the better team.

I even said last week, that Utah didn't necessarily have to win, although that would definitely be preferred, but just seeing Utah come out with fire, and make progress is a nice site, for a season that was sitting on the brink.

The Turning Point

Finally the boneheaded decision to tighten up the offensive play calling in the second half absolutely doomed the Utes. I understand Kyle and Brian's thinking. Down by three, statistically even with the Trojans at half time, getting the ball first, the thinking is, if the Utes can put together a long sustained clock eating drive, and simply score a field goal they'd be tied. A Defensive stop, another clock eating drive, and they could have went into the fourth quarter leading.

The problem with that thinking is that what made the offense so effective in the first half, was the dynamic play calling. By abandoning the philosophy of the first half, the Utes became predictable. USC also is explosive and one big play later in the 4th, the Utes were staring at a 10 point deficit, requiring Jon Hays to make plays.

Requiring Jon Hays to make plays is never a place the Utes want to be. Sure enough, Hays pressed, made bad throws, and a pick six later it's a 17 point deficit.

View From The Red Zone

Granted the outcome of the game was disappointing, but I couldn't help but marvel at the moment. The USC Trojans, College Football Royalty, was playing in the state of Utah for the first time since 1917.

Since that 1917 game, the Trojans have won all of their championships. All of the tradition that USC has become known for has happened since then. This is the type of team that never would have come to Utah just three years ago. Now all the pageantry of the Trojans, all the tradition, was there in grand display.

In view from us was the possible #1 overall pick in Matt Barkley, and multiple other future NFL players. This was a tremendous moment to be a part of.

The marvel and spectacle of having teams like the Trojans come into the state will not sustain the fan base long, but for that one night, it was a spectacular moment to be a part of. This was a moment I will always remember, and to top it off, it was also the first game I got to attend with my son. Granted in a few years my son won't remember it, because he's currently less than a year, and probably neither will my daughter, but I will always remember the first Pac-12 home game against USC.

The Utes get to follow that up with a trip to the Rose Bowl this week.

Think about the state of the two football teams of Utah right now. Teams like USC and UCLA are required to play in this state every two years. Oregon and Stanford will also be coming to the state over the next few years. But it's not just the Utes. BYU will be having some major teams come to Provo to play them. Between 2012 and 2015 the following teams are currently scheduled to play games in this state: USC, Stanford, Oregon, Michigan, Georgia Tech, Notre Dame. That doesn't include an unscheduled home date for BYU against Texas and Wisconsin.

Now factor in TV exposure. These are the channels for Utah and BYU games during the first three weeks of October: Espn, Espn, Espn, Abc, Fox, and NBC. In fact, of the 14 games involving Utah and BYU (counting the Holy War only once) since the start of the season through October 20th, 11 of those games have been, or will be, shown on ESPN/ABC, FOX, or NBC.

Quite a difference from what football fans in this state had to look forward to as recently as 2010.

Continuing The Progress

While the Utes made progress this week, they now must continue the progress as they head into the Rose Bowl. The Bruins are much improved over last season, but have been wildly inconsistent. They've been lead by redshirt freshman Brett Hundley, who is a dual threat quarterback. Something the Utes have struggled with so far this season, and will continue to struggle with the linebacker situation the Utes have.

Where the Bruins struggle though is keeping Hundley clean. The Bruins are near the bottom of the nation in sacks allowed, and tackles for loss. The Bruins will also be without one of Hundley's main WR targets who will be out with an injury.

One question for the Utes will be at the QB position.

It's clear from watching the game, that Jon Hays is not going to win you any games. While he is much improved from last season, he's still not quite at the speed of Pac-12 defenses. His decision making is typically just a tad slow. Jon Hays will not be able to lead the team back from any deficits, and will not be able to make the plays necessary to win games. However on thing Jon Hays also won't do, is make the big mistake that loses them the game. He will make mistakes when he's put in position that he has to make a play (USC pick six), but he won't cost you the game.

Now there are rumbling by fans to start Travis Wilson, and rumors from the up on the hill that Wilson will be getting more time. Wilson should get more plays, however if the Utes decide to start Wilson, that means they have punted on the season. Wilson is not ready. Wilson is very raw. Wilson has not shown any ability in his limited time to read a defense. He's only asked to throw when they have to (such as on 4th and 9 against USC), or short 3-4 yard routes. When he is asked to throw he clearly locks onto his receiver at the snap of the ball.

Jon Hays may not be the answer to the Utah offensive struggles, but he's also not the problem. It's not Jon Hays' fault the offensive line is a sieve. It's not Jon Hays fault that his WR's cannot hold onto the ball. Hays has shown an ability to move the ball, and make the throws.

Just look at the USC game. Granted Hays threw the pick six that put the Trojans up 17, and effectively lost the game, but that was not the back breaking play of the game.

The fumble by Dallin Rogers, with Utah up 10, that stalled a Utah drive, the ineligible receiver downfield, the three and out after halftime, in which only one pass was called, and the 83 yard Touchdown by USC were the back breaking plays. The pick six is what happens after the game has been lost, and you ask Hays to do too much.

The Future Is Not Now

Travis Wilson may be the future of the team, and needs to get some playing time. But he clearly is not ready to be the guy, yet, and the future is not here yet. Wilson still has a lot of growing to do. The past two games he was brought into the game in the most pressure free situations he will ever face in college, and it was clear the coaching staff had very little faith in him. They would not let him open it up, only calling a single pass greater than 10 yards, and that occurred because the Utes were facing a 4th and 9.

Look the Utes are only 2-3. They are only 1 game out of first in the Pac-12 south. Last year they were sitting at this same position, with Jon Hays, and ended up 8-5. Granted the Pac-12 is improved this season, but the Utes have also played the toughest games on their schedule.

The future schedule is not easy, but, thanks to Sean Mannion's injury, there isn't a game left on their schedule that you can look at and say is a guaranteed lost, thanks to the Utah defense.

If Utes are ready to punt on this season, then start Wilson, don't let Hays see another play, and you ride with every single mistake he'll make. However, if the Utes are still hoping to make a bowl game, and show some fire to this season, you don't start Wilson. Instead you increase the amount of "package" plays he has, including an increase in the

number of passes you call for him.

Abolish Kickers

Of course on bad thing about that much exposure is we're seeing just how bad the kicking game is. All three FBS teams this season have struggled mightily with the kicking game. Both USU losses can be attributed to missed Kicks. The Holy War was decided on two missed field goals. Utah missed an opportunity to win the Utah State game in regulation because of a missed field goal.

During a 30 hour time frame from 7:00 p.m. Thursday, to just before midnight on Friday, Kickers in this state went 2 of 7 on Field goals. That doesn't include a missed extra point, and a failed fake field goal attempt, which was only being called because the kickers suck.

The longest successful kick was 34 yards, meaning the offense was at the 17 yard line. Anytime the offense is within the red zone a Field goal is more like losing 4 points than gaining 3 points.

Sad thing is, it's not just the Utes, Cougars, and Aggies. Two of the misses were by the USC Kicker. Two weeks ago against the Cougars, Boise State bypassed short field goal attempts to go for it on 4th four different times, including once at the 1 yard line.

In games involving top 25 teams this past week, Kickers went 41/56. That means among the best teams in the nation less than 3 out of every 4 attempts are being converted. Add in all of 1-A and I'm sure that number is in the mid 60 percentage.

What's strange is the pro game is seeing some fresh young kickers making impacts this season. 4 rookie kickers are being effective this season, led by the St. Louis Rams' Greg Zeurlein who is 13 of 13 this season with including 4 greater than 50 yards. Two weeks ago Zeurlein became the first kicker ever to kick field goals of greater than 50, and greater than 60 yards in the same game.

The way the college kicking game is this season, we may not see a fresh batch of kickers able to complete that feat anytime soon.

Locally, it's clear, that it's time to forget about the kicking game altogether. The teams need to go into every drive, knowing that they are clearly four play drives. It's time to abolish the kickers.

From On High

Excuse the religious pun for a moment, but something happened during the LDS General Conference this weekend that greatly affects the Utes and Cougars.

President Monson announced the lowering of the missionary age for men from 19 to 18. While this decision was made for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with football, this will greatly benefit both the Cougars and the Utes as they both have a lot of LDS recruits.

First off, this helps remove a problem that occurs when a high schooler is 18 when his freshman season begins. It leaves both the player and the program in a weird sort of limbo where they really don't know what to do with them. If it's a good player, the program doesn't want to necessary start him if they are thinking of leaving on a mission, because after a season they will lose them for two years. For example, the Utes with Chase Hansen this season, and the Cougars with Ben Olson a few years ago. Granted Olson later said he wouldn't have went on his mission had he started his freshman season, but he never let that be known while he was here. Olson then went on a mission, and signed with UCLA.

However, good players must get on the field, so missionaries tend to lose two seasons, only one of which can be retrieved via redshirt.

In connection with the above, this now means that high school, LDS athletes interested in a mission can now commit, go directly on their mission, and come back as 20 year old freshmen with four straight seasons ahead of them, and not have to interrupt their careers, or possibly put off a mission altogether because of football.

The coaches for both schools, will also have an easier time managing scholarships and recruitment classes, because there will be less "what if" possibilities with possible missionaries. Most likely, the teams will know when the commitment

is made, exactly what the athletes intentions are.

The LDS mission will always be an interesting aspect of football in this state. Now it's just a little bit easier to deal with.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 13:33

Tuesday, October 2, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

This week is arguably the most important week of the 2012 season for all three teams collectively. Utah has a serious gut check game against one of College Football's royalty, even if the bloom has fallen off the rose from pre-season expectations of the game. Meanwhile, in Provo, the Beehive Boot is up for grabs for the Aggies when they travel to play BYU.

All three teams will also be done with their week before the weekend even gets here. Enter The Trojans

No this won't be the first time USC has played in Salt Lake City. The University of Utah hosted the Trojan way back in 1917. Safe to say it's a different era.

The Utes will host the Trojans, Thursday, for the first time in the modern era, and for the first time as Conference Mates. Last season the Utes hung tough with the Men of Troy in the Coliseum, before falling to a blocked field goal on the final play of the game.

This year the Utes come into the game licking their wounds after being destroyed by Arizona State two Saturdays ago. The Utes were on a bye last week, to right some wrongs, and to rest some injuries. However, the Trojans also were on a bye last week.

What Can The Utes Do

The Trojans of course come in with the probably #1 overall pick in the next draft with QB Matt Barkley. They also have two probable first round Wide Receivers in Robert Woods, and Marqise Lee, as well as the jewel of the Penn State poaching aftermath in running back Silas Redd.

Defensively the Trojans also have stars led by Safety TJ McDonald.

Truth is I could go on and on, about how the Trojan starting lineup is clearly superior to the Utes. What the Trojans don't have is depth.

This may already be an issue as Center Khaled Holmes is questionable for the game. It was Holmes' injury in the Stanford game, that cause massive issues for the Trojans in the only loss of the season.

About the only position group the Utes can match up on, is the Defensive Line, thanks largely to Star Lotulelei and the Kruger brothers. However with defensive end Joe Kruger questionable, the bright spot for the Utes may be dimmer.

Speaking of injuries the Utes will be with Eric Rowe for the first time since the USU game.

The Gameplan

Since we know the Utes are deficient in most positions on the field, for them to have a chance to win the game, will require a lot of pressure on this coaching staff. Specifically on offense. So far this season the Utes have been without an offensive identity. Now would be a great time for them to find it.

The Utes will need Kelvin York to run with the same violence he showed in the ASU game. Offensive Coordinator must feed the rock to whichever running back is being the most effective, even if that means taking carries away from Wolfman John White IV.

Speaking of White, hopefully he'll be healed up from his ankle injury after the bye.

As for the QB, Hays must get the ball out of his hands quickly. The Utes offensive line, is just shy of terrible. The Utes will also have two freshman starting on the right side of the line. Tackle Jeremiah Poutasi has been starting since the BYU game, while Siasi Aiono will get his first start at right guard. Expect the Utes to move the pocket frequently, as Hays rolls to the right. Even while rolling, it will be important for Hays to have an internal clock to tell him to get the ball out quickly.

Finally the Utes must have creativity. The bubble passes to Dunn in the flat will not work against this Trojan defense. What Utah must do is adopt a gameplan similar to what they used in 2009 with Terrance Cain. Use the screens. Use slants. Run the ball with White/York, and when the Trojans sneak up, go over the top.

If the Defensive Line can play to their potential, and the Secondary can prevent the mental mistakes they showed against ASU, the defense can keep the team in the game for a while, but the offense must take advantage of opportunities, or the defense will wear down.

P.S.

When Wilson comes into the game, call a freaking pass play.

Gut-Check

This game is a season defining game for the Utes. Was the game against ASU simply a case of overlooking the Sun Devils after the intense emotion of the rivalry game the week before? Or are the Utes simply a terrible team, who is outclassed in the Pac-12 can cannot handle the speed of the next level with their current talent level?

Utes don't necessarily have to win this game to save the season, but they must compete. They must be in this game late. After the Trojans the season doesn't get much easier, as the Utes still have 4 games against currently top 25 teams still to play. If the Utes come out and show fire, and show heart, than the outlook for the rest of the season improves greatly. If, however, they come out and show like they did against the Sun Devils, than you can expect Utah football players to be home for the holidays for the first time since 2002.

This is the type of game that Whittingham and the Utes made their name off of from 2004-2010. Utes being the scrappy underdog against the high powered, highly touted foe. This was the type of team Utah could shock on their way to racking up the most wins against BCS teams by a non BCS team.

However that magic has been missing since the Blackout game of 2010. It's time to see if this year's squad has heart. Do they have any of their former magic left?

Escaping Reality

They say a visit to the Hawai'i islands is a great way to escape ones reality. Last weekend it turned out that a visit from the football team of the Hawai'i Islands was a great way for the BYU Cougars to escape their reality for a while. Gone were the troubles of an anemic offense wasting fantastic defensive performances. Gone were bonehead coaching decisions costing the team games. Gone were Riley Nelson fumbling and throwing interceptions.

Well the last one was because Riley Nelson was gone. At least for that game. Apparently not healthy enough to start, so the Cougars gave the nod to freshman Taysom Hill who performed well against the Rainbow Warriors. While Hill wasn't all that great in the passing game, he led a Cougar offense that was fueled by a potent rushing attack that ran for 396 yards.

While that's an amazing performance there is a little equation to put the performance into context. What do you get when you take the 119th ranked rush defense and then subtract two starting defensive tackles? The answer is 396 yards rushing.

While the numbers for the Cougar run game are astounding it is important to remember who it was against. There was some bad news for the Cougars though, as starting running back Michael Alisa broke his arm and will be gone for a few weeks.

QB Controversy Brewing

Now Bronco is left with a difficult decision to make. Riley Nelson or Taysom Hill. After the game Bronco said Riley is his guy if healthy. The question is, should he be?

It's a tough choice.

Taysom Hill may be getting all the publicity right now, but the truth of the matter is we don't know what the Cougars have in him.

With Riley Nelson we know his absolute ceiling.

Rushing wise Hill seems to be faster than a healthy Nelson. Passing wise neither has been impressive. We know Riley is a one read huck it and pray QB. With Hill we haven't seen enough to know. In both games (against Hawaii and 4th quarter against Boise State), Hill was merely adequate passing the ball.

Nelson seems to be a bit more reckless with the ball. That recklessness has killed BYU at times, and saved BYU at times. Meanwhile Hill seems to be a little to conservative with the ball, bypassing a throw to run it.

Nelson has experience in big games. None of it is good experience, but he's at least experienced it. Hill however has not.

If you're concern is for this season, truthfully it's a push. The difference between the two is negligible, however Hill will be here after the season, whereas Riley will be done. However, one can understand why, between the two, when Riley is healthy, Bronco is likely to go with Nelson.

Beehive Boot

The decision will play big starting this Friday, when the Cougars begin a brutal stretch of their season by hosting the Utah State Aggies. The Aggies have a chance to outright win the Beehive Boot for the first time 1982. (Two wins since then have been by media vote due to ties between two or more of the in state teams.)

This will be an interesting matchup. The Aggies upset BYU two years ago at home, and then lost a heart breaker in the game that ended the Jake Heaps era last season. The two teams are also very similar in their style of play.

Breakdown

Since this is a rivalry game, we're going to do a rivalry game breakdown. However it won't be as in depth as the Holy War breakdown. Instead we're going to compare QB's, and the Matchup of USU Offense vs BYU Defense, and BYU Offense vs USU Defense, as well as some X-Factors.

Quarterbacks

Aggie QB Chucky Keeton is the best quarterback in the state. He's a dual threat qb, who has seemed to be unfazed by hostile environments so far in his career. Keeton is a bit of an escape artist, who throughout this season has shown a knack to escape from sacks and make plays.

We went through the BYU QB situation earlier.

One thing that is really nice for both teams as far as game planning goes, is No matter who plays QB for the Cougars, both teams will have a similar QB. Usually it's difficult for teams to gameplan against mobile QB's such as Keeton, or Nelson/Hill. However for both these defense, they simply need to practice against their normal QB.

Advantage: USU

Utah State's Offense vs. BYU's Defense

BYU's Defense two weeks ago played out of it's mind. It followed that up with another strong effort against Hawai'i. However earlier in the year, and early in the Boise State game, the defense showed a propensity to have holes in it's coverage.

Utah State's offense is a very run heavy offense, which plays into BYU's strength. However, the Cougars have not played a team yet this year with an offense as potent as the Aggies. Especially when it comes to running the ball. In the passing game, the Aggies rely on a zone/read type of attack, that relies on quick slants, and looks mainly to take advantage of overly eager defenders biting on the running game.

If BYU can shut down the Aggie run attack, they're defense should be able to bait Keeton into making mistakes. The Cougars are currently 4th nationally in scoring defense. The one area that could hurt BYU is they are an active, attacking defense. If Keeton can make them miss, or get them to bite on the zone/read it could be a tough night.

Advantage: BYU

BYU's Offense vs. Utah State's Defense

Gary Anderson has brought with him to Logan the same defensive mentality he learned during his time at Utah. The Aggies also play an aggressive attacking style defense, that is anchored by it's defensive line. The Aggies currently rank 18th overall in scoring defense.

On Offense, despite the breakout against the Rainbow Warriors, the Cougars are still a big question mark. Questions about the passing game, and the QB aside, it will be interesting to see if last week's running break out was the Cougars turning the corner, or a result of a porous opposing defense.

The Cougars have been forced to become more of an option team due to qb issues, and Brandon Doman at times completely forgets to call straight up running plays. With Alisa gone, Doman's tendency to abandon the running game, especially if the game gets tight, could become even more pronounced, and that puts a lot of shoulders on the passing game.

Advantage: USU

X-Factors

BYU is home and desperately wants to prove that it's struggles of earlier this season are behind them. If Riley Nelson plays he will also be extremely fired up for this game due to his history with the Aggies.

The Aggies meanwhile still remember Riley's 11 second miracle from last season where they had victory snatched from them. Also as much as Utah State reveled in beating Utah earlier, their hatred for the color stealing Cougars is unmatched.

Advantage: Push

Final Thoughts

Thanks to early season struggles by both BYU and Utah, the Aggies have been pronounced the unofficial best team in the state by fans, and media, both locally and national. This is the Aggies chance to prove they've earned it. It's also a chance for the Aggies to prove they've grown from last year's oh so many close calls.

The Cougars have struggled against a Boise State and Utah team who both have shown to be down from recent years. A win against the Aggies will greatly help the Cougars as they prepare for a rough stretch of games, before ending the season against 3 dog opponents.

Season Definitions

Are the Aggies the best team in the state, and ready to flip the long written script in Utah, or are they still just a little brother who gets pesky once in a while but still needs to know their place?

Is Utah a team that struggled with inconsistencies because they lack talent to match up, or are their struggles mostly mental and can be fixed allowing them to be a factor in the Pac-12 south?

Is BYU an offensively inept team, or have they finally found the answer to turn this team around? Can they actually turn in a legitimate good season, or will they end up being a fraud with a good record once again?

Is there any good football to be played in this state, or is it all just terrible and we should focus on high school?

This pre-weekend will go a long way to clarifying some of the answers.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 16:38

Wednesday, September 26, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

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Outplayed, outcoached, outclassed, and any other out-verb you can think of. That about sums up the performance of Utah this past weekend against the Arizona State Sun Devils. The game started out decent for Utah as they completed a 36 yard pass to Dres Anderson on the third play of the game, to set the Utes up in Arizona State territory. That was it. From that point on, the ASU proceeded to terrorize, and demolish the Utes.

There are no bright spots for the performance on Saturday.

The Utes OL was embarassed and destroyed all game long, as ASU defensive linemen spent more time in Utah's backfield than Utah's running backs did.

The running game was mostly non existent as John White IV was clearly hindered by the sprained ankle that kept him out of the BYU game. Unable to make any decent cuts, or break away from any tackles, White spent the night getting swallowed up by ASU's massive defensive tackle Will Sutton.

To try and find a spark, the Utes then brought in Kelvin York, who was actually a breath of fresh air, running with a purpose and with a vengeance. On Utah's only scoring drive, York rank 6 times for over 60 yards. The Utah coaching staff then promptly replaced the back averaging 10 yards a carry, with the back averaging just over 1 yard per carry for the majority of the rest of the night.

Defensively this was the worst stink bomb in the past 4-5 years, and possibly ever, in the Whittingham era. The Sun Devils effectively stayed away from Star Lotulelei by running to the edges. The defense seemed as if it had never seen a zone read option game before, as the ASU qb torched them with his legs and his arm.

The linebackers were never in position, and the defensive backs were constantly being burned. Safety Brian Blechen played with a lot of rust, and at times seemed like he was still high.

The Sun Devils scored on their first 5 drives of the game, on their way to a 37-7 shellacking, that should have been closer to 137-7.

Extra Time To Lick Their Wounds

I hate bye weeks, but this week's bye is clearly needed. Utah will have to spend the week licking their wounds, and trying to straighten things out. The Utes seemed as if they were still focused on the dramatic ending to the BYU game, and never focused on ASU.

Kyle Whittingham, who this year seems to resemble Ron McBride 2.0 more than the post 2007 Whittingham we're used to, better get this team focused, because they are preparing to enter the gauntlet of their schedule. Look beating BYU is always fun and great, but truth is, that game means absolutely jack. The goal of this team is Pac-12 glory, not in-state glory. While I enjoy a victory over BYU as much as anyone, Whittingham will need to do a better job next year, and in 2016 and beyond, of getting this team past the BYU game, and onto Pac-12 play.

Now Whittingham not only needs to get this team to put BYU behind them, but they must make their adjustments, and put the ASU game behind them, because with the schedule in front of them the next few weeks, business is about to pick up.

So use the Bye week, heal some injuries, heal some mental injuries, because Utah's next game is a Thursday nighter on the 4th of October when they, as probable 3 score underdogs, welcome the Trojans of USC to Rice-Eccles for the first time ever.

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What do you get when you mix an Amazing Defensive performance with a Bronco Mendenhall happy dance, inept offenses, inept quarter backs, terrible coaching, and then throw in even worse coaching for good measure.? You get a new level of hell, which is what watching the Boise State/BYU game last Thursday night was.

The Broncos survived the Cougars to win 7-6 in a game that no human being should ever be forced to watch again. It was the worst game I've seen since the 3-0 snow game, and you could make an argument that this one was even worse. Truthfully I would love to say nothing more about and move on, but alas I can't because BYU's defense deserves credit for their play, and Bronco Mendenhall deserves derision for his decision at the end of the game.

Defense In Its Purest Form

BYU's defense all night was really good. Although in the first half, they had plenty of holes, that allowed the Broncos to have opportunities to blow the game open. However as the night went on BYU put on a defensive clinic that's rarely seen. This was a defensive performance unlike any I've ever seen by a BYU team.

The highlight of the night of course, was the goal line stand when Broncos got the ball for 1st and goal at the BYU 1. On the first play of the drive the Broncos apparently ran for a TD, but the play was called dead before it ever started for an official review of the previous play (an obvious fumble by Alisa that truly did not deserve a review.) After the review BYU stuffed Boise State on 4 consecutive plays to give the ball back to it's offense.

The stand was so good, that Bronco Mendenhall actually forgot he was a robot for a minute and showed emotion during the game including a happy dance on the sideline, bringing back memories of the fiery defensive coordinator version of Bronco from before he became head coach and had his personality surgically removed.

Emboldened by the goal line stand, BYU's defense then went on to finish out the second half by prevent Boise State from doing absolutely anything. In a game where the offense lost 5 turnovers, and was truly inept, the defense kept Boise State from doing anything.

It's too bad that the performance was wasted by a truly dreadful offense, terrible quarterbacking, and worst of all by their own Head Coach.

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A devastatingly terrible decision.

I understand that the common thought is go for the tie and home, and the win on the road. Personally I think that's a stupid thought. You have to take into account the game situation, and the game situation was this:

Boise State head coach Chris Peterson had finally had enough with his field goal kicker. After an early game miss, Peterson stopped even pretending he had a field goal kicker, bypassing a field goal opportunity 4 times during the game. 3 of which were short yardage field goals, including one that would have been a 20 yard field goal.

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The smart move was to go to Overtime and force Boise to actually attempt a kick. Your defense had shown they weren't going to get into the end zone at all.

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Immediately after the game, Bronco announced that Nelson would be the starter the next week which is another bad decision in it's own right.

The Riley era needs to come to an end. Not that I think Taysom Hill, at this point, is a much better option for the Cougars. Even with Hill in the game, the Cougars are looking at an option based offense, led by a Quarterback who trusts his legs, more than his arm (as evidenced by his decision not to throw the ball to Jamaal Williams for an easy TD, and instead run for short of first down yardage.)

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Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 13:57

Tuesday, September 18, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Only in the Holy War could an ending like the one we saw last Saturday just be considered part of the norm. But hey at least Utah fans got to go through the enjoyment of winning the game, three times. BYU fans, meanwhile had to suffer the loss three times. A Wild Finish

After fighting back, and making many Utah fans see ghosts of rivalry past, the game sat with 8 seconds left, with the ball on the 36 yard line. Maybe because Bronco doesn't trust his kickers, the Cougars made the boneheaded decision to run a play with no timeouts. Even worse Riley, threw a pass that would not have made it out of bounds. Fortunately for the Cougars, Riley isn't a prolific passer and the pass fell flat, Clock read 0:00, and the fans rushed the field, Game Over, Utes win.

For now, we'll skip over the fact this wasn't a rush the field worthy victory, but there was another problem with the fans being on the field, and something fans need to be smarter about. Whenever the timing is as close as it was on the play, the refs will always go to the replay to make sure that the game was over.

Lo and Behold the ball hit the ground with :01 left on the clock.

This time the Cougars trotted out the field goal unit for a 51 yard, game tying try. Star Lotulelei (who after re-watching the game, it's possible I underrated him) blew up the offensive line, blocked the kick. JD Falslev tried to pick it up and return it, but failed. Game Over, fans rush the field

But wait. Fans began to rush the field as soon as the block was done, meaning they were on the field while play was going on. Penalty flag, 15 yard personal foul, and the fans are now on the line as the goat of the century, while BYU now gets to attempt another field goal, this time from the 19 yard line.

I'm not going to go over the penalty too much. By the letter of the law it's a correct call, although there is an argument to be made that it shouldn't have been called when you consider it had no effect on the play, and coaches/players from both teams also went on the field as soon as the block was made, including Bronco Mendenhall, who was closer to the live ball play than any Utah fan.

What I will say about that call though, is that's one freaking gutsy official. It takes a lot of guts to sit there, surrounded by a group of fans, not happy with you because of the :01 second call (In the stadium there was no discernible way to know that was the correct call, because by the time you watched the ball hit the ground, and looked up to see the scoreboard, the :01 (or closer to 2/10ths of a second) were gone.) and inform the crowd that they have cost their team 15 yards, and possibly the game. The truth of the matter though, is the fans need to be smarter than that, and not put the ref, in that position. The fans were an embarrassment. Apparently I was one second off on my prediction last week, that the fans would be a Utah advantage until the end of the game.

BYU trots out Riley Stephenson for what would be a career long 36 yard attempt. Kick is up.... and... it's wide left. Game over, this time for real, fans rush the field again. Saved from the humiliation of costing the Utes the game.

Stop Rushing The Field

Look I have no problem with fans rushing the field. Heck I've done it twice in my life. But there is a right time and a wrong time to do it.

Beating a rival can be a rush the field moment, but only if it's a historic moment (2004, 2008), or you've beaten the rival for the first time in a large number of years. Not when it's a rival that you've previously dominated, and just recently lost to, or a rival you've now beaten 3 of the last 4 years, 5 of the last 7, or 8 of the last 11. Especially if you've spent the greater part of the last two years talking about how you no longer needed your rival, and was better than your rival because you moved into a bigger conference.

So to recap, Utah State rushing the field in 2010 after beating BYU, and 2012 after beating Utah: Acceptable. Utah rushing the field after beating BYU this year, and BYU rushing the field after beating USU in 2011: Unacceptable.

Another caveat. Any game you were up by 17 points in the fourth and you had to hold onto for dear life to win, Not a rush the field moment, unless it's against the #1 team in the nation, or again a historic moment (Championship, etc.) If you had to hold on against a rival, than just take the win and get out of there, thankful you don't have to suffer the ignominy of blowing that game for the next year.

Speaking of #1 teams in the nation, upsetting the #1 on your home field, is worthy of rushing the field. However simply upsetting a really really good team is not. That now means that since Stanford knocked off USC, if Utah were to pull out an upset, it is not acceptable to rush the field.

If you are going to rush the field, whether you are following the rules above, or not, please pay attention to the game. Look we're not that far removed from the Texas/Nebraska one second game. Fans have to know that in a case this close, it's going to be reviewed. Honestly though, that's the more excusable of the premature rushes. How the fans, after just getting chastised, and embarrassingly removed from the field, you could rush the field again so very prematurely is beyond me.

And finally if you're going to rush the field, don't be moronic, drunken idiots. Rush the field to celebrate with your team, not to go get into the faces of opposing coaches and players. Especially if you're idiotically dressed in suspenders, and then run away peeing your pants when said coach turns to stare you down.

But that's enough, for now, on the crowd, because unfortunately, very similar to Max Hall in 2009, all the fans really managed to do was take the focus off of the actual game. So let's get to the game.

Beyond The Box Score

Looking at the score, and the penalties, one would think this was a game between to evenly matched heavyweights who spent the entire night counter punching each other. They would be wrong.

For most of the first 45 minutes of the game, it was actually fairly one sided. Utah's offense was efficient, and the defense was outstanding, as the Utes built up a 24-7 lead. The Cougars had no answer for Star Lotulelei all night, as the Utes constantly harassed and pressured Riley Nelson, with mainly a four man rush.

Offensively the Utes were able to move the ball efficiently, flipping field position multiple times. Where they really struggled was in the run game, where they were without star running back John White. An aggressive BYU defense took advantage of the backup running game, decimating Utah's supposed, hoped for running depth, and limited the rushing game to a less than two yards per carry average.

Jon Hays meanwhile showed that he is not the QB from last year, as he seemed to have a better grasp of the offense, as well as passes that seemed crisper, and stronger than anything he threw last year. Multiple times he threw a pass to beat the defense deep, just to see a WR fail to bring it in.

Defensively, the Utes were aided by the fact that Brandon Doman, once again, forgot he is allowed to run the ball, instead putting the game in Riley Nelson's hands. The defense confused, and frustrated the offense all night, forcing multiple false starts, and delay of game penalties. The defense was also just a few bounces away from more turnovers, and eventually swung the game open with a long fumble recovery by Mo Lee, who picked up an errant snap for a Touchdown, but not till after Michael Alisa foolishly tried to pick up the fumble and run it for BYU.

All in all a dominant first 45 minutes, that was almost wasted by personal fouls, and awful kicking. The Utes racked up 6 personal fouls, including on BYU's first snap where an errant snap should have been a safety, but was wiped clean by a Joe Kruger facemask.

If not for those personal fouls and a terrible, terrible kicking game, BYU would have crossed midfield only once in the first three quarters of the game. The punting game itself saw a shanked punt from the Utes own 10 yard line give the Cougars the ball at the Utah 38. Two plays later the Cougars tied it up.

BYU's final score of the game was set up when Sean Sellwood, trying to punt from his own 20, was unable to get the kick away, due to the extreme number of Cougars in the back field.

Go For The Jugular

Last year, the Cougars entered halftime with a 14-10 deficit. Two scores later, the Cougars were looking at a 24-10 deficit. Last year the Cougars folded up shop and quit, as the Utes rolled to a 54-10 final score. This year, the Cougars

didn't give up. Maybe the Utes were expecting the Cougars to give up after last year's game, which would explain the shell that the offensive play calling went into during the fourth quarter. New coordinator Brian Johnson needs to use this game as a learning experience, that even with a 17 point lead at the beginning of the fourth quarter, you need to play to win, instead of playing not to lose.

The Ghosts Of Rivalries Past

With the offensive play calling grinded to a conservative halt, the Cougars fought back, and eventually had the ball back with less than two minutes to go, a Senior quarterback, needing to drive the length of the field.

Cue the ghost of Jonny Harline.

Utah's defense came out strong eventually making the Cougars face a 4th and 12 from their own 19 yard line.

Welcome ghost of Austin Collie.

Sure enough Riley Nelson finds Cody Hoffman behind the defense for a 47 yard gain, setting the ball at the Utah 34 yard line, and the ghosts haunting Utah fans are alive and well. A few incomplete passes left, and we're sitting at 1 second left on the clock, and BYU lining up for a field goal to tie it up. It's blocked!

The ghost of Brandon Burton begins to rumble.

Personal Foul, and now it's a short try 36 yard to send the game into overtime.

The ghost of Andrew George blows past the ghost of Brandon Burton.

In the end the Field sails left, doinking on the upright, (Kaneshiro's ghost, is that you???) as the terrible special teams of the state of Utah strikes again. Utah overcomes the ghosts of the rivalries past. Could this possibly be a permanent exorcism? Still unclear, but what is known is the Cougars are still struggling with the ghosts of their kicking game, which has not made a game winner in over 10 years.

The kicking game is a major problem for both teams this year, but the Cougars also face two other problems: The Riley Problem, and The Bronco Problem.

The Riley Problem

I've said plenty of times that Riley is not a good quarterback. However, Riley is a tremendous fighter. In fact the big difference between BYU quitting last season, and fighting back this season is a direct correlation to who they had behind Center. Jake Heaps was a spoiled brat who shied away from contact, and folded easily. Riley Nelson however loves contacts, never shies away from a hit, and never gives up on a play or a game. As a result the Cougars were able to scratch and claw their way back. Just look at Riley at the end of the game, he was beaten, bloodied, and battered.

However, everything that makes Riley good, is also a huge problem for BYU. Riley Nelson's style of play will get him hurt this year. Nelson will miss extended time in either a single game, or multiple games this year.

Outside of the risk of injury, the style of play Riley pursues is dangerous. Riley will never give up on a play, and will fight and claw to make any sort of play. This works great against athletically lesser teams and defenses. However against teams on his level or better, it's just asking for danger. This was clearly on display this week. Riley's fire is what caused his ability to rip a fumble recovery out of the hands of Nate Fakahafua. However, it was his fire, and his needing to make the big play that allowed the fumble to happen in the first place. Riley had multiple fumbles during the game that were a direct result of him trying to do too much, and a couple more plays that were initially (dumbly) ruled a fumble before being overturned via instant replay. But really does anyone feel comfortable with fumbles being overturned by replay? Especially with the crew that was calling the game. (Who also by the way helped call the San Diego State game in 2010 against BYU.)

This is similar to last year against TCU. Riley will make a lot of plays to keep a game competitive, or even bring the Cougars back in the game. The problem is, Riley will make a lot of plays for the opposing team as well, with less than recommended decisions.

Riley has only lost twice since taking over as starter last season, but it's no coincidence that both those losses came to the two most athletic teams he's faced. With a schedule coming up that includes Boise State, Notre Dame, Georgia

Tech, and even Utah State, all of whom are equal to or better than BYU, especially from an athletic defense standpoint, Riley Nelson could cause some severe damage to the Cougars.

While BYU loves when Riley evades an oncoming defender, and throws up a prayer that Hoffman comes down with, they hate when Riley evades a defender, keeps looking downfield, and gets drilled by a defender, or throws up a prayer that the defense intercepts. Problems that BYU didn't face against the likes of Washington State, and Weber State. Problems they won't face against Idaho, San Jose State, or New Mexico. But problems they will be facing in a few more games this year.

The Bronco Problem

Bigger than the Riley problem is the Bronco problem. BYU just wasn't prepared to face Utah. BYU rarely seems prepared to face Utah under Bronco. Not to mention there were plenty of coaching blunders, and Bronco was just out coached by Kyle.

When the game got tight, Kyle made adjustments, Bronco didn't.

Bronco has already admitted that he didn't give the noise enough focus during the week, and it was obvious that the Cougars struggled with the noise of the crowd as they committed multiple false starts penalties, and wasted timeouts. He's already said he overestimated his seniors abilities to withstand the noise, and should have practiced it more during the week.

Over the last two years the Cougars have fumbled 11 times against Utah. That points to preparation, or lack thereof. It's also a problem that occurs when you don't hit during fall camp. You can work on technique all you want, but that doesn't prepare you to actually hold onto the ball when you are being hit.

As for coaching decisions there were plenty to wonder about. Starting on BYU's first drive, when facing a 4th a short, Riley looked to the sideline to determine if they were going for it or punting. Bronco told Riley to stay out there. As Riley came to the line, Bronco then sent out his punt team. Then Bronco tried to call his punt team back as the ball was snapped. 4th and short turns into 4th and 6.

The biggest coaching blunder however was the decision to run a play with 8 seconds to go. It's obvious that Bronco didn't have faith in his kickers, but with 8 seconds to go, and no time outs, a final pass play never should have been ran. Especially with Riley Nelson, who isn't exactly the strongest arm, or doesn't have the best internal clock.

Each of the games the last few years have had a lot of "what if" moments for both teams. But in the end the team that's the most poised, and makes the most plays, wins the game. Utah has generally been that team, and that's a result of coaching.

It doesn't just extend to Utah for Bronco. This is how his teams usually come out in big games. Now Bronco is a good-ish coach. He's won 10 games in a season 5 times, and has over 60 wins during his career. The problem is the majority of those wins are built on lesser opponents. The Cougars hit their plateau in 2006 and 2007, and hasn't improved the last few years and frequently regress.

One thing you can say for Bronco is his teams always beat the teams they should. They haven't ever suffered a UNLV or Colorado level loss during his tenure. The problem is Broncos teams rarely beat the teams they shouldn't. Really the only example was 2009 against Oklahoma after knocking out Sam Bradford, but that Oklahoma team turned out to be very average.

Bronco's built a legend as a coach who's team has averaged 10 wins a year. Problem is that legend is built on the backs of midgets, as most of those wins came against dogs.

View From The Red Zone

After missing out on the Northern Colorado game due to travel, and having the Oregon St./Nicholls St. game I was going to attend in Oregon get postponed due to the Hurricane, I finally made it to a game this year, and boy it felt so good to be back.

It's too bad that the crowd, 6th largest in Utah history, will be remembered for the end of the game, because it almost ruined what was the loudest, most rowdy crowd I have ever seen at Rice-Eccles Stadium. This crowd was unbelievably loud. Enough so that my ears were still ringing a couple hours later. This crowd's intensity matched the crowd at the

beginning of the 2010 TCU game (before they got trampled by the horned frogs), and it matched the intensity of the end of the 2008 TCU game, where the CBS cameras were shaking. Only this crowd was that loud from start to finish. Even when the ghosts of rivalries past were showing their head, this crowd was crazy.

And for once the South East corner didn't shrink down leaving the gap in seats.

For all the talk of this rivalry dying down, it definitely didn't feel that way judging by the fans. It's clear the fans want this thing to continue. Maybe that's why they tried to extend the game, they figured they could just keep it going through the Hiatus.

It's fun to watch Star Lotulelei. The guy is a beast, who would shrug off double teams, and man handle single teams. Although my favorite moment watching him, was at the end of the first half, when BYU was deep in the North End Zone and eventually penalized themselves to the 2 yard line. Star lined up over the center, and you could just see him trash talking the Center. His face mask was bobbing up and down as he was barking whatever trash he was saying.

Finally the Utes are trying to start a new tradition. Due to a disagreement, possibly over the Crazy Lady wanting financial considerations for her expenses, the Utes moved the Crazy Lady from the start of the 4th quarter, to 4:00 left in the half, to welcome the fans to the second half.

In it's place, the Utes have started a new tradition to begin the 4th quarter this season. They bring out a large Taiko drum on carts, with 4 other smaller drums. The drums roll to around mid field, where the Utes pound out a War-Drum like melody. At the end of the drumming, a cannon is fired multiple times.

I like it. In fact, I like it a lot. It did a good job of getting fired up. The Cannon is loud enough you can feel the shockwave in the North End Zone, even though it's fired from the gap between the East and South bleachers. I'll try to get a video of it during the USC game, but overall I was generally impressed.

State Special Teams

Why do the teams in this state not realize that Special Teams are 1/3rd of the game. Utah, Utah State, and BYU all missed important field goals this year, with the Aggies missing a game winner, and BYU missing two game winners.

For BYU it's a little worrisome that their normal place kicker has a career long of 33 yards. That's not very good. That means, just to get into the outer edges of his range, they must get the ball to the 16 yard line. And honestly anytime you are within the Red Zone, and settle for a field goal, it's more like you are giving up 4 points, rather than scoring three. Justin Sorenson, who the Cougars brought in for the first 54 yard attempt, isn't much better. While he has actually connected from farther than 33 yards, he's only 51% on any kick greater than 30 yards in his three year career.

Utah's place kicking issue with Peterson is well known, and came into play again this year with a kick that was blocked. A short kick that never should have been kicked as low as was. With Peterson, one has to wonder if he's now just mentally gone. Punting wise, Utah's punter, Sean Sellwood, leads the nation in punting average, so if he can get it off, it's usually a good kick. That's if he can get it off, as the Utes struggled to block the rush for the second straight week. Utah has also given up a blocked punt for a touchdown in three consecutive years, including last year against Todd Graham's Pittsburgh Panthers. Ironically for Utah, one of Sellwood's smarter decisions ended up helping to put Utah in the nailbiter position.

When BYU broke through on the punt, Sellwood realized they were there, and pulled the ball down, and took a loss of 6 yards, giving BYU the ball at the 14 yard line. Had he kicked the ball there's a good chance it goes out of the end zone from there for a safety, meaning BYU would have been probably been down by 8 points at the end of the game, instead of three, meaning they'd have needed a hailmary pass instead of driving for a figgie. Had they got the touchdown they still would have needed to convert the two point conversion.

Of course there's always the chance that BYU just gets the TD off of the block and would have had more time at the end of the game, which is exactly why Sellwood's smart decision was the right call.

The teams in this state must realize that special teams count as 1/3rd of the game. Special Teams have already cost three games this season (BYU missing the game tying kick this week, Utah missing the game winner against Utah State, as well as the blocked punt, and Utah State missing the game winner this week against Wisconsin.) If something doesn't get figured out, even more games will be lost by the State's Short Yellow Bus Special Teams.

Roller Coaster Week

Alas on of the negatives of playing the Rivalry this week, is it means there is more season left to play. For the Cougars, they must put behind them a roller coast week. A week that began so good for BYU with the loss of Utah to the Aggies, and the Cougars rolling against Weber State, got a little bit better with news that John White IV, and Eric Rowe may not play.

Then the week started to turn on Tuesday, as rumors of back problems for Riley came to light.

News got bad on Wednesday when Notre Dame announced they were pseudo joining the ACC, and would play 5 games a year against ACC opponents. Though it's not yet known, one has to wonder what this means for the BYU/Notre Dame contract. A contract that would provide a quality November opponent may now be in trouble. Notre Dame now has 5 contracted ACC games. While the ACC game will probably include their rivalry games with Boston College, and Pittsburgh, there are plenty of rivalries that will still need to be scheduled. If you take 5 ACC games, that leaves 7 more games for Army, Navy, Michigan, Michigan State, USC, Stanford, Purdue, all of whom Notre Dame plays annually or mostly annually. Will BYU get the nod over one of those 7?

Finally the week hit rock bottom on Saturday, where their bowl destination, when they become eligible, was determined. The Cougars now know they'll be going to the Poinsettia Bowl in the postseason. And now to make things worse they have to take one of the most torturous drives up through Idaho into Boise. There's a reason why the only good thing about driving through Idaho is the "Your are now leaving Idaho" signs at the border.

Bring On The Smurf Turf

The Cougars make the horrid trek through Idaho to face the Boise State Broncos in the first of what BYU hopes becomes an almost annual rivalry type game. For some reason many think that the Broncos will fall back to earth and become mediocre now that Kellen Moore is gone.

Apparently those people have forgotten that Boise was good before Moore got there. They seem to have forgotten that in 2004, the Bronco were also undefeated in the regular season, only to be overshadowed by the Utes. They seem to have forgotten the 2006 Fiesta Bowl against Oklahoma.

Boise State won a national championship as a Junior College. They were a great Division II team, and won a national champion as a 1-AA team. When they were a meager big sky team, they were giving teams fits, including the Cougars and the Utes who both have nightmare performances. They've been to and won two BCS bowl games.

Boise State is led by a system, not a player. A system that is ran to perfection thanks to head coach Chris Petersen. In week one Boise State gave Michigan State all it could handle before finally falling. The Broncos may have pains adjusting to life without Moore, and may not be a threat to make the title game like they have the years past, but make no mistake, this is a really good team.

The Broncos have a defense, and a defense front that is fast and opportunistic. A defense that will look to take advantage of a BYU offensive line who played poorly this past week, and will be without Houston Reynolds for the remainder of the year. Joe Southwick, who replaces Moore, is not some wide eyed freshman, but is instead a Junior who has seen plenty of plays due to blowouts by Boise.

Most importantly the Cougars need to shake off the rivalry game. If the Cougars aren't mentally over the events of this past Saturday, they could struggle with the Broncos, a team that already matches up pretty well with the Cougars.

To make matters worse, it must be a quick turnaround for the Cougars. From a game that ended at 11:59p.m. on Saturday Night, to a 7:00p.m. Thursday kickoff.

Into The Conference

For Utah, they must also shake off the events of this past weekend. In the end, no matter how great it is to beat the rivals, the game means nothing in their ultimate quest of a Rose Bowl. That quest begins in earnest this weekend with a trip to Tempe to face the Arizona State Sun Devils.

Last year the Sun Devils were the opponent for Jon Hays' first start. However that team was coached by Dennis Erickson. This year the Sun Devils are coached by Todd Graham. The Utes and Todd Graham's 2011 team, the Pittsburgh Panthers, are responsible for one of the ugliest, make your eyes bleed games of last season.

Last year the Utah defense stifled, and stuffed Graham's offense, holding them to 120 yards. Utah's own offensive futility made it a game nobody ever wants to see again, as the Utes won 26-14.

Nobody wants this year's matchup to be similar. Arizona State seems to have more talent offensively than Graham's Pittsburgh team did, and it's shown up on the score board through the first three weeks, as the Sun Devils average 42.7 points per game. However the defenses they've faced do leave a little to be desired.

For the Utes, they seemed to make many good adjustments between the USU and BYU games. More adjustments will be made.

Supposedly John White will be back from injury, which is a must for the Utes. Their running game without him was absolutely anemic, and despite being somewhat improved in 2012, Utah does not want to leave the game in the hands of Jon Hays.

One offensive adjustment that must be made quickly is letting Tyler Wilson throw the ball. BYU knew immediately whenever Wilson came into the game, the next play was a run. If the opponent knows Wilson is going to run, it does no good putting him in there. Utes need to dial up passes for Wilson on 3 of his next 4 appearances, minimum. The passes don't even have to be completed, they simply need to be thrown.

Defensively the Utes get Brian Blechen back off of his "I'm an idiot" suspension. Blechen will be a needed boost to a defense who has missed out on a few opportunities during the past three weeks. Some of those dropped int's, and missed fumbles will be scooped up now that Blechen is patrolling the middle. Most importantly Blechen was a huge force against the run, helping out the line backers from his safety spot.

It's hard to get a good read on Utah even after last week. They won the game despite the change in quarterback, and with 3 of the 4 best players gone. How will this team be at full strength. We know the defense will keep them in it, but the offense must respond and get at least 24 points of their own.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 15:58

Tuesday, September 11. 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin: Holy War Podcast

The 2nd episode of the podcast is now available.

Download it here. We are currently working on some issues with iTunes, since they've changed their server requirements recently.

Errata

This is what happens when timing requires you to record a podcast before all events are completed. Shortly after completion of the podcast, the Utes got trampled by the Aggies, and in the process, Jordan Wynn suffered a career ending injury. This is all addressed in this week's article.

Also I made the complete brain fart of thinking Reggie Dunn had graduated.

As usual reader/listener interaction is encouraged. Please leave comments with feedback, suggestions, or anything else.

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Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 16:43

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Two weeks down, and about ten weeks too early, but the Holy War is upon us. And with the Cougars taking care of business against an overmatched Weber State Wildcats, while the Utes come in licking their wounds after being ambushed in Logan, it's time to see how these two teams match up. Stop Me If You've Heard This One Before

Knock, Knock.
Who's There?
Pride
Pride who?
Pride cometh before the fall

After a summer spent being the obnoxious big brother, the Utes rolled into Logan for a Friday night matchup, possibly the last one ever in Logan. Based on the way they performed, it seems as if the Utes were also expecting to just roll out of Logan unscathed. Instead Gary Andersen and the Aggies, absolutely took it to the Utes, beat the Utes up, and became the only Utah based team to beat all 4 other Utah based teams since 2010.

The Utes were mentally out of the game, committing mistakes from the outset. A Delay of game on the 2nd play. A Blocked Punt. Terrible penalties. A Possible "Punch". An ill-timed snap, and the Utes were sitting in a 13-0 hole

And then a career ended.

Utah would eventually get things straightened out and fight and claw their way back into the game, eventually tying the game at 13, and then again at 20, before losing 27-20 in overtime.

The best QB in the state, Chucky Keeton, was able evade, and elude pressure all night, causing the line backers, and secondary to get out of position.

In the end, a possible promising season, is now sitting on the edge of derailment, after the Utes came into the game having overlooked the Aggies. The Aggies made sure to make Utah pay for it.

Thanks For The Memories

Near the end of the 2nd quarter, Utah QB, now former Utah QB, Jordan Wynn went down with another shoulder injury. It was announced on Monday that Wynn will retire from the program.

Wynn looked to regain some zip on his ball in week one, and it was hoped that he had worked out some of the nerves. It was obvious from the outset on Friday, that this was not the case.

Wynn came out and seemed shell shocked from the moment the game started. He was never comfortable under center. Folded too easily from the pressure, and just seemed confused.

Even has Wynn not suffered the injury to force his hand, it was obvious that he was done for good. It's a sad thing. I've admitted that I like Wynn. He was a fighter. Unfortunately for him, his body was never able to match up with talent, and desire. As fans we give our hearts and souls to our teams. Wynn gave that, and his body.

His body, could never catch up with his talent, and eventually that just played with his mind too much. Personally I will choose to remember the Jordan Wynn from the first of 2010, and the Poinsettia Bowl in 2009, before injuries overtook him. I'm glad that he's making the decision to step away from the game before it does more damage than it's already done. He'll have another surgery, but hopefully he'll still be able to one day hold his children, which wouldn't have been possible if he kept playing.

The Next Era

So the easy joke when Wynn went down, is that it was the best thing to happen to the Utes. Especially after Hays came in and started 6 of 8, and helped lead the Utes back into a tie.

However the truth is the Utes are still unsettled at QB. Jon Hays definitely has the backing of the team, and is a fighter, and has the desire to be a good QB. He just doesn't have the talent. Once the Aggies adjusted to Hays, the Offense fell stagnant, much like it did for the majority of last season.

Hays always seems just a moment too slow, either in his passing, or in his decision making. There was hope that if Hays had a full offseason with the team, it would result in a greater mastery of the position, but this just isn't so.

As for true Freshman Travis Wilson, he definitely has the fan's edge behind him. He's a big monster of a QB, who definitely enjoys being out there. But the truth is, even in what little we've seen of him, he just is not ready. On the Flea Flicker TD Pass he threw on Friday, it was a pretty pass in the air, but it was a bad decision, and he had to be bailed out by Kenneth Scott.

While Wilson also gives the Utes another weapon with his legs, his decision making while running the Zone Read option play is still suspect, as multiple times in the past two weeks you could see Wilson clearly make the wrong choice.

Wilson is the future of the Utes. There's no doubt about it. But the future just isn't now. Hays is the guy, but the offense is going to end up being a lot like last year, and relying a ton on John White IV. Unfortunately this year, they don't have two all conference tackles on the line.

It Could Always Be Worse

At least the Utes didn't suffer the most embarrassing loss of the week. That would belong to formerly 8th ranked Arkansas, who had strong National Championship hope. That is of course until the Karmic Justice sledge hammer came down and wumped the Razorbacks for originally hiring Bobby Petrino, and for the way John L Smith abandoned the Weber State Wildcats, as the Razorbacks lost to the University of Louisiana-Monroe.

Also at least we're not this lady.

Podcast Note

There is a podcast to go with this week's article. Unfortunately due to the fact we had to record Friday, prior to Utah State game, when you listen to it, remember the timing, and that it was recorded before certain events dramatically altered the course of the Utes.

Although that doesn't excuse the brain fart I had when I said Reggie Dunn wasn't with the team anymore.

Savor The Moment

It's always astonishing that something that is so good, because of the animosity present in it, animosity that has been involved in the rivalry for decades, and not just since 2003, can produce so many wonderful, enjoyable moments. The Holy War is one of the greatest rivalries in the entire nation. The last twenty years, especially, has seen one magic moment, after one magic moment.

Unfortunately, the bomb that has lingered over the rivalry since the Utes were invited to the Pac-12 was dropped this past offseason. There are plenty of reasons, and arguments why, but no matter what side you fall on, it's bad news, that this rivalry will be going away for two years in 2014, and 2015. That means we are left with only two more games, before the first break in annual play between Utah and BYU since World War II.

At this time, I would also like to make the announcement, that I will be taking a hiatus from the special holy war roster breakdown edition of Red, Blue And Pigskin for the 2014 and 2015 seasons. However, I'm more than ready to begin the breakdown for the 2013 season. So without further ado.

Schedule

With only two weeks to go it's hard to get a feel for either teams schedule, as much of the season is left to be played. However, I don't need an entire season to know that BYU's first two weeks was tougher than Utah's first two weeks, if only because the Utes opened up the season against a team that had lost 18 of it's previous 19 games, and was one of the worst teams in Div. 1-AA. It doesn't matter that BYU played one of the worst AQ teams in week one, followed by a better than average Div 1-AA team in the Wildcats. About the only way Utah could have made their first two games tougher would have been to follow up with Alabama, or LSU in week 2, instead of Utah State.

Advantage: BYU

Quarterback

The QB position for both schools will be the most watched, and most scrutinized position all season. Both QB's will be under even more scrutiny than normally comes from the position.

Utah's Jordan Wynn came into the season with lots of concern about if he could stay healthy. He came out in week one with some butterflies and nerves, which led to an underthrown interception early. However as the game progressed Wynn was able to show off a lot of zip, and start to put to rest some concerns about his arm. Although there was still some question about the deep ball.

The Utes come into the game with serious questions about not on the present, but the future of the QB situation, as I discussed earlier.

Down south, the Cougars have a running back playing the position of Quarterback. Riley Nelson is a one read, huck it and pray style QB, but that didn't stop them from running an almost Air-Raid like offense in week 1. Nelson only played a half against the Wildcats, and at times looked great, going 10/10 on the three scoring drives, but there were also plenty of missed passes, and questionable throws to go with it. Nelson also was suffering from back spasms which is why he didn't come back in the 2nd half.

Many Cougar fans believe that if Nelson was quarterback during the game last year, it would still have been a blow out, but in the opposite direction. For my money a QB is better than a RB.

Advantage: Push

Running Backs

Both teams are top heavy at the running back position, and hoping that perceived depth becomes actual depth. For Utah, John White IV had the best single season in Utah history in 2011, and is looking to pick up where he left off. In the 2011 Holy War, White's numbers were large, but not representative of some of the success BYU had in the first half. However, White is the type of running back who gets better the more you feed the beast.

Backing up White, is JuCo transfer Kelvin York, and Jarrel Oliver, and early returns show that the Utes might finally have some real depth at the position

For BYU, the problem is remembering they have a good running back. Alisa is a solid downhill runner, who may just be stuck on the wrong team. Either his offensive coordinator forgets he's around and gets too enamored by the passing game, or they use him incorrectly, trying to get him out wide, when he should be running north and south.

Depth wise, the Cougars don't have any. After running off Josh Quezada in the off season, the Cougars will spend the first few weeks of the year finding the change of pace for Alisa. Of course their real change of pace running back, happens to be playing QB.

Advantage: Utah

Wide Receivers

Both Utah and BYU suffer from the same problem in their Wide Receiving corps. Questions as to whether someone can get them the ball.

As for the corps themselves, there is a lot of talent in this state at the WR position. Utes have the depth going with DeVonte Christopher, Dres Anderson, Luke Matthews, Kenneth Scott, Anthony Denham, Reggie Dunn and Quentin Pedroza. One major issue for the Utes is with DeVonte Christopher, and that his desire, and effort are often times lacking. No better example of this than the final play of the game against the Aggies.

Instead of going full on after the pass, which would have been a game tying TD, Christopher instead, tried to take the easy way out and hope to get bailed out by the officials with a Pass Interference call. It's clear that Christopher didn't give full effort on the pass. It wasn't the first time this game that happened, nor the first time this season.

The Cougars top two match, if not exceed the Utes top two with Cody Hoffman, and Ross Apo. However after the top it's a bit slim pickings, with only JD Falslev really being known.

The Utes have slightly more options, and a bit more speed, however the major questions now at QB makes one wonder if, much like last year, the Utes will get the most out of their WR depth.

Advantage: Push

Tight Ends

For years the tight ends have been a position of historical strength for the Cougars, as the Utes decided to ignore the position for years. Now things are starting to change, as the Cougars are in a transitional phase looking for their next TE, while the Utes seem to have a few tools to use.

Jake Murphy, son of BYU, and Alanta Brave baseball great, Dale Murphy seems to be getting the early lead as the main man for Utah, and has definitely become a favorite dump off valve for Jordan Wynn. Behind Wynn the Utes have Westlee Tonga looking to surprise, and Kendrick Moeai coming off a season ending injury a year ago. A fourth option for the Utes is Dallin Rogers, who was actually caught passes from Utah offensive coordinator Brian Johnson.

For the Cougars Kaneakua Friel had a breakout performance in week one with over 100 yards receiving and two TD's. Other than Friel, the Cougars have a slew of tight ends trying to make their mark with Austin Holt, Marcus Matthews,

and Devin Mahina, who's returning from a broken neck.

Both teams are unsure about their tight end position. Both teams have a bunch of players still trying to sort out their spots on the depth chart.

Advantage: Push

Offensive Line

How do you replace two all conference tackles? That's the question the Utes are trying to answer. In addition, the Utes are also struggling with a line that is undersized in it's conference. While the Utes brought in a lot of line talent during the recruiting period this season, the line as a whole is extremely unsettled, especially at the tackle positions where they are hoping to be able to replace Bergstrom, and Cullen from last season.

Against the Aggies, the Utes OL struggled mightily. Unable to open up holes for White, and unable to protect either of the QB's back there, the Utes OL looked very vulnerable. While this did improve in the 2nd half after some adjustments were made, it's still a very big concern.

The Cougars don't have a bunch of depth, but may look to have some solid starters, led by Braden Brown, who could be an all american candidate this season. One area of concern is Bronco Mendenhall's decision to rotate the center during the games. This is nothing but a recipe for disaster. The relationship and chemistry between QB and Center is arguably the most important part of the game, and insisting on messing with it, because the coach can't figure out who he likes best, is asking for trouble.

If the coach can stay out of their way, and they can stay healthy, the Cougars could have a stout offensive line. Something they'll need to face the Utah Defensive Line.

Advantage: BYU

Defensive Line

Star Lotulelei is the best football player in the state, and it isn't even close. That's not to denigrate the other players, as the second best player in the state is really freaking good (see Linebackers). Star is just on a level to himself. Because Star is so good other teams must double team him. That's bad news when his line mates are players like Joe and Dave Kruger, Trevor Reilly or Nate Fakahafua. And that's just the first wave. Trevor Reilly is such a playmaker he's listed as a starter in three spots on the depth chart.

When Utah has to sub, they are still bringing in players that could start on other teams.

Meanwhile, BYU's defensive line is a little bit light on depth. It's anchored by Eathyn Manumaleuna who always seems to give the Utes some fits. The Cougars are also hoping that Romney Fuga can return to the form he was showing prior to a brutal injury two years ago.

This is the biggest mismatch between the two teams.

Advantage: Utah

Linebackers

The only well known linebacker for the Utes is Trevor Reilly. Yes the same Trevor Reilly who plays on the defensive line. Outside of Reilly, Utah's linebackers leave a little bit to be desired, and are generally considered the weak link on the defense. This was evident last Friday, as the LB's were constantly out of position, opening up the middle for Chucky Keeton. The LB's were also very concerned about Keeton and his legs, as they would bite too much on the play action. Things should improve a little bit when Brian Blechen comes back from his "Being a moron" suspension.

For BYU, they only happen to have the second best football player in the state roaming the field as their Lineback. Kyle Van Oy is an amazing freak of an athlete. Van Oy is able to move from sideline to sideline in the blink of an eye, and is very reminiscent of a Brian Urlacher or a Ray Lewis, only much more raw. If there is a defensive play being made, you can usually bet Kyle Van Oy is involved. Much like Lotulelei's mere presence on field must be accounted for by Utah opponents, Van Oy roaming the middle is something that all opposing players must watch out for.

Uona Kaveinga and Spencer Hadley are too good, to very good linebackers who round out BYU's biggest positional advantage.

Advantage: BYU

Secondary

The Utes have been known for their secondary for the past few years. Unfortunately it's been a secondary that they've had to completely rebuild each of the past two or three years. This season it's not the case. The Utes have senior leadership at the corner positions with former WR Mo Lee, and Ryan Lacy. In Nickel will be Reggie Topps, who the Utes plan to use in a fashion similar to Lamar Chapman in 2010, when Chapman had 5 sacks.

At the safety position the Utes will feel the pain of Brian Blechen's suspension most in this game, but still are led by Eric Rowe who turned heads as a true freshman last year. Quade Chappuis will feel in for Blechen.

Bronco Mendenhall likes to say that this year is the most athletic secondary they've had in his time there. He seems to like to say it every year, but at least they don't have a 5'6" starting cornerback. The secondary for BYU is led by junior Daniel Sorensen. Senior Preston Hadley will try to take over the hard hitting role vacated by Jordan Pendleton and Travis Uale.

The Cougars secondary must still prove to everyone that they have the speed to match up.

Advantage: Utah

Special Teams

Utah's kicking game will cost them at least two games this year if something doesn't get figured out. Coleman Petersen has been shaky at best, and dreadful the rest of the time. The only hope for him, is that since BYU isn't from the state of Colorado, maybe all of his kicks will make it through the upright. Of course, the real hope, is that the Utes just get fed up with him, and go for it on 4th down, and go for two every time, and not even give him a chance to screw up.

BYU's kicking game meanwhile is dependable, if not spectacular, which in all honesty is really what you hope for.

In the return game, both teams have players capable of making big contributions, but have yet to find the consistency hoped for.

Advantage: BYU

Coaching

Two people who are probably not too upset over the hiatus of the rivalry are coaches Bronco Mendenhall, and Kyle Whittingham, if only because it means that for those two years, their interaction with each other will be lessened. Mutual dislike aside, the two have found success at their current gigs.

Bronco is 67-24 in his career as is Kyle.

Last year's 54-10 blowout put the record in Kyle's favor during the rivalry game at 4-3.

Postseason Bronco has won 5 of his 7 bowl games, Kyle has only lost 1 of his 8 attempts. (Kyle is recognized as co-Head Coach for the 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). With this criteria in mind Bronco is 15-19 in big games, while Kyle comes in at 20-14.

High point for Bronco is still 2006-2007 and 2 consecutive undefeated years in conference. 11 wins both seasons, and beating Oregon and UCLA in consecutive Vegas Bowl.

Kyle's high point also hasn't changed, but it's hard to top 13-0 and beating Alabama in the Sugar Bowl to finished as the 2nd ranked team, and only undefeated team in the nation.

Low Point for Bronco is the ridiculous decision to go with, and stick with the two QB system in 2010, and then trying to

distance himself from any responsibility for the decision. For Kyle it's hard to get lower than being shut out by UNLV in 2007.

Coaching Staff: Bronco still likes to handle the defensive coordinator duties, and Offensive Coordinator Brandon Doman is still getting accustomed to life in charge of the Offense. Meanwhile for Utah, Brian Johnson is not only in his first year as Offensive Coordinator, but he's the youngest OC in the country. Johnson will experience some growing pains during the season, and hopefully as the season goes along he'll look less and less like Andy Ludwig as early returns seem to suggest. There are many think defensive coordinator Kalani Sitake is in line for a head coaching gig of his own in the very near future.

Discipline And Adjustments: Both teams are typically light on off the field incidents, Brian Blechen's moronic suspension not withstanding. On the field both teams tend to be a little to prone to penalties. Adjustment wise, the Utes tend to be better in the second half, especially the third quarter, while with BYU what you get in the first quarter, is typically what you get in quarters 2, 3 and 4.

Coaching will be a huge factor in this game, as the Utes staff needs to bounce back, after being out classed against Utah State, while the Cougars coaching staff must make sure to keep the Cougars grounded after playing to weakly talented teams so far this season.

Advantage: Utah

The Crowd

The Rice-Eccles crowd is going to be rowdy. This is going to be a crowd that makes BYU Graduate Assistant Max Hall laugh. With kickoff being so late in the day, it's going to leave Utah fans with a lot of time to tailgate. Unfortunately that also means there is going to be a lot of time for some Utah fans to be drinking. Factor in the added facts that this isn't just any opponent, and it's the last Holy War in Rice-Eccles until 2016, and this crowd is going to be amped up, excited, drunk, and belligerent.

While the noise will be good, and the Muss and North End Zone will be rocking, I dread listening to the post game incidents that are sure to happen.

Advantage: Utah... Until Post Game

X-Factors

There are some things in this game, that as a Utah fan have me a little uneasy. First off is the whole power play move of Utah's. I've said before that I think putting the rivalry on Hiatus has done more post Pac-12 to reignite the rivalry than anything Utah could have done. Being such BYU will be gunning to stick it to Utah to make their last game at Rice-Eccles before the Hiatus, which Utah is responsible for, a loss.

Add into it that BYU is wanting to make up for last year's extreme embarrassment.

It's also been publicly said by BYU Coach Mendenhall, that without a conference, BYU's first goal every season is to win the State.

There's also the fact that it's extremely hard to win three times in a row during this rivalry.

Finally Brian Blechen's suspension will hurt the Utes the most in this game. Blechen is great sneaking up from his safety/line back spot and spying the back field, especially a qb out of the back field. Blechen would have been a great Riley stopper for this game. As it is now, a key for Utah will be finding someone who can keep Riley Nelson in check.

Advantage: BYU

Final Thoughts

Utah was definitely the best team in 2011, but they weren't 44 points better. They were closer to the team that led by 24 points with only a +1 turnover margin, before BYU gave up last year. The team that led only by 4 points to start the 2nd half.

In all honesty, as a Utah fan I worry about this game, and I did before the results of last Friday. Before week two, I would have (and did on the podcast) say that on paper, the Utes shouldn't really have a problem this year, but that is when weird things happen in this series. After last week's game, I still believe that, on paper, the Utes are still the better team. But how much better they are remains to be seen. Were they simply overlooking the Aggies, and had read too much of their own press clippings? How will they respond at the QB situation? I still think Utah will win this game, but

Blog Export: Annals of the Homestarmy, <http://www.thehomestarmy.com/s9y/>

I'm bracing for something closer to the memorable moment creating norm of the Holy War, than the blowout outlier of 2011.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 16:42

Tuesday, September 4, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

The results are in, and all returns are as expected. With the first week of games in the books, there were relatively few surprise. The Utes rolled an opponent they had no business even being on the field with, meanwhile down in Provo, the Cougars got walloped. In All Honesty

Just wanted to give a quick note about this week. Holiday travel limited my actual viewing of either Utah and BYU to one quarter of the Utah game. And I won't have been able to watch a recording of either game until after this is posted. So all analysis of this game, is based mostly on Radio listening, and internet post game reports.

Mission Accomplished

With such an absolutely dreadful opponent, there's not much the Utes could actually gain from last week's matchup. But they could have lost a lot by suffering a major injury. The Utes were able to make it through the entire game without a major injury. In doing such, they accomplished the biggest goal of the week.

So what about the rest of the game? What can we take from it.

Any analysis has to take into account the quality (not much) of opponent, but early returns show the Defense may even better than advertised. Northern Colorado crossed midfield once. On the game they gained 114 yards of total offense, or about 5 yards less than the Wolfman John White gained on his 25 carries. In fact, about the only thing that was stopping Utah defenders from making plays, were other Utah defenders making plays. On multiple occasions a Utah Linebacker (usually Trevor Reily), or secondary member was in perfect position, or had jumped a route, and ready to return an interception for a pick-six. Unfortunately for them, the ball was being batted down earlier on by a defensive lineman (usually Nate Fakahafua.)

Overall, a very good performance by a defensive unit that will keep the Utes in most games this year.

The Worry Wasn't On the Defense

Offensively, it wasn't as glowing of a review. The Offense started slow, even ending the first quarter in a 0-0 tie. QB Jordan Wynn started slow, under throwing a deep pass on the first drive intended for Dres Anderson, that was intercepted. However, once he, and the rest of the offense settled in, and shook off the rust, the Utes started chugging, with Wynn himself, actually looking a bit impressive. Gone was the floating ducks, and side arm delivery of last year. Instead Wynn looked to have regained some strength and velocity.

In the running game, John White looked a lot like John White. Takes about a quarter to get going, but hard to stop, and someone who will keep chugging away. The big difference from 2011, is that the depth hoped for during off season camps, looks to actually be legit, and backups Kelvin York, and Jarrell Oliver both delivered some nice carries in back duties.

In the booth, Offensive Coordinator Brian Johnson had a solid debut. The Utes looked to have a good run/pass ratio, as well as seemed to do a good job in mixing up plays, and packages.

Of course, they were playing Northern Colorado, so there's that.

The Extreme Negative

Of course, there was one bit of worry, that is legit, whether the opponent is Northern Colorado, or USC. For the 2nd consecutive regular season game, the Utes hosted a team from the state of Colorado. Apparently teams from Colorado are kicking Kryptonite for the Utes, as Coleman Petersen, of the 3 missed chip shot field goal frame against Colorado, missed another gimme field goal, and an extra point.

Utah kicking game was a major point of concern in the off season, and it seems like it was good to worry. Coleman Petersen was shaky most of 2011, culminating in his ultimate collapse in the Colorado game. In the bowl game against Georgia Tech, Petersen, again seemed shaky, as he came close to missing a few extra points.

It may be time to look at replacing Petersen on the field goal unit with Kickoff kicker Nick Marsh. If the kicking game doesn't get figured out, it will cost Utah at least two games during the season.

Now That The Exhibitions Are Done

Next week, the Utes actually play a real team. For possibly the last time ever, the Utes will travel through Logan Canyon play the Aggies at Romney Stadium. The Aggies had their best season in many decades last year, but are trying to replace two great players in LB Bobby Wagner, and RB Robert Turbin. The Aggies showed the running game will still be in effect against Southern Utah, by having three rushers over 50 yards, led by Joe Hill's 119.

Due to injuries to Wynn and Nelson, the Aggies have arguably the best QB in the state with true sophomore Chucky Keeton. However, the Aggies did suffer an injury to backup Adam Kennedy.

The Aggies represent a bit more than the group of luke-warm bodies the Utes faced in week one. The Aggies very well could be sleeper pick to be the final WAC champion ever, and could be a bit of a trap game, if the Utes are to busy thinking about the Holy War the next week.

Schemes Are Great, But Players Matter

When Mike Leach took the job at Washington State, most pundits started reliving his glory days, when his Air Raid offense tore up Big XII defenses. They imagined Washington State taking the field with the same high powered offense we're used to. And it may still happen, but here's the thing about any great scheme, if you don't have the right players, you'll fail every time.

And that essentially is why Washington State may be in for a bit more dark before the dawn.

It doesn't surprise me one bit that the Cougars from Pullman, Washington were out classed, out played, and completely embarrassed by the Cougars from Provo, Utah. Leach may eventually bring his offense to Washington, but it will take a while for him to get the right players, and to get his scheme set up. It also doesn't help that Leach's team typically treat the defensive side of the ball as an interruption that happens between offensive possessions.

All that being said, it was a nice defensive performance by BYU to keep Washington State out of the end zone. The first time since 2006 that a Mike Leach team failed to score a touch down. Led by Kyle Van Oy, who was all over the field, the Cougars flummoxed Washington State, and specifically senior QB Jeff Teul, who may not be the starter for long.

Air Raid-Ish

The one surprise of the game, was that the Cougars from Provo actually had a bit of Air Raid like aspects to their offense. Again it helps that they were playing against a Mike Leach defense, but Riley Nelson and company were moving the ball at will early in the game. There were a couple concerns though.

First Cody Hoffman suffered an injury to his thigh and did not return. With next week's game against Weber State, chances are he won't be on the field again until the Holy War. Secondly, it sounded like Riley Nelson, was still taking too many hits. Something that will continue to happen, if the Cougars insist on rotating the interior of their offensive line.

I also noticed the announcers of the game talking about Nelson having a tendency to under throw some of his throws, and since the announcers were Greg Wrubell and company, (whose homerism makes my 11-1 prediction last week look down to earth) I'm shocked the negativity was mentioned, especially considering Riley under throwing isn't exactly a surprise.

One major surprise for the Cougars from Provo, was the breakout performance of tight end Kaneakua Friel who caught 6 passes for 101 yards and two TD's.

Everyone's Favorite Player

They say that everyone's favorite player is the backup quarterback. Especially when your starter is someone the fan base isn't exactly sold on due to injuries, or lack of talent. Both BYU, and Utah's backup QB this week only made the fans want them even more as both came in and scored touch downs on their first every plays.

Utah's true freshman Travis Wilson scored two TD's with his legs. Passing wise, we didn't get much to judge as he threw only two passes. Meanwhile down in Provo, the Cougars used Taysom Hill as their change of pace QB, who decided the best way to change the pace was with a 18 yard td pass to Friel to put the Cougars from Provo up 14-0.

Scrimmage Prior To The Holy War

Byu will play their garbage opponent this week, but at least they are helping out an in state team, as they welcome the Weber State Wildcats. Also Weber State has for the past few years been among the upper teams in Div 1-AA. However, after an offseason that saw them replace long time Head Coach Ron McBride, only to have the replacement burn tread on his way out of town to replace Petrino in Arkansas.

So two head coach changes in less than a single offseason has the wildcats in possible turmoil, and it'll be interesting to see how it manifests on the field.

Answers In Weeks Upcoming

Both Utah and BYU may not get complete answers to the questions around their team in the first two weeks, but with the schedules make steep improvements in quality starting in week three, how they manage to take any small lesson learned during the first couple weeks, will be the key to whether 2012 is successful.

Podcast Reminder

Just wanted to remind everyone that we will be recording the second episode of the podcast this upcoming Friday, in preparation for the Holy War. Reader participation is highly encouraged, so please send your thoughts, questions, and smack talk either in a comment on this blog or via email to unhollyram@gmail.com.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 09:17

Monday, August 27, 2012

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Game Week! One of the most beautiful phrases ever uttered. Of course "Game" next to any other word, is usually a guarantee of a great phrase, unless the other word is "cancelled". But I digress. It's time to celebrate, as this week, finally, football doth return anew. The New Season Smell

One of the best parts of the start of the season, is the hope and optimism for all teams is at it's highest. Typically nobodies dreams and expectations for the season have crumbled under cruel reality that is football. Utah's quarterback hasn't succumbed to yet another shoulder surgery. BYU playing in anything more important than the Poinsettia Bowl is still a possibility.

Starting this week, however, we will begin to find out the truth about these teams. But before we find out about reality, let's dwell in the realm of conjecture, and prediction for just a little longer.

A New Addition To RB&P

This season, I am going to do something I've been wanting to do for a couple years. The Red, Blue And Pigskin Podcast. The hope is to do 3 or 4 a year, and it will cover topics missed by the article, or just expand upon them. This season, the in depth season preview is in Podcast #1. Please go take a listen, and let me know your opinions, share your thoughts, and give me ideas. Also I would like some reader interaction for the Podcast. Podcast #2 will be for the Holy War game, and will probably be recorded the Friday before Utah State game.

Three Keys

While the full season preview may be in the Podcast, I wanted to touch on three keys points for Utah and BYU. These are the thoughts that will make or break either teams season in 2012.

QB - Both teams come into the season with QB's that are a bit of an enigma. For Utah, if he could stay healthy, Jordan Wynn would easily hold the title of the Best QB in the state. However, injury concerns have some wondering if he's even the best choice on his own team. Wynn has supposedly bulked up properly, and his new frame should be able to withstand the beating of a season. If Wynn can stay healthy, Utah can have a very successful season. If not, Utah is in a better position than they were last year, but it will still be a rough road. I'll be honest, I'm a Jordan Wynn fan, and think he'll make it through the entire year. In fact, all my predictions later are based on him staying healthy.

Down South meanwhile, the Cougars had addition by subtraction with the transfer of Diva Jake Heaps. There is the old saying that the most popular guy on any football team is the Backup QB, and last year Riley Nelson was definitely the popular guy. But what happens when that Backup, now becomes the starter? Riley Nelson is a tough, hard nosed, spirited football player. He plays with fire, energy, and determination. He's obviously a great team leader. This was noticeable in the way the Cougar players rallied around him. Where he has some questions, though, is his QB ability. Nelson is not a good QB. He's a hard nosed, power running back, who is playing the QB position. The key for the Cougars will be to see if Nelson can keep himself reigned in, and stay the QB, instead of reverting to RB.

RB - From a RB playing QB in the first point, to the actual RB's in the second point. The Utes have John White IV returning after the greatest single rushing season in program history. However, the Utes really hope they don't have to put such a workload on the Wolfman. This year they are looking at some depth to assist them with Juco Transfer Kelvin York.

For the Cougars, they must remember they have a Running game. How deep of a running game, remains to be seen after the coaching staff ran off Josh Quezada in the offseason. Michael Alisa, who took off about the midway point of the season last year, returns. The key for the Cougars, and Offensive Coordinator Brandon Doman, is to remember he's actually there.

Defense - While QB's and RB's may be the glory position, it's the defense that both teams will need to rely on. For Utah, they should return an even better team than last years, Pac-12 leading defense. Led by Star Lotulelei up front. In the backfield they are short handed for the first three weeks because Safety Brian Blechen is an absolute moronic idiot, who failed his second drug test, and will be suspended for the first three games. However, Utah is actually pretty deep in the

secondary. For them the big question, is the LB's. After seeing all three of their starters from 2011 graduate, Utah is left trying to find three new starters. And considering last year's trio was serviceable, but not up to Pac-12 standards, if Utah's defense is going to live up to expectations, the guys in the middle must step up.

For BYU, the defensive question is depth. The Cougars have some stud defenders, with players like Eathyn Manumaleuna, Preston Hadley, and the only player who could think of competing with Star Lotulelei for best defensive player in the state, Kyle Van Oy. What the cougars don't have, is a lot of depth. Romney Fuga returns, but he was never quite right last year in his first year back from a gruesome, cheap shot caused injury. Uona Kaveinga has yet to fulfill the hope on the other side of Van Oy, that he brought with him in his transfer from USC. In the secondary, Bronco has said this is his most athletic secondary since he's been there. He says that every year, and it is a BYU secondary, so that bar isn't very high, but at least their db's are all taller than 5'6".

With Apologies To The Bengals

Last year, I made no effort to hide my disgust of the Cougars scheduling Idaho State. In fact, this was my exact statement as I compared the game to prostitution:

My thoughts on BYU's schedule are well known, and this week's game is the worst of the bunch. I hate it when Div 1-A teams play teams from Division 1-AA teams. Unfortunately it happens way too often, including the Utes earlier this year. Worse than playing a 1-AA team though, is playing a 1-AA that had won only a single game for the past three years. If you add there two wins from this season, the Bengals have won a total of 10 games since 2006, half of which came against Division II teams. This is a completely indefensible scheduling choice. The Cougars have paid Idaho State to come into their house, lay down, and let the Cougars have their way against them. This game is Football scheduling prostitution at it's absolute worst. BYU should actually pay any fan who shows up to the game, for sitting through the atrocity. There is zero chance BYU loses this game. Scratch that, there is less than zero chance. Even if somehow their bus gets delayed and Idaho State lines up against no one, BYU would still win this game. This isn't meant to be another dig at BYU's schedule this year. Even if BYU had 11 other top 15 teams on the schedule, I would still hate this game. Even if Utah had scheduled this terrible team, the football lover in me would still be offended.

Well my apologies to the Cougars, and the Bengals both, because as terrible as that was last year, The Utes decision to schedule the Northern Colorado Bears this year, a team that lost to Idaho State last year by 30 points, and actually did go winless on the season, is ten times worse. As a Utah fan, and a football lover, I am offended. This isn't a tune up game. Northern Colorado isn't good enough for this to be a tune up game. All that can happen in this game, is an injury. Nothing good can come from this game. They can't take anything they see on film and apply it to future games, because the level of competition is so bad. The only breakdown I am willing to offer for this game, is Utah will win. They better not sustain a major injury, and if any starters are playing in the 2nd half, Utah has screwed up royally.

The Pirate Returns

BYU meanwhile actually plays something resembling a team, as they host the Washington State Cougars. Washington State has been trying to rebuild ever since bottoming out in 2009 with a one win season. The first rebuilding job brought them to the brink of mediocrity with a 5 win season in 2011. To help them take the next step, the Cougars brought in one of the biggest personalities in College Football in Mike Leach.

Leach is known for many things in the College Football world. He's the QB who got screwed out of his previous job with Texas Tech, because Craig James' son was a sissy whose daddy happened to work for ESPN. Leach is also known for his strong infatuation with Pirates. From a coaching standpoint Leach also happened to take a historical also ran from Lubbock Texas to new heights with a high powered, fast paced, offense, coming just 1 win away from the National Championship Game in 2008 with Texas Tech.

Leach brings his pirate loving ways back to coaching sidelines in Pullman, Washington. For his first game he returns to his alma mater. A place where he learned about high scoring offenses with LaVell Edwards. And while his offensive style will give BYU's defense a test, there just hasn't been enough time for Leach to get enough of his system, and his talent into the program.

Another thing about Leach, he's a tad overrated. I like Leach, after all what's not to like about a guy who loves pirates, and isn't willing to cut a kid a break, just because his father works for ESPN, and was partially responsible for the only death penalty in NCAA history. Take that away though, and his results are mediocre. Sure he's seen extreme highs in 2008, but take that season away, and his years were always filled with head scratching losses that shouldn't have happened.

I think overall he'll be good for Washington State, but I don't think he'll ever accomplish what he accomplished at Texas Tech. And as for week one, there is no reason that this should be a close game. High scoring offense or not, Washington State, just isn't a good team yet. BYU should be. They should be able to take control of this game on the ground early, and while they'll give up some yards, and probably some points, this game should never be in doubt in the second half.

The Rest Of The Year

So now that both teams should be starting the year 1-0, how will the rest of 2012 play out? This was touched on during the podcast, but I wanted to expand on it just a bit. I even have some conference predictions (for Utah), and there might be a BCS Championship prediction at the end.

Week 2

Friday September 7 - The Utes make what could most likely be their last ever trip to Logan after pulling a major Big Brother move on the Aggies in the off season. The Aggies will still be trying to find their way with life after Robert Turbin and Bobby Wagner. Kerwin Williams will want to show that there were multiple running backs in the backfield. Odds Utah Wins: 80%, Will They Win?: Yes

Saturday September 8 - I said last year, if you are going to bother with a 1-AA team, at least make it an in state team. The Cougars did just that and play the Weber State Wildcats, who are in a state worse than disarray. This is a no contest game. Odds BYU Wins: 100%, Will They Win?: Yes, and be resting by half time.

Week 3

Saturday September 15 - The Holy War is going on hiatus in 2014 and 2015, but before it does, there will be one last game in each stadium. Utah doesn't want to lose in Rice-Eccles before the break. BYU wants nothing more than to pay Utah back for last year's 54-10 beat down, by winning the last game pre-hiatus in Rice-Eccles. BYU fans think last year would have been different with Riley Nelson, but truth is Utah is still the better team. Odds Either Team Wins: 50%, So Who Does? Go Utes!. X-Factor This game doesn't kick off till 8:15 p.m. That means there's going to be a lot of pre-game tailgating, which also means, that unfortunately, many in the crowd will live up to some negative Ute stereotypes. Max Hall will be proud.

Week 4

Thursday September 20 - You know what the worst part of any drive to anywhere in the Northwest is? It's the 4 hours or so you are stuck in Idaho. The Cougars must make that trip as they face the Boise State Broncos on the smurf turf. There are many who think that Boise State is in for a down year now that Kellen Moore has graduated. Apparently they don't remember that Boise State has been good for more than 6 years. It's a system down there, and while I don't think they'll reach the heights they reached with Moore, it's still going to be a really good team. Odds BYU Wins: 35%, Do They? Not likely. Production on the Countdown to Poinsettia Bowl clock at LaVell Edwards should finish that weekend.

Saturday September 22 - The Utes begin conference play, and also the unofficial Jordan Wynn revenge tour. Last year in Jon Hays first start, the Sun Devils took care of some costly mistakes to secure a big victory. This year though, it's a different Sun Devil team, as Dennis Erickson is gone and Todd Graham is in charge. Last year the Todd Graham coached Pitt Panthers, and the Utes played an extremely ugly, boring terrible game. Let's hope this game is more enjoyable to watch. Odds Utah Wins: 65%, Do They? Yep, and countdown to USC begins.

Week 5

Friday September 29 - Norm Chow has no love for the school he coached at for almost 30 years, and would love nothing more than to win in LaVell Edwards during his first trip as a Head Coach. Unfortunately for him Hawaii just isn't any good. Odds BYU Wins: 75%, They Do Don't They? Of Course

Week 6

Thursday October 4 - USC will bring their #1 ranked team into Rice-Eccles Stadium for a Thursday night showdown. If Utah is undefeated, this could very well be the biggest college football game ever played in the state of Utah. Last year's matchup saw Utah come within a blocked field goal of overtime. This year though the Trojans are post season eligible, and have their sites set on a Championship. Odds Utah Wins: 35%, Any Hope? I'll admit it, this is a homer call, but USC traditionally stumbles somewhere along the way, and I still don't think Kiffin is a good coach, I'm calling the shocking upset right now.

Friday October 5 - With the nation still abuzz from last nights upset 30 miles further north, the Cougars welcome in the Aggies for the annual conference weekend matchup. Last year, the Aggies dominated the game's first three quarters, bringing to an end the Jake Heaps era in Provo, before Riley Nelson came in and led the Cougars to the victory with 11

seconds left. Can the Aggies continue the climb they started two years ago, or do they drop back down to earth? Odds BYU Wins: 60%, Will they? This is a tough one, BYU is the better team, but the Aggies really, dislike BYU, I think a little vengeance might be in order.

Week 7

Saturday October 13 - For the first time all season, BYU and Utah play on the same day, when they aren't playing each other. Utah, high off their upset a week prior must refocus early as they travel to LA to play the Bruins. UCLA cast off Slick Rick, and hired Jim Mora Jr. Mora has never been a college head coach, but did have moderate success in the NFL. Odds Utah Wins: 65%, Do They Avoid A Post USC Let Down? Yes, but it's sloppier, and closer than they'd like.

BYU meanwhile begins the second half of their season at a mediocre 3-3. They start with what could be a trap game at home against Oregon State, with two big road games coming up the next couple weeks. The Beavers had a rough 2011, and are looking for a bounce back season. Odds BYU Wins: 75%, Akbar Alert? Not really, BYU should be okay here.

Week 8

Saturday October 20 - A week after playing the Cougars, the Beavers host the Utes. The Beavers hope to capture some of the magic they had in 2008 when they ruined the Trojans undefeated season. Unfortunately the Rogers brothers have no more eligibility for the Beavers. Odds Utah Wins: 80%, Could they really be 7-0? Yes, yes they can.

When BYU went independence they signed a 6 game contract with Notre Dame. Game 1 is this week. Surprisingly enough the Golden Domers actually began the season without a lot of hype. For them this game is sandwiched between a rivalry game with Stanford, and a matchup with Preseason #4 Oklahoma, meaning Admiral Ackbar could be seen in South Bend this week. Odds BYU Wins: 40%, Do They? They give it a good try, but alas come up short,

Week 9

Saturday October 27 - Last year's game against California was the ugliest, and worst performance of the season. It ranks with 2007 UNLV, and 2010 TCU as one of the worst losses in the Kyle Whittingham era. The Utes were never in that game, and were just absolutely embarrassed. Cal comes to Rice-Eccles looking to repeat the feat, especially considering their long time head coach may be sitting on a bit of a warm seat. Odds Utah Wins: 55%, Revenge? It'll be close, but yes, the Utes powered by their Blackout Helmets pull it off.

BYU will be on the road for the 2nd straight week against Utah's 2011 Sun Bowl opponent. Georgia Tech runs a very run heavy Triple Option format. BYU is no stranger to the triple option from their days playing Air Force, but this will be the first time they've seen it since going independent. Tech's running game, will give BYU's depth defensively a real test. Odds BYU Wins: 40%, Will They? No, BYU will lose, badly, and this will mark the low point of the season, fortunately for BYU they can wrap up their WAC Conference Championship the rest of the season.

Week 10

Saturday November 3 - Mike Leach comes to the state of Utah for the 2nd time this year. His team will be a bit more used to his system, and by then should be cranking out enough yards to give even good defenses a scare. Defensively the Cougars will still have nothing. Odds Utah Wins: 70%, Will They? Yes, but there's going to be a lot of yards and possibly points given up.

Week 11

Saturday November 10 - Washington effectively ruined Utah's season last year, when they caused Jordan Wynn's injury. Washington would love to ruin an even better 2012 season for Utah. If Washington can get their defensive woes together, they may be in the midst of quite a season themselves. Odds Utah Wins: 45%, And The Result? Sadly the run ends. Which stinks, because I really hate Steve Sarkisian, and not just because he's a former Cougar.

My podcast partner called this as a stunning upset for Idaho, but in reality Idaho still stinks. The Cougars will be three wins away from being the unofficial last WAC Champion ever, despite not playing in that conference. What better way to right the ship than from scrubs. My guess is we also see a bit of the BYU Future at QB during this game. Odds BYU Wins: 95%, Need You Ask? BYU Closes out it's home season with a Victory

Week 12

Saturday November 17 - Utah's perfect season may be over, but they are still in the hunt for the Pac-12 South. This week they face another new head coach in Rich Rodriguez at Arizona. Rich Rod may have flamed out in Michigan, but his style fits Arizona better, and is my pick to be the most successful of the 4 new head coaches in the Pac-12 this year. Odds Utah Wins: 75%, Utes Rebound? Indeed.

BYU meanwhile will head to sunny California to play San Jose State. SJSU actually played BYU tougher than they had any right to last year, and this is the one of the three finales for BYU that could see them upset. Odds BYU Wins: 90%, Will they be upset? Maybe upset they don't win by more.

Week 13

Friday November 23 - Last year the Friday after Thanksgiving was indeed Black Friday, as the Colorado Buffaloes got their first victory outside the state of Colorado in 4 years, ruining a chance for the Utes to play in the Pac-12 Championship game. All that being said, this still isn't close to a rivalry, but Utes will want revenge. Odds Utah Wins: 80%, Buffalo Burgers anyone? Absolutely, forget the Turkey Day leftovers.

BYU Will finish off their regular season with yet another game that no one will care about, or want to discuss. New Mexico State is bad, but at least this is the end of the WAC Contract for BYU, as they move up to C-USA fillers in the future. Odds BYU Wins: 95%, End With A Bang? A blowout victory as they prep for the Poinsettia.

Season Wrap-Up

BYU finishes 7-5, Utah has a great run to 11-1.

What about Utah's conference mates. I think it's going to be a bit of a surprise year. USC is an early Championship game pick, but what they are really lacking is depth. Thanks to appeals, 2012 was the first year they had to suffer through scholarship sanctions. They have two more years of that to. Scholarship sanctions take 3-4 years to show themselves at the top of the depth chart, but the more immediate impact come in depth. SC can't afford many injuries.

In the North, Oregon will still be a power, but I think they will come into the pack. Despite beating Washington again in their rivalry game, I think they finish behind the Huskies in the Northern race.

Four teams have new coaches, three of them will be okay in year one, with Todd Graham's Sun Devils being the only ones to really stink it up. Leach and Mora get the Cougars, and Bruins to that bowl eligible 6-6 mark, as does Rich Rod in Arizona.

Nationally Everyone talks about the SEC's 6 consecutive Championship game victories. I prefer to think about the fact they lost the last championship game also, and make it two in a row as Wisconsin upsets Georgia.

Enjoy The Season

As always all predictions guaranteed or they're wrong.

Enjoy the season, enjoy the podcast, and please leave comments.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:48

Red, Blue And Pigskin: Podcast Edition

This year Red, Blue And Pigskin is breaking out. I present to you episode 1 of the RB&P Podcast. This will be a supplement to the weekly edition. Please give it a read and leave feedback.

Episode, The Deuce: Holy War Edition will be recording most likely September 7. Please leave any comments, or reader participation prior to then, either here on the blog or via email at unholyramp@gmail.com

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:44

Thursday, December 1, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Due to a battle of The Sideshow Family vs. The Common Cold, in which the Sideshow Family is currently performing about as well as the Utes last Saturday, this week's RB&P will be cliff notes version:

Rumble in the Rockies more like Bumblin in the Rockies. Utes undisciplined, and played tight. Testament to how terrible Colorado is, Utes only lost by 3. Started with Mo Lee's stupid penalty on first drive. Utes just in holiday spirit to give departing Colorado Freshmen an away victory.

7-5 only one game off of preseason prediction, but route taken very interesting. More on this next week as we revisit ThRhett's preseason question what would you rather watch question.

BYU heads to the islands with Riley Nelson cleared to play. Meaning he'll start. Can't be a good feeling for Jake Heaps. Hawaii still a terrible team but at least it's not as bad as November.

Congratulats to the Aggies, Bowl bound and have accepted the invite to the first ever Famous Potato bowl. Great job by Andersen and the Aggies to turn it around when they were sitting 2-5.

Next week, Season Review, Revisiting a season long argument, and Bowl destinations announced.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:20

Tuesday, November 22, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

It's Rivalry week baby. Finally 11 weeks of the season are done with, leading up to this week everyone has been waiting for. It's time for the annual rivalry game.

Wait, oh yea, not so much anymore. The Holy War has already been played, with a Utah dismantling of the Cougars, 54-10, in week three. This year for Rivalry week Utah gets a home game against Colorado. A team, that no matter how hard the Pac-12 tries, or no matter which lame name they give the game (Rumble in the Rockies, awful), Colorado and Utah are not rivals.

As for the Cougars, their big Rivalry week opponent is.... lethargy. The Cougars don't have an opponent this week, as they have their second bye of November, although it won't be their easiest week of the season, that belongs to Idaho State week.

You could say this is a negative side effect of change. Stadium Bookend

On September 30, 1972, in front of a crowd of 20,600 people, the Washington State Cougars opened up their brand new Martin Stadium with a 20-6 loss against the Utes. On Monday Washington State University began major renovations on Martin Stadium, meaning Saturday's OT loss to the Utes are the last game at the current iteration of Martin Stadium.

I can't say what happened in 1972, but the crowd of just over 16,000 at the game on Saturday had to brave a game that started with some snow, dried up, and then turned into a white out blizzard.

The first half of the game, the two teams combined to put offensive football back 20 years. The Utes managed to play arguably their worst offensive half of the season. They couldn't do anything offensively with the football, and what few positive plays they managed to successfully complete, they immediately followed it up with boneheaded and stupid penalties.

The only truly successful offensive play of the first half for the Utes was an 47 yard touchdown pass. Completed by the punter on a fake pass.

Crazily enough, during halftime when the snow started really coming down the game turned into a high scoring shootout, with Jon Hays making some great, clutch passes, and John White doing what John White does. Unfortunately this was also when Utah's defense decided to play it's worst half of the season. Twice the defense gave up 10 point leads, as they switched from their man press defense to a soft zone, and even a near prevent defense late.

Utah's defense went without a sack the entire game, and although they did hit Washington State's QB a lot, enough that he was hospitalized with a lacerated liver, in truth the Utes didn't get much defensive pressure.

Fortunately with 10 seconds to go, and pass to the end zone was just short enough, that the WR had to come out of the end zone to catch the ball at the 1, forcing the Cougars to settle for a game tying field goal. In OT Mo Lee intercepted Halliday, and the Utes kicked the winning field goal.

Chugging Along

Another game, another massive workload, another great game. Although John White was contained in the first half with a measly 49 yards, the second half was a different story. White ended the game with 42 carries for 186 yards. He also added two TD's. One of them a 57 yard scamper. The other was a measly three yard run, setup on the play before by his refusal to go down, or step out of bounds, and one legged hopping for extra yards.

The two TD's have tied the Utes single season rushing TD record. The 186 yards put White at 1,377 yards on the season. That currently makes him 1st in the Pac-12 and 5th in the nation. Although, how he wasn't a Doak Walker semifinalist I'll never know.

Those 1,377 yards leaves him 131 yards away from breaking the Utah single season rushing yards record. White is averaging 125 yards per game on the season. Since the Pitt game, that average is 146 yards per game. During the

current 4 game win streak, it's 166.7 yards per game. All this means is there is a really good chance he breaks the record on Saturday. However, with a bowl game still to be played, he simply needs to average 65.5 yards per game for the next two.

I'm really not sure that it can be put into words, exactly how valuable White has been to this team.

Not Feline Friendly

The Utes this season have not been friendly to the feline community. This year the Utes have beat two types of Cougars, Bobcats, Panthers, and Wildcats. Of the Utes 7 wins, 5 have come against teams with feline mascots.

Well At Least It's Over

The only thing of note about the BYU/New Mexico State game, is that it means that BYU's awful, boring November schedule is now at an end. A Month that saw two stinker games, and two bye weeks.

As for the game itself there's not a whole lot to say. Jake Heaps played a solid B game. He still showed tendencies to overthrow his WR and lock on to his target. About all we learned from this game, is that when Heaps doesn't get any pressure on him, which NMSU couldn't do all game, Heaps can lead a team down the field.

Somehow this game was actually close after about 20 minutes which itself was probably inconceivable. But eventually, the Cougars did what they were supposed to do, and finish off yet another garbage opponent. Now the Cougars get to rest up for a season finale on the road next week against Hawaii.

I'll Be Honest, This Sucks

One truly negative aspect of having the Rivalry game in September is that it's not Rivalry week in September. Rivalry week is now. Only now, we don't get to enjoy the build up around Thanksgiving towards the rivalry.

Instead BYU is preparing for a bye. While it's good for the Students who wouldn't have really been able to be involved anyways, since BYU is out of school for the holidays, it still has left a huge void.

Instead Utah is preparing for Colorado. A terrible Colorado that is. In fact, Colorado is so terrible, they make New Mexico State look good. The Pac-12 keeps trying to tell us this is the new rivalry. No matter how hard the Pac-12 pushes, and no matter whatever lame, lazy name they give this game (Rumble in the Rockies??? Really?), and no matter what happened the last time these two teams played, fifty freaking years ago, this is not a rivalry game. Utah and Colorado's coaches put it best when they called this game an arranged marriage.

This week just feels hollow.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 07:30

Tuesday, November 15, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Apparently football in the state of Utah is meant to be played in cold, snowy conditions, as all four Northern Utah teams won in varying conditions of perfect football weather last week.

One team flipped the script from earlier in their season by coming back when behind in the fourth, another ended in a fitting score, a third ended up bowl eligible for the 9th consecutive year, and the fourth finds themselves with a story that just won't die. A Fitting Sendoff

Last week we talked about the impending retirement of Weber State football coach Ron McBride. Last Saturday was the final home game of the season for the Wildcats, and therefore the final home game for Coach Mac. It's fitting then, that it would be played in cold and snowy weather, as it was the kind of weather that McBride loved.

Even more fitting was the final score. A 34-31 victory for the Wildcats.

Rewriting The Story

For much of the first half of the season, the Utah State Aggies would climb out to 4th quarter leads, only to lose them in dramatic and heartbreaking fashion. None more difficult than seeing former prodigal son Riley Nelson lead the Cougars from behind, to win with 11 seconds left.

An argument could be made that through their first 7 games, the Aggies could easily have been sitting at 7-0. Instead they were at 2-5, teetering on the edge of bowl ineligibility, and a trip to the islands coming up.

Apparently the Aggies have decided that the secret to winning is to be trailing late in the 4th quarter. Two 4th quarter deficits with 4 minutes or less to go, two 4th quarter rallies, and the Aggies are now sitting at 4-5.

Utah State has ended the last two seasons with that very same 4 win total. Moreso, it's been since before 2000 when the Aggies last had 3 consecutive wins. This week the Aggies travel to Moscow to take on a dreadful Idaho Vandal team, with a chance to not only break past the 4 win barrier, but to notch three consecutive wins.

They could be the first of many barriers to fall for the Aggies over the next several years.

YAAAAAAAAAAWN!

BYU could give the Aggies some pointers on the Idaho Vandals, as this past weekend they dispatched of them in an utterly boring, and dreadful game. Just the most recent such boring game for the Cougars, as now that the TCU game is over, they plod through the end of their WAC Conference schedule.

While the game itself was a snore-fest, there was one storyline that came out of the game. A storyline I'm sure that most BYU fans wish would just go away.

That Had To Hurt

Thanks to a borderline hit during the first half, Cougars starting QB Riley Nelson had to leave the game, with what would later be diagnosed as a broken rib, and a partially collapsed lung. With his style of play, it's not all that surprising that Nelson eventually got hurt. What is surprising is that it happened on a play where Nelson actually passed the ball.

With Nelson injured, that meant that Jake Heaps once again is the Quarterback. With rumors of red-shirting or transferring in 2011, this could be Heaps' last chance to prove he's deserving of the starting job. The problem for Jake Heaps is that due to the lack of quality of opposition he faces, Heaps can only prove that he's not worthy of the starting job by struggling. Any success will be tempered with a grain of salt, in the face of dreadful opponents. Especially since most of the hype surrounding Heaps coming into 2011, was built on the back of a bad second half of the schedule in 2010.

Nonetheless, this is his chance, and the review from the Idaho game is mixed. Heaps' numbers were good, going 15 of

20 for 195 yards and two TD's. But there were also a couple of the throws we're used to from Heaps, including an overthrow that led to a red zone interception.

Of course, with Head Coach Bronco Mendenhall saying that when Nelson is healthy, which could possibly be as early as the Hawaii game, or as late as the bowl game, he will be the starter, one must wonder if the ship has already sailed for Jake Heaps.

There was another bit of good news for Heaps during the Idaho game, during his limited time in mop up duty, 3rd string QB James Lark, was really unimpressive.

The End Is Nigh

The good news for BYU fans, is that the end of their dreadful home schedule is now upon us. Unfortunately, it's still a terrible matchup, that will require most viewers, either live or on tv, to take heavy doses of caffeine to stay awake. Especially with it being buried as an 8:15 p.m. kick off.

This week the Cougars host the New Mexico State Aggies. Much like five of their last six opponents, there really is no feasible reason why this should even be a close game.

With it being the final home game, that means it Senior day for the Cougars. This will be the last chance for fans at LaVell Edwards Stadium to say goodbye to players such as JJ DiLuigi, Brian Kariya, and Mackay Jacobsen.

And while some seniors such as Matt Reynolds will have a chance to continue their career, this senior day will probably be most bittersweet for LB Jordan Pendleton.

Pendleton's time at BYU will always leave him and fans wondering about what could have been. Pendleton had the talent and the fire to be one of the all time best at BYU, unfortunately for him, his hard hitting, ruthless style of play and his body never we able to mesh, as his career has been littered with injuries, including the knee injury that ended his year early this season.

Bowling Over Bruins

I'm sure losing to a coach you fired the previous year is never fun, but I wonder if it hurts even more when you are still paying them. For the Bruins that's just what happened when they lost to the Utes, and former Offensive Coordinator Norm Chow.

For the Utes, this game was much like their previous two. What you saw from the Utes is the recipe that they will need the rest of the year. For them it's simple.

Jon Hays will have to throw the ball a few times, just to keep them honest, but the Utes don't really want him throwing the ball. Run the ball with John White IV. Don't let Jon Hays be in a position to hurt you. Keep the defense rested, and let them dominate the opposing offense, and run the ball with John White.

That's exactly what happened. Defensively the Utes shut down UCLA's pistol offense. With their running game stymied the be game was left to UCLA QB Kevin Prince. Prince was unable to response. When he wasn't being harassed in the backfield, Prince was busy throwing two interceptions to Conroy Black, one of which Black returned for a TD, as Prince could only lead the Bruins to first and fourth quarter field goals.

With the Bruin offense stymied, that left it in the questionable hands of Jon Hays, and the steady legs of John White. Hays had another not terrible game. He only had 67 yards of passing, but honestly the Utes really don't want to see him passing the ball that much. What Hays did manage to do, was not turn the ball over, and throw one or two passes that were just enough to keep UCLA honest. After that his job was simple. Turn around and give the ball to White.

Assaulting The Record Books

White ran 33 times for 167 and two touchdowns, with a third one in the receiving game, during the Utes 31-6 victory. That left White with a Pac-12 second best 1191 yards so far this season. White climbed from 10th all time to 4th all time in Utah single season rushing yards.

The Utah record for rushing yards in a season is 1507 by Carl Monroe in 1982. With 2 games and a bowl game left to play that record is clearly achievable, especially since the White is the first, second and third option for the offense.

White is currently 316 yards behind the record. To break the record during the regular season, White will need to average 158 yards in his next two games. During the Utes current three game winning streak, White has averaged 160.3 yards per game.

When you add in the Bowl game, the Utes are now eligible for, the record really becomes within reach. White simply needs 105.3 yards per game to catch Monroe, well below White's 132.3 yard per game average on the season.

The other record that White is assaulting is Marty Johnson 2004 record of 14 TD's. His two rushing TD's against UCLA left White with 12 TD's. I'll leave the math up to you to determine what is needed for that record.

View From The Red Zone

Sitting in the North End Zone means that when teams are in the pregame warm ups, the visiting team is at our end. Being so close to the end zone of course leads to the home town fans heckling the visitors. Of the 11 teams I've seen in Rice-Eccles since I've started sitting in the End Zone, the UCLA Bruins are by far the best natured about it.

Most teams simply ignore the heckling. Occasionally a player will put his hand to his ear, or acknowledge the heckling slightly. The Bruins were the first to to actually respond to it with some good-natured joking of their own.

For that I give the Bruins kudos.

A Sense Of Deja Vu

For the second straight week, the Utes are facing a team that is suddenly confident, and now slightly dangerous thanks to a stunning upset of the Arizona State Sun Devils the week prior. For the second time in three weeks, the Utes opponent is fight to stave off bowl elimination.

Unlike last week, the Utes won't have the friendly confines of Rice-Eccles Stadium, as they have to travel to Pullman Washington to face off against the Washington State Cougars.

Interesting side note: the Utes were the first opponent to play in Martin Stadium (Home of the Cougars), and they will be the last opponent to play in Martin Stadium as construction to re-do the stadium will begin on Sunday.

Interesting side note number two: Utah and Utah State will both be playing road games, but will be closer in proximity than if they were both playing home games. The two teams will be 8 miles apart, and playing at the same time this weekend.

The big news for the Cougars out of their Arizona State upset, other than the upset itself, was the play of freshman QB Connor Halliday throwing for a school freshman record of 494 yards. He also had 4 td's to go with it. The Cougars do not run the ball much, currently ranked 103rd in the nation, meaning this game is going to be a test of a defensive backfield, that seems to have continued a tradition of stout secondaries for the Utes.

In addition the secondary, the other aspect of the Utah defense that will help shut down the gun slinging freshman will be the defensive line. If the Utes can continue to get pressure and rush the youngster, it will help the defense overall.

As for the offense it's simple. The Cougars will try to stack the box to stop John White. Jon Hays simply has to not turn the ball over, and if the Offensive Line can open holes, allowing White room to run, the Utes will be fine. If White gets stopped, that means that the game will be in Hays' hands, which is the last thing, any Utah fan wants to see.

How About A Scholarship For A Kicker

For the second straight season the Boise State Broncos saw their undefeated season, and national championship dreams disintegrate as a last second kick sailed wide of the target. This time against the TCU Horned Frogs. The loss means that in their first season in the MWC, the only season in the MWC with any sort of a decent opponent, and possibly their only season in the MWC period, the Broncos most likely will not win the conference.

However what it hasn't done, until next week, is eliminate them from a BCS Automatic Qualification. While it's a long shot, Boise is one of four teams that still have a legitimate chance to nab the non-AQ Automatic BCS Bid.

In the pole position are the Houston Cougars. Houston is 10-0, thanks mainly to a schedule that even BYU thinks is a

bit easy. Houston is currently ranked 11th in the BCS, one behind Boise State, meaning if Houston wins out, they will qualify by being a conference champion in the top 12. The Cougars schedule however, gets much tougher over the next few weeks as they host 6-4 SMU, and travel to 7-3 Tulsa. Should they win those games, they then must face currently 20th ranked Southern Miss in the Conference Championship game.

Should Houston slip up in any of those games, TCU is next waiting in the wings. Thanks to their upset over Boise State, the Horned Frogs have the pole position for the MWC title, and are currently ranked 19th. Since the Big East does not have a single team ranked in the BCS top 25, if the Horned Frogs can climb to 16th, they would qualify under the provision of a non-AQ Champion being in the top 16, and a AQ champion being ranked behind them. While neither of the next two opponents for the Horned Frogs will inspire much help in their rankings, they will benefit from the fact that two of the three teams directly ahead of them play this week.

Should TCU slip up, Southern Miss is sitting right behind TCU at 20, with the same possibility. The big difference is that Southern Miss will have one extra game in the Conference USA champion, against what should be a Top 10 Houston Team.

Finally there are the Boise State Broncos who are still alive. They slipped to 10th with their loss to TCU. The automatic non-AQ bid only goes to conference champions though. So if Boise wins out, and TCU were to somehow lose out, the Broncos would win the MWC, and they would be in the top 12. However their dream dies this week when TCU beats Colorado State, effectively clinching the MWC championship thanks to holding the tie breaker because of their head to head victory over the Broncos.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:33

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.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 07:57

Wednesday, November 2, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Hey Guys,

Sorry but there won't be an RB&P this week. Adjusting to the new little one, and trying to get Bree ready for me to go back to work next week. Next week it should return.

Sorry.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 16:30

Sunday, October 23, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

There will not be a Red, Blue And Pigskin this week.

Instead at 8:50 a.m. on Sunday October 23, My wife and I welcomed our second child into the world. He's a healthy baby boy, 8 lbs. 8 oz. 21" long. 10 fingers, 10 toes, and 1 extra thingy.

Momma and Baby are doing well. We currently do not have a name picked out, so for the time being he's simply our "Li'l Monster".

Well He'll always be our Li'l Monster, just cause he was due on Halloween, and born so close to it, but he now has a name.

Kaeson Eric Woolsey

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 18:41

Tuesday, October 18. 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

If you missed this week's games, well lucky you. In a week where both games were actually somewhat dreadful, and actually had a studio announce team for one of the games apologize to fans for the previous three hours, both the Utes and Cougars came away with victories

If you did sit through the games you saw a team win it's first Pac-12 game. The other team, meanwhile, discovered what happens when you don't turn the ball over. Combined with a brilliant defensive game, that overcame their own special teams, they manage to snap a two game losing streak.

Thus completes the first half of the season for all local teams, so let's spend a bit of time and see where they sit at the mid term, and what to expect going forward. Ugly Still Counts

The game actually caused the ESPN-U studio crew to apologize to viewers after the game. To say it was ugly was an understatement. The offense struggled, and was only able to get a single touchdown off of a tipped pass. The special teams was downright dreadful. The defense was amazing, but it became clear that Pitt doesn't have a legitimate QB threat. Even with all that, there are some good things to take away.

We'll start with the offense. Numbers weren't that great. Watching the game, the offense wasn't as great as you'd want to see, but let's take a few things into account.

First this team was coming into the game on a two game losing streak where they treated the ball like a greased pig. They also had to deal with an East Coast travel, and an early start time. The wind was also going crazy swirling in multiple directions. Everyone knows the Utes were without their #1 QB. To make matters worse their #1 WR DeVonte Christopher didn't make the trip due to a leg injury, and early on in the game they lost their most productive TE Dallin Rogers, to what would become a season ending injury.

Even with all that above them, they put up 250 yards of offense. Most impressively was John White IV. All week the talk was about how the Utes would contain the Nation's leading rusher Ray Graham. We'll get to his performance later, but John White dominated the Running Back duel racking up 171 yards rushing on the ground. For the first time all year White put together a complete game.

Offensively the Utes chewed up the clock, holding the ball for 38 minutes of the game. They had three drives of longer than five minutes, two of which where 12 plays or greater, and went for more than 70 yards.

Hays was a bit of a mixed bag, but where he was greatly improved over the last six quarters was his decision making. Hays didn't beat the Utes. He didn't make the stupid mistake that cost the Utes a possession, or worse. That's all that can be expected.

Now for the bad offensively. The Utes struggled on both 3rd down conversions and in the red zone. While it's nice that Coleman Peterson won the Pac-12 special teams player of the week. However, he should never be kicking 4 field goals. The Utes were dreadful in the red zone, with four appearances in the Red Zone. They ended up with three field goals and a botched punt attempt from the 48 yard line.

If Utah wants to get a few more wins this season, they'll need to convert at least one of those field goals into a TD. Fortunately, their defense had an amazing performance to help them out.

Defensive Shutout

This was one of the better defensive games the Utes have played in the last three years. Even though the score was 26-14, the Defense pitched a shutout. A defensive performance that saw Derrick Shelby not only win the Pac-12 defensive player of the week, but the national defensive player of the week award as well.

The gameplan was to try and contain Ray Graham. For the second straight season, the Utes not only contained a dangerous Pitt running back, but flat out shut him down. Graham ended the day with 46 yards. Without Graham Pitt learned they don't have much else of an offense, as they pulled their starting quarterback twice, for a backup who was

just as ineffective.

You can talk about Pitt's offense being dreadful, which it was, but it's really really difficult for a defense to keep an offense to 120 yards of total offense during a game.

Now that we've talked about the good (Defense, running game), and the bad (passing game), it's time to talk about the ugly.

Short Yellow Bus Special Teams

The Utah special teams were beyond dreadful. Despite the defensive shutout, Pitt still managed to get 14 points on the board. Those 14 points came because of back to back special teams disasters. The only reason Pitt even stayed in this game was because of the special Teams.

The first score came on a 98 yard kickoff return by Pitt. Kickoff returns are bad enough, but they are even more infuriating when they come about, not because of bad coverage, but because of sloppy, lazy, and poor tackling. On the return, the Utes actually covered the punt well, meeting the returner at the 25 yard line. Greg Bird, who has multiple big special teams hits over the past few years, apparently thought he didn't have to wrap up, and instead just merely had to hit the returner. Instead the returner bounced off of bird, bounced to the outside, and was gone.

After a three and out for Utah on the next possession, the Utes had to punt. Only they decided that part of punting was not blocking anyone, as the kick got blocked. When Nick Marsh kicked the ball, the Panthers had 7 guys surrounding him. The ball was scooped and scored.

The comedy of errors continued with shanked punts my Marsh. Even when Marsh actually got a nice kick off for Utah, they managed to bungle it up like a bunch of Keystone Kops.

On one occasion the ball bounced inside the 5, one defender kept it from going into the end zone, and allowed Mo Lee, standing on about the 3 inch line to pick up the ball, for what should be a great spot. Instead another Utah defender, not paying attention, bumps into Lee, knocking him into the end zone, giving Pitt the ball at the 20.

On another occasion, Marsh punted the ball and saw it bounce up at the 9. Greg Bird running down the field to down the ball, went to grab the ball, so it didn't give Pitt any better field position. He tipped the ball at the 11. But rather than getting a hold of the ball, he tipped it towards the goal line, and it trickled into the end zone.

This was a disastrous special teams performance. Special teams have been an issue for Utah, the last couple years, but it seemed like they were actually making some headway this year. All of that headway was lost in a single game.

Back Into The Conference

Now that Utah has finished their out of conference schedule with a perfect 3-0 record, they head back into Pac-12 play, still looking to find similar success. The Utes have opened up their inaugural Pac-12 season with an 0-3 record, and look to get their first win against the California Golden Bears.

The Golden Bears have also had a 3-0 conference record, and are also 0-3 in the Pac-12. Much like the Utes, the Golden Bears have struggled offensively, especially at the quarterback position, but they also have a running back who can hurt the defense.

Defensively the Bears and Utes are similar as well as both teams have top 3 conference defenses.

The Bears have also killed themselves with turnovers giving up five last week to USC. Even the Bears three losses are very similar to Utah, as the Bears have lost to USC, and Washington, in addition to the top team in their division.

This is as close to being different sides of the same coin as two teams can get this late in the year. The good news, is that means that Utah should know what it needs to do to beat Cal. This also means that it's the same thing Cal needs to do to beat Utah.

This will be a road game for the Utes, but it won't be played in Cal's home stadium. As with all home games for Cal this season, they are being played at AT&T Park, while Cal's stadium undergoes an extensive renovation.

One other interesting note, Cal is the last Pac-12 (then Pac-10) team Utah has beaten, during the 2009 Poinsettia Bowl.

Grading On A Curve

Last week I made mention that there wasn't a whole lot you could take away from the Cougars win over San Jose State. While this week's opponent may have been an Automatic Qualifying conference member, in truth, Oregon State isn't much better of a team. So as expected BYU rolled out another win.

It's still hard to know what to take from these games. But after the past two weeks, there are a few things that we can feel comfortable with for BYU.

Firstly, this team is just different under Riley Nelson. Riley Nelson is a gamer, and the team responds to him. What Nelson lacks in arm strength, he more than makes up for with the added dimension he brings to games with his legs. Riley Nelson also has the heart that Heaps seemed to have lacked early in the season. There was no bigger evidence of this, than on the play where Nelson scrambled, went head first into a couple of Beavers, and lost his helmet. He then popped up, and decided to give the Beavers' an earful.

Unfortunately, that reckless abandon, may also be Riley's downfall. There is a fine line that Nelson must walk the rest of the year, between aggressive and careless. Otherwise, his body isn't going to be able to hold up, and Heaps will be back in under center.

The second thing, that was impressive this week was Michael Alisa. Against the Spartans Alisa came out of nowhere. This week, he continued his stellar performance. For most of the season the depth chart read, DiLuigi, Quezada, and Kariya. In two games, Alisa has seemed to far outshine all the others. Alisa is a bigger runner than the DiLuigi and Quezada, and is faster than Kariya. Alisa also seems to be the shiftier of the three, and actually reminds me a bit of Harvey Unga. My only real complaint, is he shouldn't be so willing to bounce to the outside.

Finally, and this isn't relegated to just the past two weeks, we can feel comfortable stating Kyle Van Oy is a beast. He is guaranteed to make one amazing play a game. Usually he doesn't just stop at one. Van Oy is eligible for the NFL draft at the conclusion of this season. Although BYU fans shouldn't fear this year, but if BYU is lucky enough to see him stay for each of the next two years, Rob Morris, and Brian Kehl, are going to have to move over and welcome the new greatest LB in BYU history.

Also, Congrats to BYU on getting a Pac-12 victory before the Utes.

BYU's Checklist For This Week

My thoughts on BYU's schedule are well known, and this week's game is the worst of the bunch. I hate it when Div 1-A teams play teams from Division 1-AA teams. Unfortunately it happens way too often, including the Utes earlier this year. Worse than playing a 1-AA team though, is playing a 1-AA that had won only a single game for the past three years. If you add there two wins from this season, the Bengals have won a total of 10 games since 2006, half of which came against Division II teams. This is a completely indefensible scheduling choice. The Cougars have paid Idaho State to come into their house, lay down, and let the Cougars have their way against them. This game is Football scheduling prostitution at it's absolute worst. BYU should actually pay any fan who shows up to the game, for sitting through the atrocity. There is zero chance BYU loses this game. Scratch that, there is less than zero chance. Even if somehow their bus gets delayed and Idaho State lines up against no one, BYU would still win this game. This isn't meant to be another dig at BYU's schedule this year. Even if BYU had 11 other top 15 teams on the schedule, I would still hate this game. Even if Utah had scheduled this terrible team, the football lover in me would still be offended.

So with that said, here's is BYU's checklist for the game. In order to have any since of pride from this game, the Cougars must do all of the following, and even then I'm not sure you can have pride in this win:

- First string Defense pitches a shutout
- First string Offense has one or fewer non scoring drives
- No more than first string scoring drives can be field goals
- Second string in the game, no later than, the second drive of the third quarter
- Third stringers in the game by middle of fourth quarter
- Combined all levels of defense give up less than 10 points
- Combined all levels of offense have less than 4 non scoring drives
- At least four takeaways
- No more than two giveaways, only one of which can be from first string offense

There is one thing that does make this week's game somewhat important. In fact, if BYU wins, one could argue that it will have been the last important game of the season for the Cougars. When they win, the Cougars will officially be bowl eligible, and fans can pay for their travel plans to the Armed Forces Bowl.

Also, don't expect much of a breakdown from this game next week. As much as I love Football, I'm not sure I can bring myself to suffer through this. In fact, I'll give you next week's breakdown right now: BYU destroyed Idaho State.

Midway Point

We are now at the midway point of the season. The Cougars have played seven games, while the Utes have completed their sixth game. Both teams are about where I expected them to be record wise at the midway point. How both teams have gotten to this juncture, though, is drastically different than expected.

For the Utes, who I expected an 8-4 season for at the beginning of the year, 3-3 after six was about where I'd thought they'd be. I did expect them to have had one Pac-12 victory against Washington, and I worried that the Pitt game, mainly due to the travel, would be a loss. So why does this 3-3 feel a lot worse than hoped for?

Offensively the Utes have struggled way more than expected. There are two main reasons. The injury situation is well known. Just as he was hitting his stride, Wynn was lost for the season. Other injuries that have cause two of their top three WR's to miss time, and all three of their TE's to miss time, including one who now out for the season.

The other big issue is the offensive line. This year's offensive line is absolutely dreadful. Wynn's, and then Hays' adjustment into the new offensive scheme by Chow, has been hindered by the fact that they are constantly under pressure. The line has struggled all year to open up holes, unless you are referring to the holes that defenders have gotten to the QB with. No other position on the field has shown the drastic difference between MWC and Pac-12 than the Offensive line, and no other player epitomizes the talent leap than John Cullen.

Last year when Cullen came to the team, he seemed to do really well. Fans were excited as he anchored the Left side of the line opposite Bergstrom. This season, as the opposition has gotten tougher, we've found out, that most of Cullen's success, was due to the opposition. Against bigger and faster defenders, Cullen has seemed a step slow, and a second late, causing him to be a holding, false starting penalty machine. Even though he was a hot head last season as well, it was tolerated more when he wasn't missing so many blocks.

BYU At The Half Point

At the start of the season I expected a similar 8-4 record for the Cougars, with a 7 game record of 5-2. Defensively, the Cougar as I expected. Slightly mediocre, more good than bad, but not great, and not terrible. Led by a beast in Kyle Van Oy.

Offensively, I never bought into the hype based on the way they ended last season, and how they did in fall camp. More specifically I didn't buy into the hype of Jake Heaps. So seeing Heaps struggle wasn't a surprise to me. What was a surprise was the depth of his struggles and how much he lost the team. Not only did he lose the offensive side of the ball, but it seemed that even the defensive side of the ball lost faith in him, tired of making plays, just to see the offense do nothing with it. Most evident with the defense just gave up against the Utes.

I also didn't expect Heaps' struggles to get bad enough that the Cougars went with Riley Nelson, but they did. Since Nelson has become the starting QB, the team, both offensively and defensively has a new fire to it.

Looking Ahead

We know how they've gotten here, but where are they headed? For the Cougars, I'm still expecting an 8-4 record, with possibly a 9-3. This mainly has to do with the quality of competition. There are really only two games that are in question the rest of the way. TCU at Jerry World, and Hawaii on the islands. TCU isn't as strong as they have been in year's past, but they still are athletic, and until BYU shows they can stop TCU, I have to favor the Horned Frogs.

As for Hawaii, they are mediocre. Honestly they are about even with BYU, and if this game were in Provo, I'd pick the Cougars, but the island travel is rough on most teams. There's a reason the NCAA had to give an exception for a 13th game to get people to travel to Hawaii for road games.

For the Utes, the good news is the tough part of their schedule is past them as well. Pitt is the only team they've played so far that doesn't have five wins on the year. Pitt and USC are the only teams they've played that aren't ranked in the

top 25 of their divisions respective rankings. The rest of the way, there isn't a team with more than three wins right now, and none with winning records. Four of their remaining six opponents have the very same 3-3 record the Utes currently have. The most difficult of which is this weeks' opponent.

Record wise, my prediction is conditional upon this week's outcome, win and 8-4 is still in play, lose and they are looking at probably 7-5.

Programming Update

It's almost that time. The annual manufactured money grab blackout game is upon. This year's opponent will be the Oregon State Beavers. Fortunately, this year's uniform is much better looking than last year's eye gouge worthy disaster. There are also rumors that the Utes will have black helmets this year.

Unfortunately a time for the game hasn't been announced yet. The fact that it has taken this long is not a good sign for TV purposes. I'm guessing this will be another game on KJZZ. In all honesty I expect the game after that against Arizona to also be a KJZZ broadcast.

The only thing I'm really hoping for is that the game gets a later kickoff, preferably somewhere around 6 or 6:30. Having a blackout in the middle of the day is kind of lame. Plus it really didn't work out with the earlier kickoff last year.

****UPDATE****

As expected the game will be broadcast on KJZZ. It will also be streamed online at UtahUtes.com. Kickoff is set for 5 p.m., and with sunset currently expected around 6:23 p.m. it looks like at least half of the game will be after sunset.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:52

Red, Blue And Pigskin

If you missed this week's games, well lucky you. In a week where both games were actually somewhat dreadful, and actually had a studio announce team for one of the games apologize to fans for the previous three hours, both the Utes and Cougars came away with victories

If you did sit through the games you saw a team win it's first Pac-12 game. The other team, meanwhile, discovered what happens when you don't turn the ball over. Combined with a brilliant defensive game, that overcame their own special teams, they manage to snap a two game losing streak.

Thus completes the first half of the season for all local teams, so let's spend a bit of time and see where they sit at the mid term, and what to expect going forward. Ugly Still Counts

The game actually caused the ESPN-U studio crew to apologize to viewers after the game. To say it was ugly was an understatement. The offense struggled, and was only able to get a single touchdown off of a tipped pass. The special teams was downright dreadful. The defense was amazing, but it became clear that Pitt doesn't have a legitimate QB threat. Even with all that, there are some good things to take away.

We'll start with the offense. Numbers weren't that great. Watching the game, the offense wasn't as great as you'd want to see, but let's take a few things into account.

First this team was coming into the game on a two game losing streak where they treated the ball like a greased pig. They also had to deal with an East Coast travel, and an early start time. The wind was also going crazy swirling in multiple directions. Everyone knows the Utes were without their #1 QB. To make matters worse their #1 WR DeVonte Christopher didn't make the trip due to a leg injury, and early on in the game they lost their most productive TE Dallin Rogers, to what would become a season ending injury.

Even with all that above them, they put up 250 yards of offense. Most impressively was John White IV. All week the talk was about how the Utes would contain the Nation's leading rusher Ray Graham. We'll get to his performance later, but John White dominated the Running Back duel racking up 171 yards rushing on the ground. For the first time all year White put together a complete game.

Offensively the Utes chewed up the clock, holding the ball for 38 minutes of the game. They had three drives of longer than five minutes, two of which where 12 plays or greater, and went for more than 70 yards.

Hays was a bit of a mixed bag, but where he was greatly improved over the last six quarters was his decision making. Hays didn't beat the Utes. He didn't make the stupid mistake that cost the Utes a possession, or worse. That's all that can be expected.

Now for the bad offensively. The Utes struggled on both 3rd down conversions and in the red zone. While it's nice that Coleman Peterson won the Pac-12 special teams player of the week. However, he should never be kicking 4 field goals. The Utes were dreadful in the red zone, with four appearances in the Red Zone. They ended up with three field goals and a botched punt attempt from the 48 yard line.

If Utah wants to get a few more wins this season, they'll need to convert at least one of those field goals into a TD. Fortunately, their defense had an amazing performance to help them out.

Defensive Shutout

This was one of the better defensive games the Utes have played in the last three years. Even though the score was 26-14, the Defense pitched a shutout. A defensive performance that saw Derrick Shelby not only win the Pac-12 defensive player of the week, but the national defensive player of the week award as well.

The gameplan was to try and contain Ray Graham. For the second straight season, the Utes not only contained a dangerous Pitt running back, but flat out shut him down. Graham ended the day with 46 yards. Without Graham Pitt learned they don't have much else of an offense, as they pulled their starting quarterback twice, for a backup who was just as ineffective.

You can talk about Pitt's offense being dreadful, which it was, but it's really really difficult for a defense to keep an offense to 120 yards of total offense during a game.

Now that we've talked about the good (Defense, running game), and the bad (passing game), it's time to talk about the ugly.

Short Yellow Bus Special Teams

The Utah special teams were beyond dreadful. Despite the defensive shutout, Pitt still managed to get 14 points on the board. Those 14 points came because of back to back special teams disasters. The only reason Pitt even stayed in this game was because of the special Teams.

The first score came on a 98 yard kickoff return by Pitt. Kickoff returns are bad enough, but they are even more infuriating when they come about, not because of bad coverage, but because of sloppy, lazy, and poor tackling. On the return, the Utes actually covered the punt well, meeting the returner at the 25 yard line. Greg Bird, who has multiple big special teams hits over the past few years, apparently thought he didn't have to wrap up, and instead just merely had to hit the returner. Instead the returner bounced off of bird, bounced to the outside, and was gone.

After a three and out for Utah on the next possession, the Utes had to punt. Only they decided that part of punting was not blocking anyone, as the kick got blocked. When Nick Marsh kicked the ball, the Panthers had 7 guys surrounding him. The ball was scooped and scored.

The comedy of errors continued with shanked punts by Marsh. Even when Marsh actually got a nice kick off for Utah, they managed to bungle it up like a bunch of Keystone Kops.

On one occasion the ball bounced inside the 5, one defender kept it from going into the end zone, and allowed Mo Lee, standing on about the 3 inch line to pick up the ball, for what should be a great spot. Instead another Utah defender, not paying attention, bumps into Lee, knocking him into the end zone, giving Pitt the ball at the 20.

On another occasion, Marsh punted the ball and saw it bounce up at the 9. Greg Bird running down the field to down the ball, went to grab the ball, so it didn't give Pitt any better field position. He tipped the ball at the 11. But rather than getting a hold of the ball, he tipped it towards the goal line, and it trickled into the end zone.

This was a disastrous special teams performance. Special teams have been an issue for Utah, the last couple years, but it seemed like they were actually making some headway this year. All of that headway was lost in a single game.

Back Into The Conference

Now that Utah has finished their out of conference schedule with a perfect 3-0 record, they head back into Pac-12 play, still looking to find similar success. The Utes have opened up their inaugural Pac-12 season with an 0-3 record, and look to get their first win against the California Golden Bears.

The Golden Bears have also had a 3-0 conference record, and are also 0-3 in the Pac-12. Much like the Utes, the Golden Bears have struggled offensively, especially at the quarterback position, but they also have a running back who can hurt the defense.

Defensively the Bears and Utes are similar as well as both teams have top 3 conference defenses.

The Bears have also killed themselves with turnovers giving up five last week to USC. Even the Bears three losses are very similar to Utah, as the Bears have lost to USC, and Washington, in addition to the top team in their division.

This is as close to being different sides of the same coin as two teams can get this late in the year. The good news, is that means that Utah should know what it needs to do to beat Cal. This also means that it's the same thing Cal needs to do to beat Utah.

This will be a road game for the Utes, but it won't be played in Cal's home stadium. As with all home games for Cal this season, they are being played at AT&T Park, while Cal's stadium undergoes an extensive renovation.

One other interesting note, Cal is the last Pac-12 (then Pac-10) team Utah has beaten, during the 2009 Poinsettia Bowl.

Grading On A Curve

Last week I made mention that there wasn't a whole lot you could take away from the Cougars win over San Jose State. While this week's opponent may have been an Automatic Qualifying conference member, in truth, Oregon State isn't much better of a team. So as expected BYU rolled out another win.

It's still hard to know what to take from these games. But after the past two weeks, there are a few things that we can feel comfortable with for BYU.

Firstly, this team is just different under Riley Nelson. Riley Nelson is a gamer, and the team responds to him. What Nelson lacks in arm strength, he more than makes up for with the added dimension he brings to games with his legs. Riley Nelson also has the heart that Heaps seemed to have lacked early in the season. There was no bigger evidence of this, than on the play where Nelson scrambled, went head first into a couple of Beavers, and lost his helmet. He then popped up, and decided to give the Beavers' an earful.

Unfortunately, that reckless abandon, may also be Riley's downfall. There is a fine line that Nelson must walk the rest of the year, between aggressive and careless. Otherwise, his body isn't going to be able to hold up, and Heaps will be back in under center.

The second thing, that was impressive this week was Michael Alisa. Against the Spartans Alisa came out of nowhere. This week, he continued his stellar performance. For most of the season the depth chart read, DiLuigi, Quezada, and Kariya. In two games, Alisa has seemed to far outshine all the others. Alisa is a bigger runner than the DiLuigi and Quezada, and is faster than Kariya. Alisa also seems to be the shiftier of the three, and actually reminds me a bit of Harvey Unga. My only real complaint, is he shouldn't be so willing to bounce to the outside.

Finally, and this isn't relegated to just the past two weeks, we can feel comfortable stating Kyle Van Ooy is a beast. He is guaranteed to make one amazing play a game. Usually he doesn't just stop at one. Van Ooy is eligible for the NFL draft at the conclusion of this season. Although BYU fans shouldn't fear this year, but if BYU is lucky enough to see him stay for each of the next two years, Rob Morris, and Brian Kehl, are going to have to move over and welcome the new greatest LB in BYU history.

Also, Congrats to BYU on getting a Pac-12 victory before the Utes.

BYU's Checklist For This Week

My thoughts on BYU's schedule are well known, and this week's game is the worst of the bunch. I hate it when Div 1-A teams play teams from Division 1-AA teams. Unfortunately it happens way too often, including the Utes earlier this year. Worse than playing a 1-AA team though, is playing a 1-AA that had won only a single game for the past three years. If

you add there two wins from this season, the Bengals have won a total of 10 games since 2006, half of which came against Division II teams. This is a completely indefensible scheduling choice. The Cougars have paid Idaho State to come into their house, lay down, and let the Cougars have their way against them. This game is Football scheduling prostitution at it's absolute worst. BYU should actually pay any fan who shows up to the game, for sitting through the atrocity. There is zero chance BYU loses this game. Scratch that, there is less than zero chance. Even if somehow their bus gets delayed and Idaho State lines up against no one, BYU would still win this game. This isn't meant to be another dig at BYU's schedule this year. Even if BYU had 11 other top 15 teams on the schedule, I would still hate this game. Even if Utah had scheduled this terrible team, the football lover in me would still be offended.

So with that said, here's is BYU's checklist for the game. In order to have any since of pride from this game, the Cougars must do all of the following, and even then I'm not sure you can have pride in this win:

- First string Defense pitches a shutout
- First string Offense has one or fewer non scoring drives
- No more than first string scoring drives can be field goals
- Second string in the game, no later than, the second drive of the third quarter
- Third stringers in the game by middle of fourth quarter
- Combined all levels of defense give up less than 10 points
- Combined all levels of offense have less than 4 non scoring drives
- At least four takeaways
- No more than two giveaways, only one of which can be from first string offense

There is one thing that does make this week's game somewhat important. In fact, if BYU wins, one could argue that it will have been the last important game of the season for the Cougars. When they win, the Cougars will officially be bowl eligible, and fans can pay for their travel plans to the Armed Forces Bowl.

Also, don't expect much of a breakdown from this game next week. As much as I love Football, I'm not sure I can bring myself to suffer through this. In fact, I'll give you next week's breakdown right now: BYU destroyed Idaho State.

Midway Point

We are now at the midway point of the season. The Cougars have played seven games, while the Utes have completed their sixth game. Both teams are about where I expected them to be record wise at the midway point. How both teams have gotten to this juncture, though, is drastically different than expected.

For the Utes, who I expected an 8-4 season for at the beginning of the year, 3-3 after six was about where I'd thought they'd be. I did expect them to have had one Pac-12 victory against Washington, and I worried that the Pitt game, mainly due to the travel, would be a loss. So why does this 3-3 feel a lot worse than hoped for?

Offensively the Utes have struggled way more than expected. There are two main reasons. The injury situation is well known. Just as he was hitting his stride, Wynn was lost for the season. Other injuries that have cause two of their top three WR's to miss time, and all three of their TE's to miss time, including one who now out for the season.

The other big issue is the offensive line. This year's offensive line is absolutely dreadful. Wynn's, and then Hays' adjustment into the new offensive scheme by Chow, has been hindered by the fact that they are constantly under pressure. The line has struggled all year to open up holes, unless you are referring to the holes that defenders have gotten to the QB with. No other position on the field has shown the drastic difference between MWC and Pac-12 than the Offensive line, and no other player epitomizes the talent leap than John Cullen.

Last year when Cullen came to the team, he seemed to do really well. Fans were excited as he anchored the Left side of the line opposite Bergstrom. This season, as the opposition has gotten tougher, we've found out, that most of Cullen's success, was due to the opposition. Against bigger and faster defenders, Cullen has seemed a step slow, and a second late, causing him to be a holding, false starting penalty machine. Even though he was a hot head last season as well, it was tolerated more when he wasn't missing so many blocks.

BYU At The Half Point

At the start of the season I expected a similar 8-4 record for the Cougars, with a 7 game record of 5-2. Defensively, the Cougar as I expected. Slightly mediocre, more good than bad, but not great, and not terrible. Led by a beast in Kyle Van Oy.

Offensively, I never bought into the hype based on the way they ended last season, and how they did in fall camp. More specifically I didn't buy into the hype of Jake Heaps. So seeing Heaps struggle wasn't a surprise to me. What was a surprise was the depth of his struggles and how much he lost the team. Not only did he lose the offensive side of the ball, but it seemed that even the defensive side of the ball lost faith in him, tired of making plays, just to see the offense do nothing with it. Most evident with the defense just gave up against the Utes.

I also didn't expect Heaps' struggles to get bad enough that the Cougars went with Riley Nelson, but they did. Since Nelson has become the starting QB, the team, both offensively and defensively has a new fire to it.

Looking Ahead

We know how they've gotten here, but where are they headed? For the Cougars, I'm still expecting an 8-4 record, with possibly a 9-3. This mainly has to do with the quality of competition. There are really only two games that are in question the rest of the way. TCU at Jerry World, and Hawaii on the islands. TCU isn't as strong as they have been in year's past, but they still are athletic, and until BYU shows they can stop TCU, I have to favor the Horned Frogs.

As for Hawaii, they are mediocre. Honestly they are about even with BYU, and if this game were in Provo, I'd pick the Cougars, but the island travel is rough on most teams. There's a reason the NCAA had to give an exception for a 13th game to get people to travel to Hawaii for road games.

For the Utes, the good news is the tough part of their schedule is past them as well. Pitt is the only team they've played so far that doesn't have five wins on the year. Pitt and USC are the only teams they've played that aren't ranked in the top 25 of their divisions respective rankings. The rest of the way, there isn't a team with more than three wins right now, and none with winning records. Four of their remaining six opponents have the very same 3-3 record the Utes currently have. The most difficult of which is this weeks' opponent.

Record wise, my prediction is conditional upon this week's outcome, win and 8-4 is still in play, lose and they are looking at probably 7-5.

Programming Update

It's almost that time. The annual manufactured money grab blackout game is upon. This year's opponent will be the Oregon State Beavers. Fortunately, this year's uniform is much better looking than last year's eye gouge worthy disaster. There are also rumors that the Utes will have black helmets this year.

Unfortunately a time for the game hasn't been announced yet. The fact that it has taken this long is not a good sign for TV purposes. I'm guessing this will be another game on KJZZ. In all honesty I expect the game after that against Arizona to also be a KJZZ broadcast.

The only thing I'm really hoping for is that the game gets a later kickoff, preferably somewhere around 6 or 6:30. Having a blackout in the middle of the day is kind of lame. Plus it really didn't work out with the earlier kickoff last year.

****UPDATE****

As expected the game will be broadcast on KJZZ. It will also be streamed online at UtahUtes.com. Kickoff is set for 5 p.m., and with sunset currently expected around 6:23 p.m. it looks like at least half of the game will be after sunset.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:52

Tuesday, October 11. 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Phil Connors: Do you ever have Deja Vu, Mrs. Lancaster?

Mrs. Lancaster: I don't think so, but I could check with the kitchen.

Just like Phil Connors Utah fans got a severe case of "been there, done that" this past weekend.

Up in Logan, the Aggies finally shook off their personal Phil Connors, by taking the Wyoming Cowboys to task.

Meanwhile in Provo, we learned that Riley Nelson brings fires to the rest of the Cougars, but is there anything else we can take from the start of the poo-poo platter schedule? Next Verse, Same As The First

10-7 Halftime deficit? Check.

5 Turnovers? Check

Defense getting worn down, by offense that keeps putting them in bad situations? Check

This past weekend's game against Arizona State was as close to an exact duplicate of their game the previous week against Washington as any one team could ever play. There were a few subtle differences. This time the majority of the turnovers happened in the second half. Unlike last week the offense was not moving the ball in the first half. The biggest difference though was the Utes actually managed to score on the first drive of the second half, and actually had a 14-13 lead, with the ball, with five minutes left to go in the third.

Other than that, it was the same turnover field, mistake prone second half by the offense, the led to the defense getting put in tough spots, left on the field too long, and eventually wearing down. This game was best summed up by a 6 play offensive stretch for the Utes, that started at that five minute mark. Those six plays:

John White Fumble

John Hays Interception

John White 8 Yard Rush

John White 9 Yard Rush

Reggie Dunn fumble.

And that is how you turn a 14-13 lead, into a 35-14 deficit.

Rating Hays

I guess there is a reason that Jon Hays was going to be playing QB for Nebraska-Omaha, and not for some other Div 1-AA team this spring. Hays wasn't extremely terrible, but he was far from good.

Sure Hays showed an ability to keep plays alive, and to make plays with his legs. Something which is very necessary with the terrible offensive line the Utes have. Hays also showed he had a lot of heart, and willingness to take a hit.

Unfortunately, Hays showed that he was just unable to adjust to the speed of the opponent. His decision making always seemed about half a second slow.

The other big concern for Hays is that he simply does not have the necessary arm strength. His passes would float in the air, for way too long, which then allowed the defender to get into position to make a play. On his two first half interceptions, this was extremely evident as the passes were completely under-thrown, but the pass where this was most obvious was on the flea-flicker on their first drive of the third quarter.

On a play where the WR had gotten open, and the ASU defense had completely bit on the run fake, a well thrown ball would have led to the WR walking in for an untouched TD. Instead, the ball floated in the air, and not one, but two ASU defenders were in position to make a play. Fortunately the Utah WR was able to jump higher and catch the reception.

Hays isn't terrible, and more playing time (Which now that the Utes have announced Jordan Wynn is going to have surgery on his left shoulder, and therefore miss the rest of the season, he will now have in abundance) can possibly help

speed up his decision making, but if Hays continues to float his passes, the Utes could be in deep trouble.

The Utes need to keep Hays as a game manager, and absolutely cannot rely on him to win a game this year.

Hays' Biggest Obstacle

Unfortunately for Utah, and for Hays, the biggest obstacle that will hurt him is his offensive line. Through five games, the line has shown a distinct inability to open up any holes. Unless we are referring to the holes that the defenders run through to get to the Quarterback.

When the Utah offensive line isn't allowing their QB to get sacked, or preventing the running backs from getting any yards, they are busy killing offensive drives with stupid holding penalties. Especially on the left side, where John Cullen has caused his fair share of big plays to be called back. The most recent being DeVonte Christopher's 74 yard catch. With as often as Cullen has allowed defenders to get to the QB, the most surprising thing wasn't the penalty, it was that Cullen was even in the vicinity of the defender to get called for a holding penalty in the first place.

Offense Help Out Your Defense

This week the defense will get a huge test from a running game perspective. The Panthers of Pitt average 176 yards per game. In the air Tino Sunseri hasn't improved much from when the Utes saw him at the beginning of last year. Pitt's leading rusher, Ray Graham, averages 6.0 yards per carry, and his lowest yardage output of the year was 86 yards. Graham also has 9 TD's.

For the past two weeks the Utes defense has been stout, before getting left out to dry by the Offense. Once again, and honestly for the rest of the season, the Utes defense is going to be called on to put Utah in a position to win the game. But there is only so much they can do. Especially when the offense trots out drives of 1 play, 1 play, and 4 plays.

View From The Redzone

As Utah got the ball with about two minutes to go in the first half, I looked at the score and saw the familiar 10-7 score from last week. As I gazed at the scoreboard I just knew this was feeling too much like the previous week. Utah had to do something.

As Utah started to drive the ball in that last drive, I started to feel some relief. A field goal, anything, would be nice to get that score to change. Whatever the Utes did, they could not go into halftime with that 10-7 score. Just too much bad mojo from last week hung around that half time score. Then Jon Hays floated a goal line interception cementing the half time score.

While it started to look like I was worried for nothing in the third quarter as Utah drove down for a TD, and even held a 14-13 lead with 10 minutes to go, part of me always knew that Hays goal line interception was the nail in Utah's Groundhog Day like performance.

The Joys Of Scrimmaging

Late, very late, Saturday night, the Cougars finished beating the San Jose State Spartans 29-16. The question is what to take from the game.

Should the Cougars be excited that they seemed to find a new running threat in Michael Alisa? What should they think about McKay Jacobsen finally being used in the offense with 63 yards, including a 40 yard pass?

Or should they be worried that they gave the Spartans 16 points? Should they be worried that once again, in the second half the offense started to stutter and stall. Should they start jumping back on the Jake Heaps bandwagon, after Riley Nelson looked erratic, including two terrible interceptions?

One thing I know you can take out of this game, is that San Jose State was actually worse than expected. I guess there is a reason that the team had Juniors who were going through their first ever two game win streak. At least, the Spartans didn't kick a punt off a teammates helmet.

Is Michael Alisa that good, or was it the competition? We won't know until Alisa does it against a decent opponent. Unfortunately for the Cougars that won't happen again until they play TCU.

Same goes for the whole Riley Nelson/Jake Heaps debate. It really won't matter who is playing QB the next two weeks. Either one should be able to lead the Cougars to wins. However, Nelson does bring an entirely different fire to the rest of the team. They are playing with a different attitude than with Heaps is in the game. Until that fire is gone, BYU must stay the course with Nelson, no matter how erratic he is.

What about the offense stuttering in the second half, or the defensive secondary being a little soft? There is room for concern there, as both seem to be a continuation of problems from earlier in the season, but at the same time, it could also be written off by the fact that the Cougars may have let their foot off the gas pedal after getting a 23-3 lead.

There was one surprise though, and that was the nice 40 yard pass from Nelson to Jacobsen. What kind of shoulder surgery did he go through last year, because even that past used to be beyond his capabilities.

Damming The Beavers

Oregon State finally broke through in the win column this past week against Colorado, and in so doing, ruining what would have been this season's first Ackbar Alert Trap Game. An early season QB controversy has led to the Beavers going with Freshman Sean Mannion.

However the Beavers best chance in this game relies on star WR James Rogers. Rogers was sidelined early in the season with an injury, and has slowly been working his way back into past form. The Beavers will look for him on the offense, and if the Cougars can keep him in check, they should be able to come away with a victory.

Best Way To Avoid An End Of Game Letdown

How do you avoid another heartbreaking finish with your team on the losing end? Simple. Put up 63 points in an absolute shellacking of your opponent. Utah State did just that by beating the Wyoming Cowboys 63-19. After two consecutive games that ended in a heartbreaking fashion, the Aggies needed a victory like that.

Most impressively, they finally began to trust Chucky Keeton to throw the ball. All Keeton did, was cement his place as the state's best QB with a 213 yard, 4 TD performance.

Robert Turbin meanwhile added his 4th consecutive 100 yard game.

How long has it been since the Aggies had the best QB, and the Best RB in the state. Add in LB Bobby Wagner and you could almost make an argument for best defensive player.

Conference For The Taking

The Aggies now open up conference play, and are a legitimate dark horse candidate to take the conference title. Their toughest competition will be departing Fresno State, or Hawaii. Unfortunately they get both team on the road, starting with Fresno State this weekend.

Programming Updates

Good news for Cougar fans. This week's game against the Oregon State Beavers manage to avoid a complete live blackout, as KBYU and FSN came to an agreement to split broadcasting duties. This means that BYU fans will be able to watch the game live on KBYU, or channel 11, at 2 p.m. mountain time on Saturday.

Meanwhile for the Utes, the time for their game against Cal on 10/22 has been announced. The game will kickoff at 5 p.m. Mountain time, and will be broadcast on KJZZ, or channel 14.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 14:54

Wednesday, October 5, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

There is an old football saying that tells us the most popular person on a football team is the back up Quarterback. BYU and Utah fans both got extended looks at their respective backups this weekend. One team will need to get familiar with their backup, like it or not. The other, well they'd be extremely foolish not to use their backup, who was a player of the week in his brief appearance.

Another saying, though not relegated only to football, is that things happen in threes. Utah State Gary Anderson is praying, and hoping beyond hope that it's true as he watched his team suffer a 3rd gut wrenching loss.

The Other Side Of The Coin

For the second straight game, the Utes found themselves going into halftime seeing the home team overcome three first half turnovers to be down by less than a touchdown. For the second straight game, the Utes would then see the visiting team dominate the second half, as the home team continued to make mistakes and turnovers on their way to a blow out defeat.

Unfortunately, this time the Utes were the home team.

A roller coaster ride of a first half started when Ryan Lacy fumbled the opening kickoff, and watched Washington scoop and score for a quick 7-0 lead. Fortunately the Utes handled the next kickoff correctly, but the first play from scrimmage saw LT John Cullen completely miss a block, and QB Jordan Wynn got dropped for a sack on the first play of a three and out series.

Then the offense woke up. A Washington defense that had been much maligned, and seemed like it could be taken advantage of, started living up to it's reputation and Wynn moved the offense down the field the rest of the half.

Unfortunately the Offense couldn't finish drives.

Less than a second later, Utah WR Dres Anderson caught his first TD at Rice-Eccles Stadium.

Sure they managed a nice diving TD reception by Dres Anderson on the second drive of the game, but there were missed opportunities the rest of the half. The Utes would twice more drive deep into the Red Zone, just to turn the ball over on a Wynn interception, and a Dres Anderson fumble.

Thanks mainly to a defense that had kept Washington's high powered offense in check, allowing them only to score a field goal on their last drive, thanks mainly to two boneheaded personal foul penalties, the Utes went into the half relieved to only be down 10-7.

Then the second half started Washington scored on their opening drive, and then doom came to the Utes, when backup QB Jon Hays came under center.

Hays' second pass was an ill advised interception. Hays also had another fumble later in the game when he tried to get rid of the ball instead of taking a sack.

The defense that held up so well in the first half, wore down in the second half thanks mainly to the offenses inability to do anything. What seemed like a close game at the half, ended with a 31-14 score, made closer by a garbage time TD for the Utes.

Unfortunately the game wasn't the worst loss of the week. That instead was the reason Hays was in the game in the second half.

When Your Body And Your Talent Don't Agree

The reason Jon Hays was in the game was because sometime late in the first half QB Jordan Wynn suffered an injury to his non throwing shoulder. While exact details of the injury have been scarce, reports after the game were that Wynn

was physically unable to take a snap from center, as his left shoulder was popping in and out of the shoulder socket.

It's too bad, because throughout the year Wynn had been playing the smartest football of his career. He had finally started to overcome the mental issues caused by his offseason shoulder surgery, and was now throwing it really well. The past two games, his passes had nice zip, and were no longer the floating ducks we saw against Montana State. It seemed he was finally poised to be the QB this team would need.

Instead, Wynn suffered the third injury of his career which will require him to miss time. Ever since Wynn showed up as a 145 pound freshman, his body has always seemed to be the weak link of his game. Wynn had the arm strength as a freshman. He was now learning to think through his passes and make smarter decisions. Throughout his career you could see that he wanted to be in there. He always seemed to play better after taking a big hit. Whether it was his freshman year against BYU when a brutal hit by Pendleton was followed by Wynn leading the Utes back to force overtime, or this year, when Wynn came back from being knocked out of the game against BYU to lead the the Utes to 47 unanswered points.

Unfortunately Wynn's body just does not seem to be able to handle the rigors of being a starting division 1-A quarterback.

The official injury report says Wynn is expected to miss two to three weeks, and will then be re-evaluated at that time. It is my personal belief that Wynn will never throw another pass for the Utes. If that is the case, his legacy will always be one of unfulfilled talent and injuries.

Season On The Brink

The joy of finally being in the Pac-12 have now given way to the reality of being in the Pac-12. In a conference dominated by their Quarterbacks, the Utes are now forced to go with their unproven, junior college transfer of a backup. Despite getting to watch him for an entire half last week, there isn't really anything you can take away from that game due to the circumstances.

For parts of the half he seemed overwhelmed. He wasn't making the best decisions, as most evident by his fumble when he was trying to get rid of the ball to save a sack, and instead simply lost control of it. However, you must take into account, that he was thrown into a bad situation. There were bright moments as well including when he dove for a first down, and ended up doing an Elway helicopter to get it. His stats were also very similar to those of start Wynn. Once he settled down, he showed that he does have the arm strength.

Truth is we have no idea about Hays, which is a scary concept. To make matters worse, The Arizona State Sun Devils come into town. The Sun Devils are sitting at 4-1, with their only loss having come to undefeated Illinois. The Sun Devils won't feel any sympathy for Utah, as they have had to overcome injuries in abundance themselves. The Sun Devils are led by 6'8" QB Brock Osweiler on the offensive side of the ball. However their most talked about, and arguably their best player, is LB Vontaze Burflic.

Burflic is an aggressive and, according to some players, like USC QB Matt Barkley, dirty player. The only intentions Burflic has on the field are bad. He doesn't even care if you are on his team, as he's gotten into multiple fights with teammates. I'm sure he's chomping at the bit to rattle Hays in his first start.

It doesn't get any easier for the Utes either. After the Sun Devils, the Utes play two consecutive road games, starting with an east coast trip against Pitt.

If Hays struggles a 2-5 record is highly likely. In the Pac-12 there are no guaranteed victories, even when you are going against the likes of Oregon State, UCLA, and Colorado. So who knows where Utah would end up from there.

To help out Hays, the Utes must get their running game figured out. John White IV has been inconsistent. He had big games against Montana State, and in the second half against BYU. Versus USC, and Washington, White struggled. The Utes have been unable to find any secondary rushing either, as the second leading rusher on the team is Reggie Dunn with 67 yards.

Another thing that will help the Utes will be an abundance of motions and screens that you can expect to see this week. Expect the Utes to take the pressure off of Hays, and instead use the speed of their WR's. Jet screens, bubble screens, and middle screens to the WR's, where the WR will get the ball off of a short pass, and then make plays with their legs, will probably be the main course in the passing game this week. At least long enough to let Hays get into the game, and get into rhythm.

A successful running game is necessary to help take pressure off of the QB. Especially when the QB is a backup going against arguably the third best team in the conference.

There is good news for the Utes, as the Sun Devils are still prone to mental lapses and periods without discipline. If the Utes can get the running game going, and if Hays can manage the offense, who knows. Maybe the Utes can stem the bleeding, and still manage to have a successful first season in the Pac-12.

The View From The Red Zone

Confusion, that was the view. When Hays came in the big question on everyone's mind, was what the heck? When Hays stayed in, the confusion increased, especially because you could see Wynn on the sideline. To make matters worse, getting any data connection at Rice-Eccles Stadium is extremely difficult. Not that it would have mattered because apparently the Utes were Teammates Kenneth Scott, Dexter Ransom, and Lei Talamaivao take a moment before the game to prepare themselves mentally. being tight lipped on exactly what was going on with Wynn. It took the majority of the third quarter before word of his injury finally started coming out.

Of course, that's better than those watching at home on ROOT Sports, where the announcers didn't even realize Hays was the QB until the third or fourth offensive possession of the third quarter. Up till that point they had been calling Hays by Wynn's name.

Fool Me Once... What Happens If You Fool Me Thrice?

Of course, it could always be worse for Utah fans. They could be Aggie Fans. The Aggies seem to be making it a weekly goal to crush their fan base in the worst possible way. Though I'm not sure if they could top their 4th quarter collapse against BYU.

It's not just that the Aggies hate BYU, and were 12 minutes away from shushing all those who denied their being a rivalry between the Aggies and Cougars.

It's not that the Aggies had started the game with an 80 yard TD run by Robert Turbin on the first play of the game, and were looking to win in Provo for the first time since 1978.

It's not just that they had an 8 point or greater lead with 12 minutes or less to play in the game for the third time this season, just to end up losing.

To add insult to all that injury, it was Riley Nelson who beat them. Riley Nelson was the savior for Utah State when he committed to them out of high school. Riley was an Aggie legacy. His father played for the Aggies, and his grandfather was an Aggie basketball coach and athletics director. Nelson, being LDS went on his mission following his freshman year.

What happened next, depends on who you talk to. After his mission Riley announced that he was going to transfer to BYU. Utah State has accused BYU of actively recruiting Nelson while he was on his mission. The Cougars insist Nelson contacted them. At the time recruiting players on a church mission was not against NCAA rules. However it was something that head coach Bronco Mendenhall had promised BYU would never do, because they didn't want to take the missionary out of the spirit of the mission.

When Notre Dame LB Manti Te'o was contemplating whether he would go on an LDS mission, the Fighting Irish were so worried about losing him to other teams trying to recruit him, they pushed the NCAA to institute a rule preventing teams from recruiting players on ecclesiastical missions. This rule has been incorrectly called the Riley Nelson rule.

So imagine the agony and suffering Aggie fans went through when they not only saw their third heartbreaking 4th quarter collapse, but that it all started when their former savior was put into the game for their hated rival.

We Have A Controversy

Once again the BYU Offense had stuttered, stalled and looked generally flat. Through three quarters, QB Jake Heaps looked much like he had the rest of the season. He was missing open WR's. Bouncing passes short.

At one point the Cougars had first and goal from the five. A Couple plays later, Heaps had led the Cougars into turning that into a 3rd and goal from the 10. I promptly received a text from ThRhett saying Mr 3rd and 10 does it again. I can only imagine his frustration when later in that same driver, after a penalty had given them first and goal at the three, Heaps had turned it into 3rd and 8.

At the same time it was, and it wasn't a surprise when Bronco pulled Heaps in the 4th quarter. Backup QB Riley Nelson, who some had reported in fall camp had been dropped to 3rd string. Came in and led the Cougars from behind. In just under a quarter of action, Nelson went 10 of 14 for 144 yards, and 2 TD's. Where he was most dangerous, and what caused the Aggies the most problems, were his legs, as Nelson ran for 62 yards. With 11 seconds to go, Nelson threw a pass that was tipped by an Aggie Defender. Marcus Matthews caught the deflection, the Cougars won, and the QB Controversy was officially on.

There seems to be two big questions for BYU this week. The first, and most important one, is who will, and who should BYU start at QB this week against San Jose State.

BYU fans are tired of the offense failing to live up to potential, and are tired of seeing Heaps fail to live up to his hype. They are excited for what Riley Nelson brought in the Aggie game, and believe that he can help jump start the offensive production.

Sure Nelson was able to burn the Aggies with the QB draw, but doesn't anyone remember last year, when both Heaps and Nelson were splitting the quarterback duties. The biggest complaints about Nelson were that he couldn't throw the ball very far down field. This is where you would think that Nelson's running ability would come into play. That would be true if he were a threat to throw the ball down the field. Preparing for a scrambling QB is a lot different than preparing for a pocket passing QB, even if the majority of said QB's passes end up 5 yards short of his target.

Give a defense a week to prepare for a scrambling quarterback and then add into the fact that the QB is not really a threat to go down the field, and they have a running game that is struggling, and they aren't that much of a threat anymore.

Let's be honest, there is a reason that Nelson was almost the third string QB. Jake Heaps has the better arm, and the more talent.

That said, the one thing Nelson has, that Heaps obviously doesn't, is the trust of the team. It was evident from the moment Nelson took the field, that the rest of the offense had a new spark. The WR's were stretching out a bit more to make plays, than they had been with Heaps. Heaps has lost this team. They are tired of him missing them on passes. They were tired of him flinching at the thought of contact.

Nelson is a gamer. When he runs, not only does he not avoid contact, but he actually looks to run over defenders.

It really doesn't matter who the QB is for the Cougars the next three weeks. First there are other issues that the Cougars have. Their run defense was getting absolutely gashed by the Aggies on the ground. Last week against UCF, the Knights were moving the ball freely through the air, and everyone remembers what happened a couple weeks ago against the Utes.

The playcalling leaves a whole lot to be desired. Doman is a first year Offensive Coordinator, and you can tell by watching the calls he is making. The Running game is practically non-existent, and the WR's have struggled all year to get open.

The other reason it doesn't matter who is playing QB, is that the Cougars next three opponents are San Jose State, Oregon State, and Idaho State. The Cougars are beginning the poo poo platter portion of their schedule.

Jake Heaps is the future of this team. But right now, Riley Nelson is the QB who has the trust of this team. For that reason, and that reason alone, Nelson should be the starter. However, my bet is Bronco will give Heaps another chance. If Heaps does start, he will be on a bit of a short leash. It's a slippery slope, and now is when we'll find out what Heaps is made of. Heaps has never had to suffer such struggles as a QB. If he gets yanked again, it could damage his confidence permanently, or it could make him buckle down, and work on some of his glaring issues that have been prevalent for the last two years.

The other big question out of Provo this week already seems to have an answer, as reports out of Provo are that Riley Nelson has cut his hair.

About That Rivalry Argument

So any BYU fan that said there wasn't a rivalry with Utah State saw their argument go out the window when fans at the stadium rushed the field following the game.

Look that was an exciting game, with an exciting ending, but really BYU, have you fallen so far that squeaking past a team that has beaten you only once in the past 15 years, and has not beaten you at home in 33 years is really a cause for storming the field?

Programming Update

Utah's game against Pittsburgh on 10/15 has been given a time slot and a broadcast channel. The game will be shown on ESPN-U at Noon eastern time or 10:00 a.m. Mountain time.

This is a bad time slot for the Utes. It's already difficult for teams from the west coast to travel east. The Utes will be losing two hours during the trip. That means in order to be at the game for the 10:00 a.m. Mountain Time start, they will have to be rolling out of bed at around 5 or 6 a.m. Mountain Time.

To counteract this, I would expect the Utes to travel a day earlier than normal for an away game. While this will give the Utes more time back East to get adjusted to the time difference, it may cost them some travel time.

Meanwhile a time has been announced for BYU's game on the 15th against Oregon State. The Kickoff will be at 2:00 p.m. Mountain Time. Unfortunately, since this is an Oregon State home game, and the Beavers have been terrible this season, Fox and ESPN have passed on any National television coverage for this game. ROOT Sports Northwest, who has a local agreement with the Beavers has also passed on televising the game. This means that ROOT Rocky Mountain will not be able to broadcast the game.

Since it is an Oregon State home game, that means the TV Contract the Pac-12 had prior to expansion when they were the Pac-10, which was also widely regarded as the worst TV contract of the big six conferences, and not BYU's TV Contract has jurisdiction. This means BYUtv does not get any rights to broadcast the game live. BYUtv is currently negotiating with Oregon State, but as of right now, it looks like for the first time since either 1998 or 1996, BYU will not be broadcast live on TV.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 13:22

Tuesday, September 27, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Last October the Cougars were reeling at 1-3. They made the trip through Logan Canyon to face a team they hadn't lost to in over 15 years. The Utah State Aggies were also sitting at 1-3. Both teams were looking for a victory that would turn their season around and propel them into a Bowl Game.

The Aggies ended up demolishing the Cougars. They handed them a serious beat down that seemed destined to be a turning point. And in a sense they were right. That game did cause a turning point for a team and propelled them into a Bowl game. Unfortunately for the Aggies it wasn't them. Instead that was just the second of four victories. The Cougars meanwhile began a tweaking to their coaching staff as Head Coach Bronco Mendenhall scape-goated defensive coordinator Jaime Hill, and took over as the Defensive Coordinator. The Cougars, went 5-2 the rest of the way to earn a trip to the New Mexico Bowl.

A year later and both teams are in similar situations. The Cougars are in the throes of a disappointing season, while the Aggies just can't seem to make that jump. Once again both teams are looking for a season turning victory. New Verse, Same As The First

Hey Aggie fans, stop me if you've heard this one before. The Aggies open the season by playing a high caliber BCS team stronger than most think they should. They then are unable to follow up that momentum and struggle the rest of the year.

If it seems like a familiar song and dance for Utah State fans, that's because it is. During Head Coach Gary Andersen's first two years in Logan they opened the season by playing BCS teams strong, and then faltered for consecutive 4-8 seasons. Once again in 2011 Utah State gave Auburn an extreme upset scare to start the year. In week two the Aggies demolished a Weber State. After a week three bye, the Aggies welcomed the Colorado State Rams to Logan last week.

The Aggies out played the Rams. They rushed and hassled Rams QB Pete Thomas all day. They had overcome penalties, turnovers and a whole lot of mental blunders. They were getting ready to receive a punt with an 8 point lead and just over two minutes left, and a victory seemed on the horizon.

Instead the Aggies muffed the punt, and it was recovered by the Rams. Colorado State punched in the TD, and converted the two point conversion, and Overtime was upon them. Aggie running back Robert Turbin scored a TD in just two plays for the Aggies, but their defense, which had spent way too much time on the field, was unable to prevent the Rams from scoring a TD on their possession, or on their first possession of the second OT.

Once again the Aggies leaned on Robert Turbin who scored on the Aggies first play of second OT. Now the Aggies were left with a decision, kick the extra point and go to Triple OT, or go for the win.

Coach Andersen later would say the reason he decided to go for the win, is he thought his defense was gassed. He went for two, and the first play had a pass interference penalty. On the second attempt, Robert Turbin was ran out of bounds, and the game was over.

This was the type of game that Utah State needs to start winning. They need to figure out how to stay out of their own way. Anderson has done a good job of making Utah State competitive, but now the biggest challenge for the Aggies is to turn a culture of losing, into a culture of winning. Simply being competitive or close won't be enough in Logan. They need to figure out how to take the next step, otherwise for the third straight season, the eulogy at the end will be all about wasted opportunities and potential.

Rebound?

If there is a good thing about having seven turnovers in a game, it's that there is plenty of film to review on how to cause turnovers. The Cougars needed every one of the three turnovers they forced to overcome another underwhelming performance by the Cougar Offense, especially from QB Jake Heaps, whom reader ThRhett proposes has his name changed to 3rd and 10.

The Cougars victory was also assisted by their first Kickoff return in 13 years. Cody Hoffman's 93 yard return responded

just as the Knights had taken a 17-10 lead late in the third quarter.

The other bright spot for the Cougars was the resurrection of the Running game. Coming into the game, the Cougars running game was ranked 118th in the nation. The week previous the Cougars had managed a measly 11 yards against the Utes. This week the Cougars showed an increased dedication to running the ball, and they were repaid when Brian Kariya crashed in for the game winning TD.

Other than that, this was another, overall, underwhelming, bordering on bad, performance by the Cougars. The Cougars gave up 400 minus 1 yard of total offense, and even when they seemed able to contain UCF QB Godfrey from running the ball, the Knights were having no problem moving the ball through the air.

On the offensive side of the ball, the Passing game was non existant. Brandon Doman, who had moved to the booth, wisely kept the ball in the running games hands as the game came down to the wire.

Once again QB Jake Heaps seemed entirely overwhelmed by the game. Heaps seems uncomfortable in the pocket, and you can tell that he is afraid of the oncoming contact. This was never more apparent than when during his throwing motion he flinched as there were defenders near by.

Which Team Will Get Out Of Their Own Way

So the question is, which team, The Aggies, or The Cougars, will manage not shoot themselves in the foot. The Cougars are looking for revenge after last year's embarrassing debacle, while the Aggies are looking to prove last season wasn't a fluke. This year the Aggies will have to handle, what is sure to be, a revved up LaVell Edwards Stadium crowd, and their Flash Mob.

There are two keys to this game.

First is, can the Cougar defense handle Robert Turbin. Turbin has shown through the early part of the season, that he truly is the best RB in the state of Utah. The Cougars are 85th in the nation giving up 117 yards per game. Turbin on the season has rushed for 365 yards and 8 TD's on the season. If the Aggies can get Turbin going, it makes the rest of the offense easier for Utah State.

The second key to this game, is which QB doesn't hurt his team more. The Aggies are led by True Freshman Chucky Keeton. Keeton played great, making plays against Auburn using both his legs and his arms. However as the Colorado State game started coming down to the wire, one couldn't help but wonder whether the coaching staff really trusted him, as he was only allowed to throw the ball 15 times, completing only 9 of them for 86 yards.

Meanwhile for the Cougars Heaps has continued to struggle, and all of Provo goes into each week wondering if this will be the week, that the Heaps they saw at the end of last season, and during fall camp, finally makes an appearance. As each week passes with Heaps struggling, we might have to start wondering if this is the real Heaps after all. Heaps, and the BYU passing game, may be in even more trouble of WR Ross Apo, who is the only WR to catch a TD reception this season, is forced to miss the game thanks to a concussion suffered against the Knights.

Both teams come into this game with their season on the brink. The Aggies are trying to get over a tough loss, and are trying to show that they are indeed ready to make the jump. The Cougars are struggling to find meaning in their season. They know they have an easy stretch of games coming up, but a victory against the Aggies might be their last chance to have a legitimate win on the season.

A Pac-12 Homecoming

A well needed bye week for the Utes has come and gone, and now they prepare for their Homecoming game. This is a different homecoming this season, as it also corresponds with the first ever home Pac-12 game for the Utes as the welcome the Washington Huskies into town.

The Huskies are 3-1 on the season having just knocked off the Cal Bears. They are also a team with a Dr. Jekyll Offense, and a Mr. Hyde defense.

Offensively, the Huskies are enjoying what happens when the QB running your system is actually able to run the system. Despite being a top 10 draft pick, Jake Locker was never really built for the system Sarkisian has wanted to run in Washington. Sophomore Keith Price has the Husky passing game clicking with 983 yards passing and 14 TD's on the season, with only 3 Interceptions.

Not only are the Ute defensive backs going to be tested by the Husky air attack, the front seven will also be tested thanks to RB Chris Polk who is 2nd in the Pac 12 in rushing.

Too make matters a bit more difficult, Price is also a scrambling quarterback. While scrambling he continues to look down the field for the pass. This means that Utah is going to have to make sure that when they rush the QB, they do it in a way that keeps contain, so that Price doesn't get to the corners.

Defensively, the Huskies have been vulnerable. Eastern Washington, Hawaii, and Nebraska all were able to torch the Husky defense. This should give the Utes some hope. For Utah to win, they need to get John White IV going early. So far through all three games, White has shown a propensity for getting stronger as the game goes on. While that's always a great aspect to have, due to Washington's ability to score points, the Utes will need White going from the onset. This will allow some of the pressure to be taken off of Wynn.

Another important aspect will be how well the OL does. Wynn has shown this season that when he gets protection, he's able to find the holes in the coverage, and deliver the ball to his WR's who will then turn it into a big play. When Wynn has been pressured, his decision making goes down. It is unclear at this time if LT Tony Bergstrom, who strained his knee against BYU, will be back for this game.

It may sound like a copout, but whichever team controls the line of scrimmage the best will be the victor. Both teams must stop the run, and both teams must pressure the opposing QB to make him make mistakes.

For the fans, this week is the realization of something many thought would never happen. Joining the Pac-12 has been the dream for many Utah fans ever since the Pac-8 took Arizona and Arizona State from the WAC. Many wondered if it would ever happen, especially as Utah struggled for any recognition in the late 80's.

As Utah rebuilt their program, and eventually busted the BCS, twice, there was always that bit of disrespect that comes with the Non-AQ label. Now that label is gone, and fans in Utah get to enjoy their first home game in a "big boy" league. The culmination of the process started with Ron McBride finally comes to fruition.

The Inevitable Has Happened

Back when the Utes were in the Mountain West, I spent many a time wondering how in the world the New Mexico Lobos hadn't yet fired Mike Locksley. Locksley replaced Rocky Long as head coach. Long had success for the Lobos, Locksley not so much. To make matters worse, not only did Locksley's Lobos suck off the field, but his tenure was field with off the field distractions, including a physical confrontation with an assistant coach and an instance of sexual harassment with a secretary.

Finally after losing to Div. 1-AA Sam Houston State, on the same weekend that a recruit was caught drinking and driving in a car owned by Locksley, the Lobos had enough, and fired him, bringing to an end his 2-26 career.

It's too bad, it was always enjoyable to make fun of the disaster he had wrought.

Programming Update

Some programming updates for both the Utes and the Cougars this week. For the Utes, the game on October 8th against Arizona State has been announced as a kickoff of 1:30 p.m mountain time. This game will be broadcast on ROOT Sports, channel 683 on DirectTV, 414 on Dish and 52 on Comcast. The Sun Devils are coming off of a dismantling of the USC Trojans, and the game against the Utes is considered by many to be the game to determine the Pac-12 South, so Utah fans plan now to be there and ready for the earlier kick.

For the Cougars, their game against San Jose State on the 8th will be a little bit later. ESPN has announced that the game will be televised on ESPU (Channel 208 on DirectTV, unsure about Dish and Comcast.) It will also have a late kickoff of 8:15. Unfortunately for Cougar fans, these late games may become the norm this season, especially if they continue to struggle. But here is a question for everyone. The typical Football game runs about three hours and thirty minutes. If it's a close game, an overtime game, or a sloppy game with lots of penalties and incomplete passes, games can run longer. So what happens if this game runs past the three hour forty five minute mark, forcing BYU to play on Sunday?

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 11:05

Wednesday, September 21, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Cliches are cliches for a reason. Three popular cliches when it comes to the Holy War are "throw out everything you know about these teams when they play each other". "Forget the records." "You never know what will happen during the Holy War."

In a rivalry whose recent history is filled with unpredictable moments and games, 2011 was no different. For once, the game didn't require a last second block, an OT catch and run, a magical 4th and 18 conversion, a final play catch, a doink off the goal post, or any number of last second plays this rivalry is famous for.

Maybe it is that history that caused many to expect this game to come to the end. Add into the equation the common feeling that many wondered if the two teams could even combine for 30 points.

That last thing anybody expected was a blowout, but that's exactly what ended up happening. A Tale Of Two Halves

It was the closest of games, It was the largest of margins.

Despite starting the game with Jake Heaps doing his best Keystone Kops impression, and the Cougars first three drives ending in fumbles, there they were with 4:00 to go in the half, holding the ball and a 10-7 lead. Not only that, but they had spent a good portion of the first half absolutely bringing the wood on defense. Utah WR DeVonte Christopher was out of the game, thanks to a couple of absolutely brutal hits, and on the previous drive, Utah QB Jordan Wynn was knocked out of the game, holding his non-throwing arm, much the same way Sam Bradford did in Dallas in 2009.

BYU would eventually have a 3 and out. Jordan Wynn came back in, and led the Utes on a 6 play 63 yard touchdown drive. One that was kept alive by an absolutely bone-headed pass interference by Cougar safety Travis Uale, on a play that would have forced the Utes to punt.

Despite being down 14-10, BYU had fought back from three fumbles. They had nearly 200 yards passing, and had forced two turnovers of their own. This game seemed like it was destined to go down to the wire again.

What happened in the second half was an embarrassment of epic proportions. Wynn hooked up with Dres Anderson on a beautiful arching pass, that Anderson turned into a 59 yard TD, to start a menagerie of Utah domination, and BYU ineptitude that didn't end until John White IV scored on consecutive runs of 62 and 35 yards. Utah was down 10-7 with only a +1 turnover margin, but before the next turnover would occur, Utah had ran the score up to 24-10.

By the time the second 30 minutes had ended, Utah had ended up scoring 47 unanswered points, while their defense, and BYU offense had conspired for a total of 7 BYU turnovers. The game had turned into a shellacking that saw Utah break BYU's will. Finally at about the same time BYU fans had a mass exodus from the stadium at the beginning of the 4th quarter, the BYU team itself quit.

The Blame Game

Jake Heaps had a fumble on his own 6 yard line. On the first drive of the game, rather than just fall on another fumble at his own 2, which would have allowed BYU to punt, he tried to pick up the ball and pass, instead he ended up losing his grip on the ball, and Derick Shelby scored a TD. He threw one interception. Time and time again, he would bounce passes about 5 yards short of his receiver on 3rd down to kill drives.

JJ DiLuigi, and Josh Quezada both fumbled and were part of an 11 yard rushing attack.

The defensive line, was rarely ever able to get pressure on Wynn. On 3 consecutive plays they gave up runs of 20 yards, 62 yards for a TD, and 35 yards for a TD.

The Linebackers and DB's were frequently out of position allowing, Utah's WR's to make catches in gaps of the zone.

The offensive line started the game with Center Terrence Brown snapping a shotgun snap far right, and over Heaps head for the Shelby touch down. It never got better as they allowed sacks and pressure on the QB's all day, and never

opened up holes for the running game.

There was plenty of blame to go around, so the question is, who gets the blame for this loss.

Not Jake Heaps. Yes Heaps was bad. One could even say he was pathetic at times. But despite all his struggles he did have 200 yards passing in the first quarter. While he may not be consistent, there does seem to be one consistent thing from him this year. The weekly touchdown pass to Ross Apo. This time a beautiful rainbow of a pass to put the Cougars up 10-7.

Not the running backs. They were definitely ineffective, but the OL did a terrible job of opening holes for them. While they did fumble twice, I give the credit for both fumbles to Chaz Walker, and Star Lotuleilei, who made great plays to punch the ball out.

Not the defensive line. They were on the field way too much in the second half. Despite finishing the game with 174 yards rushing, John White IV had been held to only 24 of those yards in the first half, and 57 yards through the first three quarters.

Not the Linebackers and DB's. Despite giving up decent chunks of yardage in the first half, they were absolutely bringing the wood to make the ball carrier pay for getting those yards. More impressively, except for Travis Uale, they were legal hits they were using as well. It's a good thing Utah has a bye, because they will need it to recover from some of the first half hits BYU brought. Uale Kaveinga leveled Christopher causing a fumble, and Kyle Van Oy made a brilliant play, tipping a Jordan Wynn pass to himself for an interception.

The Offensive line didn't really do much of anything good to counteract its disastrous game. If you must absolutely blame a group of players for a loss, this would be it for me.

But no, I'm not even going to blame them for the loss. This was a team that played like football really does come fifth, and to me that means there is only one person to blame, not just for this loss, but for the general direction of this team. This was a team that seemed unprepared, undisciplined, and especially in the second half, they seemed to lack conditioning. After halftime, it seemed BYU didn't make any adjustments. While I'll give Bronco credit for keeping BYU's head in the game after the first three turnovers, throughout the rest of the game he was clearly out coached.

Down This Path Before

This isn't the first time that BYU has started 1-2 under Bronco Mendenhall. In fact in this is now the 5th time Bronco started the season 1-2. Each previous time he started 1-2 he managed to right the ship, twice he ended up with 10 or more wins, and every time he's managed at least a .500 record. So just because they are now staring at a 1-2 record doesn't mean this season will end up a disaster. But isn't the real problem that once again, high pre season expectations have turned into a struggling beginning.

And why is Bronco 1-6 in the 3rd game of the season during his career.

This year it will be interesting to see if BYU can right the ship. The Cougars right now are on a very slippery slope. Sure they've been 1-2 before and turned it around. Last year being the most recent time it happened. This time though, the Cougars don't have anything to play for.

In previous years, even when starting 1-2, the Cougars had a Conference Championship to play for. Twice they had turned it around and won that conference championship. Even in the two years they didn't win the conference after starting 1-2, they had the chance at a better bowl game to play for. Even last year when they had all their struggles, they came into the Holy War with a chance at second place in the conference and possibly the Vegas Bowl. (TCU who the Vegas Bowl normally would have taken since they won the conference, would have been gone to the Rose Bowl.)

On an individual basis, the players had personal conference based achievements to strive for, such a conference offensive player of the year, all conference honors, etc.

This year that's all gone. If they only manage to win the minimum 6 games, or if they win out and end the season at 10-2, their bowl game was determined when they lost to Texas. They can't win a conference championship, and the players have no individual honors available.

Before the season Bronco admitted that the Cougars primary goal of the season was to win the State, and then hopefully get into a BCS bowl. Both those goals are gone. During the Utah game, the Cougars showed that they are

not mentally strong. They have already quit once when the going got tough, what happens if they struggle more.

There are four games that BYU should win, just by showing up (San Jose State, Idaho State, Idaho, and New Mexico State.) That will put them at 5 wins. There is one game left that BYU will be the heavy underdog (TCU.) That leaves 4 toss up games left on the schedule - Utah State, Central Florida, Oregon State, and Hawaii - and these will be the games where a possible BYU slide will show up the most.

Moving Past The Rivalry

Both teams must now move past the rivalry and prepare for the rest of the season. Fortunately for Utah, they get a bye week to heal up. And they definitely need it. BYU was bringing the wood in the first half of that game. Utah suffered some major bumps and bruises. Wynn and Christopher both missed plays. RB Tauni Vakapuna injured his ankle, and even though he tried to gut it out, you could see that it was hurting him. The biggest injury for Utah was OL Tony Bergstrom going down with a knee injury. As he hobbled off the field, Bergstrom couldn't put any weight on his leg, and it looked to be a devastating injury.

Good news coming from the coaching staff, saying this is an MCL sprain. This is fortunate because if it had been a full MCL tear, or an ACL injury Bergstrom would be done for the year, instead Bergstrom is being listed as questionable for the Washington game.

For Utah, other than healing, the important thing about this bye week will be to forget about the Rivalry game. It was a great win, but Utah must now put it behind them. They must move on. They must forget it.

While Utah has extra time to prepare for their next game, BYU has less time than normal to prepare for their next game.

The Golden Knights

After such an embarrassing beatdown at the hands of your rivals, I can't decide if the fact that BYU has a shorter week is good or bad. On one hand it means they don't have as much time to focus on the loss. On the other hand a loss like this can dwell for an extra day or two, something they just don't have now.

Before the season I had targeted the UCF game as possibly the first Akbar Alert of the year. Thanks to the loss this is no longer a possible trap game, but I still think UCF is dangerous.

The Golden Knights won 11 games last year, and were a dark horse to break into the BCS. That all changed when they lost to FIU last week. This means both teams are coming into the game off of disappointing losses. It'll be interesting to see which coach can get their team's heads in the game.

One matchup I'm interested in, is to see how BYU handles the UCF Quarterback. In years past a scrambling quarterback has had field days with the BYU defense. This year, BYU has the linebackers to handle scrambling quarterbacks. UCF runs a spread offense that utilizes the Zone-Read running play. Sophomore QB Jeff Godfrey is very adept at running the zone read. He's second on the team in rushing yards, only 4 yards behind running back Ronnie Weaver.

We've heard all year how BYU's defense is improved. I don't buy it. Texas and Ole Miss' offense were in shambles during those games. Against Utah they showed they have very bad intentions, and could absolutely hit, but the defense had holes. Even keeping White to 54 yards through the first three quarters is an accomplishment of unknown excellence, because honestly, we don't know how good White is.

It will be interesting to see how this defense handles this offense. Also in case you were wondering, while Godfrey and the Knights rely heavily on the run in their spread, they aren't one dimensional and can throw the ball.

Another Test For Heaps/Doman

Defensively the Knights rank 3rd in points against giving up only 6.7 points per game. Of course that's helped by a 62 - 0 shutout of Div 1-AA Charleston Southern, but there was also a 30-3 beat down of BCS AQ Boston College. BYU's offense, as we all know, has struggled to put points up on the board. In fact BYU has three offensive touchdowns, all of them being passes to Ross Apo.

I know BYU fans want to see Heaps and the passing game come around, but the key to this game for BYU will be the running game. DiLuigi had 31 yards rushing against Utah, but sacks and other struggles meant the team as a whole

rushed for only 11 yards. Throughout the year BYU is ranked 118th in the country with only 48.3 yards per game. This isn't bad, this is abysmal. Despite all the hype and hope, Heaps is not ready to fully shoulder the load, and the Cougars desperately need the running game to come on. The only two teams worse than BYU at rushing this year is FAU and ECU. But all they've done is play #22 Florida/#17 Michigan State and #12 South Carolina/#11 Virginia Tech respectively.

A Unique Award

I've been high on Trevor Reilly all offseason. Especially since the Red White spring game where he had the "whoa" play of the game. This week Reilly showed exactly why I've been hyping him. Trevor Reilly won the Pac-12 Defensive player of the week with his performance. This makes him the first ever University of Utah player, in any sport, to win a Pac-12 player of the week award.

Reilly deserved it as well. In a game that had many defensive plays by Utah, Reilly stood out. He had 2 sacks, 1 fumble recovery, 3 Tackles for loss, 5 other tackles, and 2 pass break ups. He was also credited with 3 forced fumbles.

It's the last stat that I have a question for. I can only count two forced fumbles.

BYU had the following fumbles:

Terrence Brown snapped the ball over Heaps' head. Heaps spazzes, and Derick Shelby scores a TD.

Chaz Walker tackles Josh Quezada and pops the ball out with a well placed helmet.

Star Lotuleilei reaches a massive paw out and pops the ball away from JJ DiLuigi

JD Falslev Muffed a kickoff, Chandler Johnson prevents BYU from recovering and Mo Lee covers up the ball.

Reilly sacks Heaps, forces the fumble, and recovers at the 6

Reilly sacks Riley Nelson, forces a fumble that VJ Fehoko picks up, and turns on the afterburners for a TD.

I don't get the third forced fumble. Either way a much deserved award for Trevor Reilly.

The Rivalry Lives

There was a lot of talk about whether the rivalry would live on after the moves of the two teams. For me, it still lives. My nerves before the game, stress during the game as the Utes got three turnovers but only seven points, my enjoyment as Utah pulled away, and my elation as it became a rout, were all just as intense as in past history.

And judging by some of the signs, pictures, and other things coming out of this year's rivalry, I seem to not be the only one.

But of all the pictures, and there have been some good ones, this image is my favorite.

By the way, the fact that the Arby's sign was put up on Friday, makes it even funnier.

Programming Update

One downside of being in a big conference is that game times, and tv coverage isn't always determined until 10-14 days before the game. That's why there are a lot of TBD on Utah's schedule.

The first of these have now been decided as it has been announced that the Washington @ Utah game on October 1st will kickoff at 5:00 p.m. It will be televised on Fox Sports Net. This is channel 683 on DirectTV, 414 on Dish and 52 on Comcast.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:14

Tuesday, September 13, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Heartbreak - noun \E^hÃrt-ËÖEbrÃ•k\

Definition of Heartbreak
: crushing grief, anguish, or distress

Examples of Heartbreak

Going into Darrell K Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium, and dominate the Longhorns in the first quarter, only to have your Offensive Coordinator, and QB go into ultra conservative mode and end up losing the game by a single point. Playing on the road in the Coliseum for the first conference game of your new conference, and lining up for an overtime forcing field goal, only to see your offensive line get collapsed as the kick is blocked and returned for a TD. Leading Michigan by 17 points going into the 4th quarter at the Big House, just to watch them score 21 points and take the lead with 72 seconds left to play. Responding by driving 61 yards in 42 seconds, scoring a TD and having the lead with 32 seconds left in the game, only to watch Michigan put up a 80 yard game winning TD drive in 30 seconds. Actually Notre Dame, this may be worse than heartbreak.

Needless to say it was a rough weekend for fans of BYU and Utah this week, as both came up just a bit short. Both teams went into the weekend still looking to answer a bunch of questions. One team started to provide some questions, while the other team still has it's fans scratching their heads.

To recover from this past weekends heartaches, the two teams play their first Non-Conference Rivalry game in 113 years. It's also the first time since 1968 these two teams play outside the month of November. This means we'll review a little bit of what last week meant to both teams, before doing the annual breakdown of the Holy War.

Hooked By The Horns

After looking terrible for 2/3rds of the game against Ole Miss in week one, the BYU offense showed up and did just enough to not lose that game. At the start of the Texas game, it looked like the offense had almost woken up. BYU still seemed unable to finish drives, but managed to jump out to a 13-0 lead early in the 2nd quarter.

After that point, they decided game was over, because the team decided to not play the rest of the game. The offense went into a shell that made the Utah offense against Montana State look like the run and shoot.

More troubling than the offensive clamp down by coordinator Brandon Doman, is Jake Heaps struggles. Despite all the pre-season hype Heaps received, I had some serious questions based off of his play in 2010. A couple of those concerns specifically are that when he received any pass rush, Heaps looked very nervous and erratic in 2010. Heaps also had a tendency to lock onto his receiver, thereby telegraphing to the defense where he was going. A third troubling issue for Heaps in 2010 was a hesitancy to throw the ball downfield.

All three issues were very prevalent after the 12 minute mark of the 2nd quarter. Doman, sensing his QB was struggling further clamped down on the offense to help his QB. Unfortunately for Doman, the running game couldn't get anything going against the speedy Texas defense, and Heaps continued to be put into rough situations. The offense had zero first downs in the 4th quarter.

Defensively, once the Texas ended the Garret Gilbert experiment and started putting in the Ash, and Case McCoy in at QB, the Texas offense started going. What hurt BYU's defense was mainly two plays. The first was a read option play where either the RB or Ash would keep the ball. Either way, they would gash the BYU defense. When Case McCoy was in the game, Texas mainly used short crossing routes that put the ball in Jaxon Shipley's hands, who would use his speed and athleticism to make plays.

The inability to put together full games is troublesome for the Cougars.

A Tough Block

Meanwhile, while BYU was falling apart against Texas, the Utes were trying to prove they belonged against USC. It didn't start out so well for Utah, as USC jumped out to a 10-0 lead, while the Utah offense, and Jordan Wynn struggled. USC RB Marc Tyler was able to gash the Utah defense for nearly 5 yards a carry. To make matters worse, for some unknown, although stupid, reason, Utah decided to abandon their man coverage and instead played a very soft zone defense. This meant frequently when Utah would get USC into a 3rd and 5 or 6, the Defensive backs would start the play giving a 7 yard cushion to the USC Wr's.

In 2010 the Utes seemed to have a distinct lack of heart. Whenever they struggled or faced adversity, more often than not in 2010 the team wilted. This was never more evident, than when the TCU loss caused a hangover that cost the Utes the game the next week against Notre Dame. In fact it wasn't until halftime of the San Diego State game, that Utah finally shook off the TCU loss.

Fortunately, 2011 seems different. Utah rather than wilting, responded with heart and fire. The defense started forcing turnovers and getting stops.

This mean that it was now up to Wynn and the offense to turn things around. Unfortunately for Wynn late in the first half, the running game had 7 rushes for 0 yards, meaning all pressure on Wynn's surgically rebuilt shoulder.

Here's the thing about Wynn's shoulder. It may or may not be healthy, but what is obvious, is that Wynn hasn't adjusted. He has had to change his throwing motion, which has led to more of a sideline delivery. Not only that, but even if his shoulder is healthy, he just hasn't had the time to completely rebuild the strength in it.

Where Wynn is really having a problem is with the mental aspect of the game. Wynn still needs to regain confidence in not only his ability, but his shoulder. A lot of the ducks he has thrown through the two games, is because he is throwing off of his back foot.

One bonus of Wynn's struggles is that he has become a much smarter QB than he ever was the past two years. He's making reads a lot better than in either 2010, or 2011. As the game went on this Wynn started getting a bit more confidence and started playing better. At the end of the half, he led the team on a 86 yard TD drive.

Unfortunately for Wynn the Offensive Line apparently failed to show up. This mean the running game was more or less neutralized, leaving Wynn in a lot of 2nd and long, and 3rd and long situations. However with a minute left, the Utes had the ball down by 3 with a chance to tie the game.

Wynn drove the team down the field. For a moment, it looked like the Utes were going to get screwed out of a chance to attempt to tie or win the game, when on 4th down, Wynn completed a pass to DeVonte Christopher that was obviously a yard or two past the first down marker. The officials marked it short. With no timeouts the Utes were left to pray that the officials called a review. It was an obvious blunder, so it should take long for the review call to come.

It didn't immediately come. Then the USC offense came on the field, and lined up to snap the ball, The official set the ball and got ready to start the play, when finally the call came to review the play. The play was eventually ruled correctly, and Utah lived.

A pass interference play later, the Utes had the ball at the USC 25 yard line with 11 seconds to go, and the clock stopped. Utah decided to go for the field goal. This was not a bad decision. Where the decision becomes questionable, is that Utah tried to rush the FG unit on the field, and hurry the kick.

This rushing, combined with the fact that the Offensive Line was just horrendous all day, allowed the USC Trojans to blow up the offensive line, block the kick and return it for what two hours later was correctly ruled a TD.

Utah lost in heart breaking fashion, but in losing answered a lot of questions, including the question that they do belong with the Pac-12 and they can compete. There were some concerns of course. The OL is a major question mark going forwards. The Defensive Line struggled against the large USC OL. Keith McGill at safety play horrendously, and doesn't believe he has to wrap up, merely hit players. But overall Utah began answering some questions.

The best sign to me though, was how they dealt with adversity. As I said earlier, in 2010 it wasn't a stretch to question the Utes' heart. They showed in this game they have the heart that has been a trademark of the Whittingham era. Now we need to see how they rebound from a loss, because their next game is the Holy War.

A Different Feel

Here we are, rivalry week. It feels different saying that in September. There's no doubt things have changed in this rivalry with the two schools going a different way. It remains to be seen how it will affect the intensity between the two teams, and their fan bases. This year, though, the rivalry is still the rivalry. BYU would love to stick it to the AQ Utes in the first season in the Pac-12. The Utes want to ruin the home opener for 2011.

It's time for the annual positional breakdown of these two team.

Statistics

With both teams having only played two teams, there's not a lot of statistics to go off of. Both teams are sitting at 1-1. Their overall point plus/minus total is 0, as they beat the Ole Miss Rebels by a point, followed by last weekend's tough loss to the Longhorns by a single point. BYU has averaged 275.5 yards per game, with 218 of those coming through the air per game, and the ground game churning out 67 yards per game. The Cougars are scoring and giving up 15 points per game. Defensively the Cougars are giving up 133.5 passing yards per game and 115 rushing yards per game.

Utah has gotten 305.5 yards per game offensively with passing to running ratio of 169.5 to 136 on the ground. They've scored 20.5 points per game, and have given up 18.5. Defensively they've allowed 223.5 yards passing and 113.5 yards on the ground.

Neither team is in the top 90 of offensive rankings in Div 1-A.

As I like to caution, stats may not lie, but statisticians do. With such a small sample there's not a whole lot to take from the stats. Especially when you add in that Utah played one game against Div 1-AA foe Montana State, and BYU has spent a couple weeks playing against passing deficient offense.

Advantage: BYU

Non Conference Schedule

BYU Doesn't have a conference, however since Utah has only played 1-AA foe out of conference while BYU played road games against an SEC and Big XII foe, BYU wins this category, even if those two foes were down from previous years.

Advantage: BYU

Quarterback

The position with all the focus, also has all the questions. For BYU entered the season with a lot of hype focused on Sophomore Jake Heaps. Through two games he's not lived up to those expectations. He's been erratic, and has seemed very nervous through the first two games. On the season he's 46 of 76 for 417 yards, 2 TD's and 3 INT's.

For Utah Junior Jordan Wynn is coming off of Shoulder surgery and has face a lot of questions regarding the health of the shoulder. Through two games it seems the answer is that his shoulder is not all the way back. It's affected his confidence and his mechanics. Wynn has adjusted by playing smarter than he had in previous season and has done a great job of making the right decisions this year. Wynn will not be the kind of QB who wins games this year, but he has adjusted by turning into the type of QB who won't kill you either. You can see this in his stats of 38/69 339 yards, 2 TD's and 0 INT's

Neither team has a very good backup situation. So the question is, do you want the shaky, erratic QB who doesn't seem to have the full confidence of his Offensive Coordinator, or do you want the injured QB, who doesn't have the full confidence of his Offensive Coordinator. This is a close decision.

Advantage: BYU

Runningbacks

BYU is led by J.J. DiLuigi who is a running back that nobody can figure out why he's as productive as he is. He's not the fastest RB on the Cougars, he's not anywhere near the best RB on the team. He's the type of running back that seems like he should be easy to stop. Yet, he always manages to be very productive. His backup is sophomore Josh Quezada. Quezada is another one of last year's talented crop of freshmen who really hasn't been able to live up to his hype.

Utah however doesn't really know what they have for a runningback. John White IV came out like a gang buster in week run racking up 150 yards and a TD. However last week against USC he struggled. At one point late in the first half he had 7 rushes for 0 yards. He eventually started to turn it on later in the game. The Utes backups consist of true freshman Harvey Langi, and Tauni Vakapuna.

The question is how much of White's struggle were related to the OL struggles. The way he was able to adjust his running style and get yards later makes me think it's more the OL than the RB.

Utah has the higher ceiling at this position, even if it's a bit unknown right now. Both teams, though, would love to have not only Robert Turbin, but the rest of the Utah State Aggies running game, whose 440 rushing yards against Weber State was more than both Utah and BYU have combined for all season.

Advantage: Push

Wide Receivers

BYU is no longer the one headed monster of years past With Cody Hoffman, Ross Apo and McKay Jacobsen they have the receivers to stretch any team. However, a major concern for the Cougars, is that through two weeks, the WR's have shown a distinct lack of ability to separate themselves from the defensive backs.

Before the season the WR's were one of the question marks for Utah. The position has turned out to be one of its best strengths. The Ute WR are all fast, and speedy. DeVonte Christopher and Dres Anderson are both athletic freaks who have the ability to take a short pass and make it a huge play. Add in speed threat Reggie Dunn who can return kicks and run end arounds, like the 51 yarder against USC. Luke Matthews has the ability to go through the middle.

Both WR units struggle with the person delivering them the ball, but going based off just the talent at the position this one is a landslide.

Advantage: Utah

Tight Ends

BYU suffered a blow the week before the season started when it was discovered that projected #1 TE Devin Mahina had suffered a fracture in his neck. In his absence Austin Holt looks to be taking over as the top TE. Behind Holt there's a lot of unknown, although Marcus Matthews did have a good game against Texas.

Utah has two really good TE in Kendrick Moeai, and Dallin Rogers. Moeai has the ability to add to Utah's ability to stretch the field, while both aren't afraid of the middle. There are games this year when one or both of these TE will flirt with the 100 yard mark.

Advantage: Utah

Offensive Line

BYU's line is anchored by All American candidate Matt Reynolds. Reynolds has the ability to flip flop between Right and Left Tackle depending upon the play call. Reynolds comes from a long line of BYU Cougars. A line that will continue when Matt goes to the NFL next season, because he is also joined on the line by his younger brother Houston. The center position is manned by 4 year starter Terrence Brown. The offensive line has done a decent job protecting Heaps, as they've only allowed 2 sacks all year, however they're really struggled so far in helping to open holes for the running game.

Utah's offensive line is also anchored by a tackle who will be playing football on Sundays next season in RT Tony Bergstrom. Unfortunately for the Utes, that's about as far as the similarities go. Depth, and injuries have wreaked havoc on an offensive line that has struggled throughout the season. Most evident on the game tying field goal attempt when USC just blew them up. Something USC had been doing all game. The line is also giving up 2 sacks per game.

Advantage: BYU

Defensive Line

BYU's defensive line is powered in the middle by USC transfer Hebron Fangupo as well as Romney Fuga who is coming off of a brutal knee injury that ended his 2010 season. They rotate in Eathyn Manumaleuna. The rest of the line however, especially on the ends, leads a bit to be desired as the Cougars are still looking for someone to step up and help get pressure on the opposing QB.

Utah's line is deep. Deep enough to be able to rotate at least two deep at every position on the line. The line did a good job of getting pressure against Montana State. It just didn't show in the stat line due to the athletic abilities of their QB. Against USC, the line struggled a bit. The line of Derick Shelby, Joe and Dave Kruger, and Star Lotuleilei may be the starters, but the Utes also get quality minutes from players like James Aiono, Tevita Finau, Trevor Reilly, and Nate Fakahafua

Advantage: Utah

Linebackers

The strength of the Cougars is by far their Linebacking Corp. A Corp led by super sophomore Kyle Van Oy. Van Oy's athletic ability was on display when he sacked Ole Miss' QB in week 1, causing a forced fumble, which he later picked up and scored the winning TD. Van Oy is joined by Brandon Ogletree and Senior Jordan Pendleton. Pendleton is a linebacker who loves to lay the wood to some guys. Pendleton's big issue though, is that his big hits have also had a negative effect on his own body, as he tends to wear down due to injuries. So BYU fans couldn't have felt good hearing that while he will play this week, Pendleton is being sat out of practice due to minor injury issues.

Utah however wants to welcome opposing players to the Kongo. That being the name that the linebackers have adopted for their group. Even fellow Utah players don't want to cross into Kongo territory in the locker room, because they know they won't make it out without some sort of hassling. The linebackers are Chaz Walker, Matt Martinez, and Brian Blechen. Walker was the leading tackler in 2010, and Blechen is the converted safety. This gives him not only the ability to stop the run, but the Utes can drop him back into coverage, as evident by his two interceptions this year.

Advantage: Utah

Secondary

Both teams have had to rebuild their secondaries this season, and both have had relatively good results through the first two weeks.

BYU's rebuilt secondary is led by Travis Uale, and Daniel Sorenson. Stats-wise one could say the Cougars secondary looks great, giving up only 133 yards in the air, and they have yet to give up a touchdown through the air, and snagged two interceptions against Texas in week two. The other side of the coin, is that they've also played against two offenses that haven't had the ability to test the defensive secondary.

Utah's rebuilt secondary has Conroy Black and Ryan Lacy at the corners, with Keith McGill and true freshman Eric Rowe at safeties. They managed to limit the damage of Matt Barkley and Robert Woods. However Keith McGill was an absolute disaster in that game, as he seems to think you only need to hit players, and not try to actually wrap up for tackles. The corners have yet to really get burned throughout the season.

Both secondaries have held up through the first two weeks, but it's really too early to tell how good they are.

Advantage: Push

Special Teams

BYU's place kicker Justin Sorenson missed a chip shot figgie against Ole Miss, but was able to rebound with a 3 for 3 performance against Texas. Punter Riley Stephenson was the Independent special teams player of the week last week.

Utah's kicking situation was worrisome coming into the game, but has held up pretty well so far. Former walk-on Coleman Peterson went 2/2 in week one, and had his only attempt blocked, due to the OL getting destroyed, against USC. Punter Sean Sellwood has a big leg, and the ability to change field position with a single kick.

Advantage: Push

Coaching

They definitely don't like each other the way LaVell and McBride did, but Utah Head Coach Kyle Whittingham, and BYU Coach Roscoe Bronco Mendenhall will forever be linked due to how each came to be at their respective positions. It's hard to believe it's been seven years since Whittingham turned his back on his alma mater, and declared himself a Ute.

Bronco has a 54-22 record. Kyle's is 59-21.

They've each one 3 rivalry games. Many of them in dramatic fashion. Bronco has Harline still open, Magic Happening, and Hateful Max Hall hooking up with Andrew George in OT. Kyle on the other hand has Bret Ratliff out of nowhere, Another BCS Clinching Blowout, and Burton's block.

Bronco is 4-2 in Bowl Games, while Kyle lost his first one last year to see his record go to 6-1 (Kyle is recognized as co-Head Coach for the 2005 Fiesta Bowl.)

Next season I'll have to rethink the Big Games criteria, but for now It's any game against TCU, Notre Dame, AQ Schools, or ranked teams. As well as Bowl Games and the Rivalry Games. Bronco is 14-17, while Kyle is 18-12.

High Point for Bronco is 2006-2007 2 consecutive years undefeated in conference, 11 wins both seasons, wins versus Oregon and UCLA in the Vegas Bowl. For Kyle it's the Sugar Bowl season. No explanation needed.

Low Point for Bronco is the ridiculous decision to go with, and stick with the two QB system last season, and then try to distance himself from any responsibility for the decision. For Kyle last year's dismal quits against TCU, Notre Dame, and Boise State, almost beat out UNLV 2007. But when you get shut out to UNLV it's pretty low.

Personality: Bronco accidentally let one slip out during the National Signing Day dinner when he ripped a fan, but then he went back in for a tune up to his personality removal surgery. Kyle has mastered the art of coach speak, but he still can be heard occasionally cracking jokes.

Coaching Staff: The Cougars have first year offensive coordinator Brandon Doman who had promised to be more aggressive than Robert Anai. So far that hasn't surfaced. Defensive Coordinator Bronco Mendenhall has seen a remarked improvement in his squad since taking over the duties after the Utah State game last year. The only worry is that it might spread Mendenhall too thin since he has other duties, like being the Head Coach.

For the Utes Kalani Sitake may be the defensive coordinator, but this is still Fred Whittingham's defense that's been at Utah for years. Offensively the Utes are adjusting from the spread to Norm Chow's pro style offense. Chow has forgotten more about football than most will ever know.

Discipline And Adjustments: The Cougars are typically a very disciplined team, typically low on the penalty output. However, they tend to have problems later in games when other teams have made adjustments. Kyle makes great second half adjustments, that keeps his team in games, they shouldn't be. Unfortunately they can sometimes make mental plunders or stupid penalties.

Advantage: Utah

The Crowd

LaVell Edwards Stadium will be pumped for this game. It's the home opener for BYU, as well as the Independent Opener. After only having one sellout last year, and in a year that seems destined to see fan interest wane, as the quality of home games go down the fans should be amped up.

Advantage: BYU

X-Factors

There are a lot of interesting factors not normally in play this year.

BYU doesn't have much else to play for this year other than pride, and the stated goal of winning the State.

Utah is representing the Pac-12, they don't want a lost to a non-AQ school, while BYU would love to show the Pac-12 name down Utah's throat.

Really interesting though, is the time of year this game is being played. Usually this game is at the end of the year. This means that both teams have had all year to get into a rhythm and fix issues throughout the season. Utah may benefit the most from the time of play because had BYU had a chance to go through the scrimmage weeks of Idaho State, San Jose State, New Mexico State, and the other terrible games that fill the back half of their schedule, Heaps and Doman would have been able to work out their kinks. As it is, the two are still trying to figure things out.

Advantage: Utah

Final Thoughts

The two teams are really close to one another. Both teams have really struggled so far early on in the season, and are still trying to figure out their identity.

As far as the rivalry itself, I'll admit it seems weird that the game is this early. It's weird that it will so warm outside, and it's weird that the season is still so young that we don't have a good grasp on the team. That said, the intensity of the rivalry hasn't lessened any for me. If anything, it's actually increased for me, because thanks to the lack of conference affiliation, I don't have to deal with the "A win for BYU is good for the Utes strength of schedule" argument. This means I have been free to cheer against BYU the last two weeks with a 100% clear conscience, instead of the 99.9% clear conscience I've had the past few years.

Utah is trying to score the first repeat in the rivalry since BYU pulled off the feat in 2006 and 2007. The game may not have the same meaning as before since the Conference ties are gone, but in all honestly, very rarely was an outright conference title dependent upon this game. At it's core this game is still the same.

Since 1990 the total score of the rivalry is 532-530 in the Cougars favor, while over that same time the Record is 11-10 in Utah's favor. This isn't a big surprise as this is a game where everything we know about the two teams gets thrown out the window. This year, we don't really know a whole lot about either team, but we can still expect a close, maybe excruciatingly close, game, which has become the norm, as both teams typically leave it all on the line.

Memorable moments have become the norm, so don't be surprised if a new phrase gets added to the lexicon of this modern rivalry.

The good news for BYU fans is that despite what happens on Saturday, they can go ahead and book their travel and hotel rooms for the Armed Forces Bowl.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 13:07

Tuesday, September 6, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

After weeks of fall camp, and months of offseason questions looming over College Football, week one finally arrived to answer questions and clear the picture a bit.

Week one play is now over and there still not a lot I know. Things are just as muddled as ever.

Some things I know:

I know TCU was on the losing end of a game that had 98 points scored. What that means for TCU's defense, and their team this year, I don't know?

The Utes take the field for their first game of the season.

I know Utah State had the best QB by far of any local team in week one, and was oh so close to shocking defending National Champion Auburn. I don't know if that choke job at the end will linger, or if the Aggies will learn from it. But I will discuss it later.

I know Maryland sported the worst uniforms of the year. This didn't leave me with any lingering questions.

Finally, I know that Both Utah and BYU won, but they left more questions than answers. Reality Barges In

I lied, there is one more thing I know. I know there is not a punishment big enough for people who are hideously moronic enough to go out, drink alcohol, and get behind the wheel. Unfortunately tragedy struck the University of Utah team on Thursday after the game when a drunk driver in West Valley City ran a red light and caused an accident that took the life of two people.

One of those two deaths was the wife of Utah Lineman Ronald Tongaonevai. It's cliched I know, but it's at times like this that we are reminded that this is just a game. My sympathies go out to the Tongaonevai family as well as to the families of all people who are affected by drunk drivers.

Utah Fan, BYU Fan

Remember as a kid watching cartoons? Do you remember the cartoons that had a character trying to make a decision, and on his shoulder popped an Angel, and a Devil to argue the good and evil side of the situation? Well throughout the state fans of both teams are having that shoulder conversation.

Only instead of an angel and a devil, on their shoulder is a Utah fan and a BYU fan (We'll let you decide which is the angel and which is the devil.)

Utah vs Montana State

The Utes opened the season on Thursday with a 27-10. A game that saw Jordan Wynn barely get past 100 yards passing, and saw the starters in until the end of the game. Let's listen in as the Utah Fan and BYU fan make their case.

Utah Fan: Well at least we won.

BYU Fan: You were playing Montana State. A win was inevitable. If you were playing something other than a High School team you wouldn't have had a prayer.

Utah Fan: Hey give the Bobcats some credit. Yes, they are a 1-AA team, but they are ranked. Win wasn't guaranteed, just ask Oregon State. Besides they are better than at least three of the teams the Cougars play this year.

BYU Fan: Can't wait to see Jordan Wynn play a real defense this year. 101 yards of passing offense. You're going to get killed at the Coliseum this Saturday.

Utah Fan: They didn't need Jordan Wynn. The game was locked up in the first quarter, and the coaches decided not to show anything. They clamped down on the playbook.

Reggie Topps takes a moment to prepare himself for the 2nd half.

BYU Fan: Think what you want, but you can't feel confident about Wynn. Did he even have a pass greater than three yards.

Utah Fan: Look, how hard is it for you to understand that the Utes were just trying to get the win. This wasn't about showing off Wynn. Once the game was decided, and it was decided in the first quarter, the game plan was not to show anything, and not get anyone hurt. Besides, what Utah really wanted to do was setup their run game. Something they did really well with John White IV who ran for 150 yards.

John White IV ponders if the hole between two Bobcat defenders is big enough for his liking.

BYU Fan: Ooh big deal, he did it against Montana State, a 1-AA team. Let me see them do it for real.

Utah Fan: Quit knocking the Bobcats. White showed some nice moves, and speed. Also we always knew the Utes were a team whose defense was going to bail them out for the first few weeks. The defense looked good, Blechen getting two interceptions

BYU Fan: Again Montana State...

Utah Fan: Look you Zoob can't you come up with a better argument?

BYU Fan: How does Utah expect to stop Barkley and Woods this week. Woods just lit up Minnesota for 177 yards and 3 TD's. Utah had problems getting pressure on a 1-AA QB.

Utah Fan: False, Utah actually got decent pressure. But much like the offensive playcalling, the Utes didn't get out of Base Defense much. Woods will give that revamped secondary some fits, I'll admit as much, they won't be able to get away with mistakes as easily. Besides, that QB was a scrambler and turned more than a few sacks into positive plays for the Bobcats.

BYU Fan: You mean the 1-AA Bobcats.

Utah Fan: That's it bring up the 1-AA argument one more time and I'm going to come over there and give you a Pac-12 beat down. Besides, all that matters is we got the W

BYU Fan: Barely, against a 1-AA team

Utah Fan: That's it you stupid Zoob!

BYU Fan: Typical classless Yewt, what's the matter ran out of beer to toss on me.

BYU @ Ole Miss

Not to be outdone by Utah's ho-hum performance, the BYU Cougars took their vaunted offense into SEC country, and came away with an unimpressive escape of a victory, 14-13

BYU Fan: Ha Victory. Went into SEC country and came out victorious. Rise Up the Cougars are out!

Utah Fan: Yea BYU fan, but they didn't deserve to win. Your offense looked almost as terrible as Utah's

BYU Fan: What are you talking about. We ended up with over 300 yards of offense. The offense was moving the ball, just couldn't put it in the end zone.

Utah Fan: Moving the ball? Not for the majority of the game. In fact with 4 minutes to go in the 3rd quarter, BYU had only 86 yards of offense. What happened to this great Saint Jake. What happened to the aggressive play calling Doman promised. Looked less like aggressive, and more like Andy Ludwig calling plays.

BYU Fan: Utah did just fine with Andy Ludwig.

Utah Fan: And yet, we were excited when he left town. The WR's had no separation. They couldn't handle the DB speed. And the running game was almost non existent, they struggled to get around the corner. The only time BYU moved the ball was with dump out passes to the RB.

BYU Fan: Heap still managed to wake up in the 3rd and 4th quarter, drove them down for a critical TD late. They were only a couple mistakes away from 21 points.

Utah Fan: Speaking of, you realize Ole Miss was the worst red zone defense last year, giving up a TD on 75% of the possessions. Apparently BYU was exactly what that defense needed, only scoring a TD on 33% of their red zone opportunities. By the way, nice "tackling" on Heaps first TD of the year by the way. Is this a tradition, is his first TD pass every year going to be a pick six?

BYU Fan: Give them a break, they're offensive players. The defense however looked amazing.

Utah Fan: Against probably the most inept offense in division 1-A. Ole Miss was more conservative in their play calling than Utah, only they had to try and win the game.

BYU Fan: All we heard was how that SEC toughness, and SEC speed was going to run us off the field. Just ask the ESPN announcers. Instead we dominated them defensively.

Utah Fan: Again, the most inept offense in division 1-A.

BYU Fan: Well what did you expect them to do, they were without their expected starting QB, and we injured their top two running backs early.

Utah Fan: And yet you still barely squeaked by them.

BYU Fan: That's right. All hail Kyle Van Oy.

Utah Fan: Hey I've always liked Van Oy. That play showed why he's possibly the best LB on your team. But what was your coach thinking keeping him on the sidelines as often as he was.

BYU Fan: Hey give Bronco credit, his defense shut down a vaunted SEC team, and limited them to only 6 points offensively. They didn't even get into the end zone.

Utah Fan: Again the most inept offense in division 1-A.

BYU Fan: Jealous Yewt. You're just jealous that we beat an SEC team, and not some high school team brought in for a scrimmage.

Utah Fan: An SEC team that should fire their Head Coach, for that 4th down play call? 4th and 10, down by 1, 3 minutes to go. You call a timeout and then run a flat pass? Something that BYU has been shutting down all day. Wait, where did Robert Anai get hired at again?

BYU Fan: Like I said, jealousy, besides they were scared of our defense, and there's nothing to worry about with our offense. They are going to come around and light up teams just like they did during fall camp.

Utah Fan: Figures, a Zoob who doesn't think his team does any wrong.

BYU Fan: Say what you want, we went into SEC country and won.

Utah Fan: Enjoy Austin, Texas this week.

A Loss To Learn From

When a team goes over a decade without a winning season, they forget how to win. This is exactly the case for the Aggies. Utah State went between the hedges in Auburn, started a true freshman QB in Chucky Keeton, and gave Auburn all they wanted. Unfortunately for Utah State, a 10 point lead with 3 minutes to go vanished in the blink of an eye.

It was a heartbreaking loss for the Aggies. The Aggies went in and weren't afraid of the defending National Champions. True freshman QB Keeton played like anything but a Freshman. Keeton, by far, had the best performance of any local team. Keeton passed for 213 yards. He didn't throw a TD pass, but he also didn't throw an Interception. In addition to hurting the Tigers with his arm, he made spectacular plays with his legs accounting for two TD runs.

No drive was as impressive than when the Tigers took the lead for the first time late in the 3rd quarter. Down 28-24, it would have been easy to pack it in. Instead Keeton put together a long 14 play 80 yard drive to take the lead back.

Unfortunately, the Aggies are still trying to figure out how to win. The Aggies ended up letting the Tigers score, recover an onside kick, and score again in the final 3 minutes, to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

As the game got close, and the Tigers kept fighting back, the Aggies kept making little mistakes. It's what happens when you have a culture of losing. It's this culture that Head Coach Gary Andersen is trying to change. This very well could be one of those growing moments that's needed. Either way, I would say the chances of USU getting a bowl bid have increased.

And to Auburn Head Coach Gene Chizik, I need to ask. If winning is expensive, how much does it cost to barely escape the Aggies?

The View From The Red Zone

A feeling of excitement usually envelops the crowd on Opening day. That feeling increased dramatically when Brian Blechen intercepted Montana State early in the first quarter and returned it deep into Bobcat territory. Even a ill-advised attempt to pitch the ball couldn't temper the feeling as the Utes ended up opening a 24-0 lead early in the 2nd quarter.

WR Sean Fitzgerald battles for position in the end zone during the first quarter.

The excitement quickly died down and gave way to boredom as the Utes decided to shut down the play book. After the middle of the 2nd quarter, there were a few moments of excitement. The Utes attempted a fake punt. The crowd tried to stop a Bobcat TD late in the 2nd half, when the secondary made a mistake in their own end zone, and lost track of the Bobcat WR. But for the most part a lackluster game, sapped the stadium of it's energy for the majority of the game as fans were left pondering a very conservative, and ho-hum performance by the Utes.

The Pac-Dud

Utah's ho-hum performance was a harbinger of things to come for the Pac-12.

USC, despite getting 177 yards of receptions, and three TD's from WR Robert Woods, still had to hold on late to escape a bad Minnesota team.

Washington saw their questions at QB linger with only 102 yards passing, while they let 1-AA in state foe Eastern Washington torch them for 473 yards through the air as the Huskies limped to a 3 point victory.

The temperature under the already extremely hot seat of UCLA Head Coach Rick Neuheisel got turned up even more, after his Bruins gave up 469 yards of total offense, and lost to Houston. Neuheisel though can counter with the 544 yards his offense gave, and remind people that Case Keenum is in his 6th season, and that Houston puts up a lot of points and yards in every game.

No state had a worse weekend though, than the state of Oregon. Every year it seems there is a Division 1-AA team that beats a division 1-A team. This year it was Sacramento State beating Oregon State 29-28 in overtime. The Beavers had to come back from a 21-6 deficit just to force overtime, before falling. The Beavers were without James Rogers, and to make matters worse, now it looks like they may have a QB competition. Beaver fans will remind you they always start the season slow, but this is a new level of slow.

Beaver fans also will say they are glad they aren't Oregon Fans. While the Beavers may have lost to a Division 1-AA team, at least they didn't face-plant on national network tv. Fourth ranked LSU took the third ranked Ducks out to the wood shed on Saturday night. The Blur Offense began to come into a bit more focus as fumbles, miscues, and a paltry 4 yards per play average doomed the Ducks to their second consecutive loss.

The bright side for Ducks fans is that it seems the only time the Blur Offense can be stopped is when the opponent has at least 4 weeks to prepare, as evidenced by the last 4 losses for the Ducks coming either at the first game of the

season, or during their bowl game. Although, this does make one severely question Head Coach Chip Kelly's ability to adjust when he has a long break between games.

Historical Matchup

WR Dres Anderson tries to get around the corner on an early running play.

This week, mere hours after Pac-12 Conference mates Colorado and California face each other in a non-conference matchup, the Utes will kickoff against the Trojans in the Coliseum for the first ever Official, Pac-12 conference matchup. This will be a game between two underwhelming teams from the first week of the season.

Whereas the Utes were able to skate by without opening the playbook, if they want any chance of getting to 2-0, they will need better production all the way around.

Meanwhile USC continued in week one, a propensity they've shown during Head Coach Lane Kiffin's tenure, of falling apart late in the second half of games. QB Matt Barkley will look to test the revamped secondary of the Utes.

Jordan Wynn makes adjustments at the line of scrimmage.

Unlike week 1, we will finally get some answers about the Utes, Offensive Coordinator Norm Chow, and QB Jordan Wynn this week. Does Wynn have what it takes? Has the game past Chow by. All eyes will be on them for the answers this week. No excuses this week.

Deep In The Heart Of Texas

The Cougars stay on the road this week. After dealing with the heat and humidity against SEC foe Ole Miss, they will now travel to Austin Texas to take on the Longhorns. Texas dispatched Rice with a score of 34-9 that is a bit too familiar to Longhorn fans, of their 34-17 opening week victory over Rice in 2010. While the scores may be similar, the offensive production was much better for the Longhorns this time around.

The Cougars defense will get a test, that the inept offense of Ole Miss just wasn't able to give them.

As for the Cougars offense, it will be interesting to see if the WR's can handle Big 12 speed a little bit better and get separation from the DB's, or will Heaps continue to rely on short passing routes. Much like Utah fans with Norm Chow, BYU fans will also want to see Brandon Doman be a bit more aggressive.

Speaking Of Texas

TCU's defense gave up 50 points, as they lost to the Baylor Bears last Friday night in the shocking outcome of the week. I'm sure Horned Frog Gary Patterson will be livid with his team. TCU's defeat snapped three Utah related streaks, as the Horned Frogs defeat was the first regular season loss since, and the first road loss since losing to Utah in the inaugural blackout game for the Utes in 2008. It was also the first loss in the state of Texas since Utah beat them at Amon G. Carter stadium in 2007.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 14:47

Tuesday, August 30, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Game week. What more is there to say. Finally after all the talk, all the projections, all the wondering, this week the "what ifs" turn into "what happened".

Utah starts the season with a tune up game at home against Division 1-AA Montana State on Thursday. Meanwhile the Cougars travel into SEC country to take on the Ole Miss Rebels.

It's been almost 9 months since either team has strapped on the pads in a live game situation. A lot has changed since then, but finally, the long nightmare is over. We can get back to football. **Taming The Bobcats**

In what is starting to become a tradition, the Utes open their season a couple days early on a Thursday. This year they welcome 1-AA foe Montana State. I'm not fond of 1-A teams playing 1-AA teams, but at least the Utes are choosing a foe who is near the top of 1-AA.

The last few years has seen a few 1-AA teams rise up and stun 1-A teams. Appalachian State is the most famous one, but last year saw James Madison knock off Virginia Tech as well as Ole Miss, the same Ole Miss BYU opens the season against, lost to Jacksonville State.

In truth this game should be nothing more than a tune up game for Utah before they face USC in week 2. That doesn't mean that Utah can look past Montana State. The Bobcats are a quality team, and if Utah is too worried about USC, the Bobcats are good enough of a team to pull off the upset.

With that disclaimer out of the way, this game should end up being nothing more, than a continuation of camp. This is a chance for Utah to continue working out the kinks of their newly installed offense. Only the results actually count.

The New Offense

Thursday all eyes will be scrutinizing the new offense. Is Jordan Wynn healthy? Will the Utes be a boring offense? Will the Utes still be able to spread the field?

While Thursday won't necessarily completely answer the questions, it can start to alleviate Ute fans concerns.

Did you know that the Utes did not line up in a single 3 WR set last season? Did you know that about 1/3 of the time they lined up with multiple tight ends?

This just goes to show the transition will probably be smoother than expected, as the spread offense has been working it's way out of Utah for a few years.

That doesn't mean there won't be concerns. When you enter a season having to replace two senior running backs, there are always concern. John White IV and Tauni Vakapuna have won the running back job, as they top the depth chart, but on their heels if they struggle will be Harvey Langi.

The one area of the offense, where there won't be much concern though, is the WR corps, as the Utes are stacked. DeVonte Christopher, Luke Matthews, Dres Anderson, Dexter Ransom, Sean Fitzgerald, Griff McNabb, and Reggie Dunn will be testing the limits of opposing teams' secondaries. Meanwhile Tight End Kendrick Moeai may be the leading receiver at the midway point of the season.

Names To Watch

While everyone will be paying attention to the offense, there are some names on the defense to keep an eye on. The defense should be stellar this season. There are the returning players everyone knows about, such as the Kruger Brothers, Matt Martinez, and Chaz Walker, and of course, Brian Blechen, who will be transitioning to LB.

There are some new names to watch on this defense.

First is the Star Lotuleilei, who has been mentioned as a possible one and done type player. Lotuleilei may very well be the best player on the defense.

Last season Trevor Reilly was 2nd or 3rd on the DE depth chart. That didn't stop him from making a few plays when he got on the field. During the Red/White spring game, Reilly produced the "wow" play of the game. Reilly is listed on the depth chart as the backup stud LB behind Brian Blechen. Don't think this means you won't see him. One of the problems the Utes have on defense, especially in the front seven, is there aren't enough spots on the depth chart, for all the players you will be seeing. Reilly will be a good example of this, as you will see him in multiple spots. You'll see him rushing off the end, as well as from the LB spot.

While Reilly was the star of the spring game, fall camps surprise names were two true freshmen. On the defensive line Nate Fakahafua has played himself out of a redshirt. The coaches had planned to sit Fakahafua this season, mainly due to the depth of the DL. Nate was having nothing to do with it, as he has put a stellar camp together and is now 2nd on the depth chart at right end. I don't know how much you see him early in the season, but as the season grows, watch Fakahafua continually make plays.

The second true freshman to make a noise is part of a rebuilt secondary that will be a key part of the Utes success, or failure this season.

Rebuilding.... Again

The Utes seem to be making a tradition out of rebuilding their secondary. Gone is Brandon Burton to the draft, as well as Justin Taplin-Ross and Lamar Chapman to graduation. Brian Blechen moved to linebacker.

This means the Utes had to rebuild that secondary again. Conroy Black, and Ryan Lacy will man the corners, while the Safeties will be Juco Transfer Keith McGill, and Eric Rowe.

The intriguing name on that list is Eric Row. Eric Rowe is another true freshman, who the coaches just could not keep off the field. We learned last year with Blechen, that true freshmen can succeed at safety, but there could be some growing pains.

Other players in the secondary to watch will be Wykie Freeman, and converted WR Mo Lee.

Mark Twain Country

While the Utes will be home on Thursday to open the season, the Cougars will take their independent show on the road to start the season. They will face the Ole Miss rebels. A team who struggled in 2010. The previously mentioned loss to Jacksonville state, started the Rebs on a spiral that saw them lose 8 games.

The offseason hasn't been much better for Ole Miss, as they recently had to suspend a player that was expected to start at QB for them this season. Instead, the Rebels will employ a rotating QB system against BYU. BYU fans know how well that tends to work out.

The Rebels may be a bit down right now, but they are still an SEC team. With being an SEC team, means SEC talent. Even lesser SEC talent is tougher talent than BYU normally faces. Another big issue for the Cougars will be the heat and humidity in Mississippi. The forecast Saturday calls for 96 degree temperatures with 56% humidity, making it feel closer to about 100 to 103 degrees. Roughly a 20 degree difference from Provo's forecast on Saturday.

All that being said, this is still a team that BYU should beat.

Offensive Evolution

The Utes aren't the only team undergoing changes on the Offense. BYU's just weren't quite as drastic. The Cougars will have a new offensive coordinator in 2011 with Brandon Doman. While hopes are high, this will be the first time Doman is undertaking the play calling duties.

To help out Doman will be what looks like one of BYU's best WR corps. Gone are the days of a single threat, and nothing else, like they had with Austin Collie. Instead the Cougars have 3 very good WR's. Chase Hoffman, McKay Jacobson, and Ross Apo give the Cougars something they've rarely had. Three legitimate targets.

However, the entire offense will succeed, or struggle based on how well QB Jake Heaps handles his sophomore

season. Heaps saw success during the second half of last season. How much of that will carry over is a question mark, due to the lack of competition during the back half of 2010. Jake Heaps enters 2011 with all sorts of hype surrounding him. He has the physical tools to easily achieve, and exceed his expectations. There were also some question marks from his 2010 performance, to see that he still needed to work on some things.

One thing Heaps has going for him is that unlike in 2010, when Head Coach Bronco Mendenhall sabotaged him and the team with the two QB system, there is no doubt that this is Heaps team. Now it's up to him.

Defensive Adjustments

Defensively, the Cougars have some questions. The linebacking corps will be led by Kyle Van Oy, who is probably the best player on the Cougar defense. He's about the only sure thing on the defense.

Jordan Pendleton is a great player for the Cougars. He just has a problem staying on the field. On the line the Cougars return Eathyn Manumaleuna, and are hoping that Romney Fuga will be able to return after a brutal knee injury shortened his 2010 season.

In the secondary, the Cougars, much like the Utes, have had to completely rebuild. Gone is Andrew Rich, who has been their best player on the defense for the past few years. Instead the Cougars might just have four new starters. News out of camp has shown that the Cougars may just have to platoon players in the backfield.

If the secondary struggles it could make defensive coordinator Bronco Mendenhall's job tough. At least it's not like Bronco will have a ton of other things to worry about week in and week out.

What to Expect

Week 1 rust. That's what I expect. I expect both teams to come out victorious, but I expect both teams to show some rust. I think the Cougars will go into Ole Miss, and not be able to put up the Offensive Fireworks that many Cougar fans are hoping for. The Ole Miss defense will pressure the offense, and the Cougars will struggle before pulling out a 4th quarter TD that gives them a victory.

For Utah, They'll win big, even if it doesn't necessarily look that way at half time. Utah won't open up the playbook, and the offense will struggle a bit in the first quarter, including one turnover deep in their own territory. However about the middle of the 2nd quarter, the Utes will get it together, and shake off the rust, on their way to a big victory, and preparation for USC.

What I really don't want to see are a lot of penalties, and please, no 12 men on the field penalties Whittingham. I really want to see the Utes have 7 or less penalties.

One thing is for sure, I cannot wait to be in that Stadium on Thursday.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 09:37

Wednesday, August 24, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Finally we are getting down to business. Classes have either begun (at Utah), or will begin next week (Down South). Camps are coming to an end, and the teams are starting to get into their typical in-season practice routine. Kickoff is a mere 8-10 days away. Next week begins the break down of actual opponents. No more looking at scrimmage reports and talking about practice.

With the end of fall camps upon us, I present my annual demonstration of exactly how much knowledge I truly lack. This is the week where I step out on a limb and make predictions for the upcoming season. I present two examples of past predictions as evidence of my great prediction prowess.

Last year I predicted that Oregon State would beat either TCU or Boise State. The Beavers responded by going 0-2 in those games, losing to TCU by a score of 21-30, and to Boise State 24-37. The first two of seven losses for Oregon State.

In 2009 I predicted that Oregon and Florida State would both lose in week three to Utah and BYU respectively. Utah lost a close matchup in Autzen, while the Seminoles blasted BYU, and undid any goodwill earned from their week one upset over what turned out to be an average Oklahoma.

Before we get to the predictions, we'll do a breakdown of the season for Utah, BYU, and Utah State, but first, we'll start with some reader participation.

Would You Rather

I have not hid my disdain for BYU's scheduling philosophy so far during their tenure as an Independent, though I do admit that part of the terrible scheduling was due to necessity caused by being so early in the Independence process. Reader, and Cougar Fan, ThRhett has a few times tried to defend BYU's scheduling philosophy. While I think he's wrong, and don't think he fully believes what he says, I give him props for taking up the fight.

Last week ThRhett sent me the following question, that I felt was worth exploring.

Would you rather watch your team lose to Pac-12 teams, or win against teams like New Mexico State and Idaho State?

Setting ThRhett's not so subtle implication aside, it's an interesting question. I believe the heart of the question boils down to exactly what are you looking for in sports. Are you merely in it for self gratification, or do you enjoy the competition.

For a fan who has fully invested themselves into their team, there are few moments as great as accomplishing the goal, whether it be winning a game, completing the upset, or winning the championship. Strangely enough, to me, that thrill of victory isn't nearly as sweet as the anguish of defeat. I fully admit that whenever a team of mine loses, it bothers me. Depending on the situation, the loss lingers for days, months, or sometimes years. I'm looking at you Adam Vinatieri.

You would think that having my team simply walk through a schedule of patsies, and cup cakes, kind of similar to the back half of BYU's schedule this year, would be the perfect prescription.

Part of what makes Sports so intriguing, so fun to watch, so addictive, is the story that comes from the competition. It's the chance to see what you are made of. You can quantify a lot of things with stats, and measurements, and 40 times, but you'll still be missing the truth of a team or player. If you just line up against a bunch of foes that you are simply stronger, better, and faster than, more often than not, you are cheating sport. Sure you greatly increase your chances of victory, but you rob yourself of finding out exactly who you are. You rob yourself of the chance to grow. You also rob yourself of the chance to know, with a surety, that you, or your team is in fact, the best.

For me, it's the competition that I enjoy the most out of sport. I'd rather see my favorite team, or player match themselves up against the best, and see exactly where they belong, and where they need to grow. I want to see if my team can actually grow from game 1 through game 12. This is something you can only get by challenging yourself.

It's why, as a Utes fan, 2008 ended in a much more gratifying way than 2004. I firmly believe that both those teams

could line up and play with any team in the country during those individual seasons. They deserved a shot at the national title. Of course, College Football's post season is an extreme cop out that never leaves us with a true national champion, so we didn't get that shot. But beating up on a powerful, and highly respected Alabama, was way more gratifying than the joke of an opponent the BCS gave us in 2004 with Pitt in the Fiesta Bowl.

I would rather see my favorite teams, struggle, learn, and hopefully grow, against stronger competition, than merely play out the string against opponents that provide little competition. There's an old saying that there is no such thing as a moral victory. Whether you choose to believe that or not, there is such a thing as a hollow one.

Now you know my thoughts, but I'm wondering yours. I was hoping to get ThRhett to write up his opinion, but he couldn't get it done in time, so hopefully he'll leave a comment with his thoughts. I'm interested to hear what everyone else thinks as well. Please leave a comment.

Week By Week

Here are the weekly opponents for Utah, BYU, and Utah State, as well as a brief comment, as well as my odds of the local team winning.

Week 1

Utah vs Montana St. - Really Utes? A 1-AA team? If you wanted what basically amounts to a scrimmage for week one couldn't you have at least gotten a Sun Belt team or something? And if you are going to play a 1-AA team, at least go with Southern Utah, or Weber State for the in-state rivalry ties. Chance of Victory: 100%

BYU @ Ole Miss - The Cougars open up against a team from the Big Bad SEC. In reality Ole Miss is a mediocre SEC Team. The Cougars probably are better than the Rebels, but the travel to the Mississippi heat and humidity will play a factor. BYU has had good luck traveling to play mediocre automatic qualifying opponents to open their season in recent history. Chance of Victory: 60%

Utah State @ Auburn - The Aggies get to be the first opponent of the Tigers' title defense. The Aggies get to be the first win of the Tigers' title defense. The joys of a money game. Chance of Victory 1% (I'm feeling nice).

Week 2

Utah @ USC - Hours after fellow Pac-12 conference mates Colorado and California play each other in a non conference matchup, the Utes and Trojans will play in the first ever Pac-12 game. All eyes will be on this game as it will be the first test for newly automatic qualifying Utah to prove they can compete. Trojans have yet to really feel the pain of Sanctions, and still have talent, led by QB Matt Barkley. The defense, however, was a question mark for the Men of Troy last season, and will continue to be a bit of a weak link. The Coliseum's 93,000 seat capacity will be one of the largest crowd Utah has had to deal with. Utah does have 2 extra days to prepare, since their week 1 game is on a Thursday, and because their first game is such a weak opponent. Chance of Victory: 40%

BYU @ Texas - BYU fans touting the upset are quick to point out that Texas is in severe rebuilding mode after failing to even be bowl eligible in 2010. Technically true. Also true is Texas is still Texas. A Texas who beat a revenge seeking Nebraska, in Lincoln, last year. Complacency had taken hold in Austin, and 2010 was just what was needed to shake up Mack Brown. Plus people haven't forgotten about BYU's 2009 upset over Oklahoma in Jerry World, so while BYU is merely a blip on the radar for Texas, it's one they won't look past. Chance of Victory: 35%

Utah State vs Weber State - The one division 1-A local team that is still okay to schedule games against 1-AA teams, actually does it right by staying in-state. Chance of Victory: 85%

Week 3

Utah @ BYU - The Holy War returns in a new time slot. Utah looks to repeat after Burton's Block last year, while Cougars hope Chad Bunn being in the replay booth means any questionable replays will go their way. As with any Holy War in years pass, there is a 100% chance if a Utah victory. If you want to be realistic it's actually 50/50.

Utah State on Bye

Week 4

Utah on Bye

BYU vs. Central Florida - The Knights are coming off of an 11 win season and are a dark horse to crash the BCS. If the Knights get past Boston College in week 2, the Cougars could be the last real threat to Central Florida until they match

up with East Carolina on November 19th. BYU meanwhile could be trying to salvage a season sitting at 0-3, or they could be having BCS dreams of their own at 3-0. Everything is in play for BYU at this point, and this should be a high scoring, and highly entertaining game. The fireworks should fly in this matchup. Chance of Victory: 65%

Utah State vs. Colorado State - The Rams have been looking for the rebuilding success that Steve Fairchild hinted at with a 7-5 first season, before stumbling through consecutive 3 win seasons. Aggies coming in off of a bye could give them the chance to snag an important second out of conference victory. Chance of Victory: 45%

Week 5

Utah vs. Washington - The first ever Pac-12 conference game at Rice-Eccles stadium will have fans in a rowdy, raucous frenzy. As a player Steve Sarkisian was 1-1 against the Utes, but 1-0 at Rice-Eccles stadium. The Huskies, will be trying to replace first round draft pick Jake Locker at QB, and will probably rely heavily on RB Chris Polk. The crowd will be amped up and could drive what looks to be a tough Utah defensive line. Chance of Victory: 80%

Utah State @ BYU - Last year BYU was absolutely humiliated by the Aggies. Simply winning won't be enough for BYU. Whether they are reeling from an 0-4 start, sitting high at 4-0, or somewhere in the middle at 2-2, after last season, this isn't just an ordinary game for BYU. Another upset by Utah State would really make the Aggies season, but the odds are in BYU's favor at about 90/10.

Week 6

Utah vs. Arizona State - Even if USC is better at the end of the season, sanctions prevent them from playing in the Pac-12 Championship game. These are the two teams most frequently picked to be battling for the South crown. This looks like the second most important game, behind USC, on the Utes schedule this season. If you believe divisional implications mean more than historical ones, this could be the most important. The Sun Devils have probable Pac-12 defensive player of the year, Vontaze Burfict, except Burfict seems to have anger management issues, and could very well be off the team. The Sun Devils have already been hit by a rash of season ending injuries, and will have to rely on extremely hyped, but unknown 6'8" QB Brock Osweiler. An early October snow storm might just be a welcome sight to Utah fans. Chance of Victory: 50%

San Jose State vs. BYU - The WAC Conference turd sandwich buffet portion of the Cougars schedule begins with the Spartans coming to town. The Spartans were so bad last year, that their punter had a kick blocked by an up man's helmet against the Utes last year. Rebuilding would be a generous term for what the Spartans are currently doing. Chance of Victory: 99%

Wyoming vs. Utah State - The Aggies play their second MWC foe of the year. Wyoming lost the best player they had the past two seasons when QB Austin Carta-Samuels transferred out. Dave Christensen got Wyoming to a bowl two years ago, before coming back to earth last year. Chance of Victory: 65%

Week 7

Utah @ Pittsburgh - Last year Brian Blechen intercepted Tino Sunseri on the first Pitt play of overtime. It started a downfall that saw Pittsburgh end the season by firing Head Coach Dave Wannstedt. Even while rebuilding, Pitt will be a favorite to win the Big East. Then again, so will everyone else in that conference. Don't underestimate the effect of Utah having to travel across the country so late in the season and playing at Heinz Field. Chance of Victory: 60%

BYU @ Oregon State - The Beavers are typically the hardest team in the Pac-12 to figure out. They typically start slow, and can come on strong in the second half of the season. Last year, the Beavers were never able to flip the switch, and ended up with a 5-7 record. This year, they will be without super back Jacquizz Rogers, and we're still unsure how effective James Rogers will be coming off of injury. Chance of Victory: 60%

Utah State @ Fresno State - In Boise State's absence, The Bulldogs will be one of three teams looking to capitalize with a conference championship before joining the Broncos in MWC land. Chance of Victory: 35%

Week 8

Utah @ California - Utah will now be in the meat of their schedule with an away game at Pittsburgh, followed immediately by an away game at California. They'll also be in the middle of 3 away games in 4 weeks. If there is any worry of the increased competition wearing down the Utes, now is about the time we will see it kick in. California suffered its first losing season of the Tedford era last year, and the shine may be coming off of them just a bit. However some in Cal are still a bit sore over the Poinsettia Bowl two years ago, and would love to be able to welcome Utah as a Pac-12 opponent by roughing them up a bit. One big problem for Cal is that due to construction on their stadium they all 12 games for them this season are in effect, road games. That can really wear on a team. Chance of Victory: 55%

BYU vs. Idaho State - Wait. Really BYU? Playing the dregs of Division 1-A wasn't enough? You had to schedule a 1-AA team? Not only that, but you had to schedule a dreg of Division 1-AA? A team coming off of a 1-11 season last year? Southern Utah to scary an opponent for you? At least in 2012 you are playing Weber State, but with your schedule you shouldn't be playing 1-AA teams. Chance of Victory: 150%

Utah State vs. Louisiana Tech - Louisiana Tech is a WAC team with one foot out the door. A team that badly wants to bolt to Conference USA. If this game were in Louisiana the Bulldogs would be favored, but being in Logan, the Aggies should be the favorite. Chance of Victory: 55%

Week 9

Utah vs. Oregon State - The Utes have a record of 2-1 in the annual Blackout Money Grab Game. It started with a thrilling victory over TCU, followed by a boring Halloween night affair against Wyoming. Last year, not only was the Blackout game played during the day, but the Utes sported unbelievably hideous camo abominations as they got abused by TCU. The Blackout Jersey's this season looks better, and this better be a night game. It'll be interesting to see if Oregon State is in there typical late season surge. Either way they'll be a tough opponent. The last time they came to Rice-Eccles, a little Brian Johnson and King Louie magic were needed to pull it out. Chance of Victory: 60%

BYU @ TCU - TCU destroyed "The Quest" three years ago in what has become an annual thrashing of the Cougars. BYU is hoping that TCU will be vulnerable without the Ginger Ninja Andy Dalton at QB. Nine weeks into the season though, Sophomore Casey Pachall should be comfortable, and the TCU defense will still be fast, and fierce, which was truly the bane for the Cougars the past three years. This game is in Jerry World, the same stadium that BYU helped open up with a victory against Oklahoma. Chance of Victory: 30%

Utah State on Bye

Week 10

Utah @ Arizona - The Wildcats are getting a lot of hype that I just can't buy into as long as Mike Stoops is their coach. Failed expectations, and self inflicted wounds have been typical of the Wildcats for the past 4-5 years. That said, QB Nick Foles, a worthy candidate to take up the Heisman mantle if Luck stumbles, could test the Utah secondary. Chance of Victory: 70%

BYU on Bye

Utah State @ Hawaii - The Aggies must make the trip to the islands, a 6 hour plane ride that often throws many teams. The Rainbow Warriors are my pick to take the WAC this year before bolting to the MWC next year. Chance of Victory: 20%

Week 11

Utah vs. UCLA - This game is full of subplots. Rick Neuheisel will probably be sitting on an extremely hot seat, if he hasn't already been fired. Neuheisel will badly want to beat the Utes because of the turmoil that went down with Norm Chow in the offseason. He'd hate to be paying the opposing team's Offensive Coordinator \$500k to beat him. Chow himself is a very proud man, and will want to pull out all the tricks. Chance of Victory: 75%

BYU vs. Idaho - Idaho won it's first bowl game in a long time two years ago, and made it back to 6 wins last season. Apparently that emboldened their head coach, who felt it necessary to single out and belittle BYU at WAC media days. Without that outburst, Idaho could have been a dark horse upset pick. Now, not so much. Chance of Victory: 90%

Utah State vs San Jose State - The Spartans should hopefully be closer to finding their identity by this point of the season, but will still be struggling. Chance of Victory: 75%

Week 12

Utah @ Washington State - The Cougars may look like the dregs of the Pac-12 right now, but they'll be on the rise in 2011. That said, their ceiling is still 6 wins. This game is in Pullman, and at the end of Utah's schedule, so it's a game that Utah must not overlook or they could be caught. Chance of Victory: 70%

BYU vs. New Mexico State - New Mexico States two victories in 2010 were over New Mexico and San Jose State. By this time BYU fans may just be tired of these games and find it easier to stay home than come to the game. Chance of Victory: 99%

Utah State @ Idaho - The Vandals are a middle of the pack WAC team. Utah State will have climbed to the middle of the WAC by this point. Both teams will be ready to possibly pounce in 2012 with Hawaii, Fresno State, and Nevada all

gone. Chance of Victory: 45%

Week 13

Utah vs. Colorado - By this time the media will be trying to force feed this as the new rivalry for both teams. They'll probably try to force a lame name on it, and most suggestions will lack creativity and default to Rocky Mountain something. Personally I vote for the Snow Bowl instead. It plays off of the major ski industries in both states as well as the fact that the only real rivalry between these teams is in Collegiate skiing, where the two teams typically end up 1 and 2 in National Rankings every year. (Colorado unfortunately coming out on top more often than not.) There is also a chance that Denver and Salt Lake will be going after the same 2022 Winter Olympic bid.

BYU on Bye

Utah State vs. Nevada - Wolf Pack lost Colin Kaepernick from last season, so you can expect a return to earth for them. Utah State could be on the way up, and looking pull an upset. Chance of Victory: 40%

Week 14

Utah and the Pac-12 Championship Game - If Utah wins the South Division they'll be in the Pac-12 championship game. If, however unlikely, they have a better record than Stanford or Oregon, whichever of the two are representing the North, the game will be at Rice-Eccles Stadium.

BYU @ Hawaii - BYU could be playing out the string, with their postseason destination already determined as soon as they suffer their first loss of the season. (Hello Armed Forces Bowl.) It'll be interesting to see whether BYU can stay focused while on the island, or if this turns into another massacre in paradise like the last time the Cougars traveled to the islands. Chance of Victory: 50%

Utah State @ New Mexico State - The WAC may not have enough bowl bids for Utah State if the Aggies become bowl eligible, but that doesn't mean just accomplishing that feat won't be important for Utah State. They could be sitting at 5 wins at this point and needing a win to become bowl eligible. It's also feasible, with some lucky bounces, they could already be at 6 wins, and a win here gives Utah State a winning season and makes them an even more desirable at-large bowl team. Chance of Victory: 85%

Worst Team Slogan Ever

This season BYU has lost the title of worst team slogan every. "The Quest" has been replaced by Auburn Head Coach Gene Chizik's slogan "Winning Is Expensive". When public opinion is relatively confident that your Heisman Trophy winning QB who led you to a National Championship only came to your school because you paid his father who was actively shopping his services, and the NCAA is looking into the situation, you may want to think of something other than "Winning Is Expensive". You can claim you are referring to success costing hard work, blood, sweat, and tears, but all anyone thinks is money.

Predictions Around The Country

The first predictions deals with Auburn's ill-timed slogan. A slogan that will become even more ironic before the new National Champion is crowned, when the NCAA announces they have evidence against Cam Newton and send a notice of allegations to Auburn.

There's a reason that MWC teams spend time during fall and spring camp preparing for Air Force and their triple option/cut blocking offense. Boise State Head Coach Chris Petersen doesn't find it necessary, and didn't put any time aside for preparation and will just deal with Air Force come game week. That will change next year, after Air Force Upsets the Broncos

Air Force, off of their upset of Boise will finish no worse than a tie for the MWC Championship.

The Big East will end up with a 4 or 5 way mess of a tie at the top of their standings even though they'll all have two, three or possibly even four losses this season. The BCS will award TCU with the BCS bid that typically goes to Big East champion in 2011, despite not officially joining the Big East until July 1st of 2012.

New Michigan Head Coach Brady Hoke ends the season by giving Ohio State their 6th loss of the year. This will be the first of 4 straight victories for Michigan in the rivalry.

Florida State rides their preseason hype to an upset of #1 Oklahoma in week three. The Seminoles celebrate by

dropping three of their next four games and watching Virginia Tech win the ACC.

One loss Georgia plays one loss Alabama in the SEC title game. The winner goes on to the National Championship game, where the SEC does not get it's 6th straight national championship.

Newcomer Nebraska dominates a twelve team B1G Ten conference.

Oregon does not make it through the season undefeated, but the loss does not come against Pac-12 Champion Stanford.

UCLA fires Rick Neuheisel after the Utes beat the Bruins.

The Texas A&M SEC-ede fiasco will not be resolved by the time of the BCS National Championship game, When it finally does get resolved you can count on two things. The Big XII will still exist, and ESPN will have a heavy hand involved in whatever resolution comes to be.

Andrew Luck lives up to the hype, wins the Heisman Trophy, and is the favorite to be the #1 overall pick in the NFL draft. This will leave the Carolina Panthers in an interesting situation as they will once again have the #1 overall pick. The Panthers took Jimmy Clausen in the 2nd round in 2009, and took sCam Newton #1 overall in 2010.

Utes end with two linemen on the Pac-12 All Conference First Team, Tony Bergstrom and Star Lotuleilei.

And my final prediction is that Next week Red, Blue And Pigskin will be breaking down actual games that start that week. (Hey I have to get at least one prediction right.)

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 11:26

Thursday, August 18, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

In 1990, Ron McBride took over a program he would refer to as "soft", "underachieving", and "going nowhere". The program was so down that when it came to expectations he was told "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."

He didn't even have to win against BYU, just not be embarrassed. To say that the bar at Utah was set low, would be an understatement. The bar was so low, that they don't even bury dead people that low.

What Ron McBride ended up doing, was making those "middle of the league, and be respectable" expectations no longer acceptable at the University of Utah.

On September 1st, the University of Utah finishes the journey that Coach Mac Started. A journey that was picked up by Urban Meyer, and then Kyle Whittingham. But make no mistake, this turnaround, this entry in the Pac-12 got it's start in 1990 with the hiring of Coach Ron McBride.

Now that the Utes are a part of the Big Boy Club, all eyes are on them to see how they will compete. Fairly or not, this first season for Utah will be scrutinized like none before it. It is not a stretch to say that 2011 is the most important season in Utah football history. So what can we expect from this team? An Internet Search, A Referral Phone Call, And An Overhaul

In October, the University of Minnesota fired their head coach. This typically means that the assistants are expendable as well. Tim Davis was the offensive line coach at Minnesota. Trying to be helpful, his wife was on the internet trying to find opportunities. She noticed that the Utes were in the market for an Offensive line coach. She knew that her husband had ties to the University, having not only attended there in the 80's, but also serving as an Offensive Line coach in the mid 90's. She also knew that her husband had ties to current head coach Kyle Whittingham, so she talked her husband into calling him.

Expecting to just leave a message, instead Tim Davis actually got a hold of Coach Whit, and they were able to talk, and Davis expressed his interest in the job. Coach Whit knew that part of the transition into the Pac-12 would be dealing with bigger, faster defensive linemen, and having someone who had experience at that level would be a bonus.

However Coach Whit, wanted to do a little bit of due diligence first. Knowing that Coach Davis worked with Norm Chow at Southern California, Coach Whittingham called up then current UCLA, and former USC Offensive Coordinator Norm Chow to get a referral for Tim Davis.

During this referral call, the topic of the Offense at Utah came up. The topic of discontent and disagreements between Chow, and UCLA head coach Rick Neuheisel also came up. Chow expressed interest in joining the Utes as Offensive Coordinator.

In what seemed like a surprise out of nowhere, the spread offense is now on it's way out, and Norm Chow, with help from Tim Davis, are introducing a more pro-style, downhill running game oriented Offense. In all actuality though, this is a move that Coach Whittingham may actually have been moving towards for the past few years.

Ch-Ch-Changes

When Urban Meyer took the Florida job, he left behind players and a system that were part of a highly specialized offense. The spread formation had taken over College Football, and it wasn't an offensive philosophy that blended well with other systems.

Seven years later, it was time for a change. Fear not though, because in all honesty the change isn't going to be a severe as one would think. This is mainly because the Utes have been slowly fading out the Spread for a few years. I believe the reason that the Utes were so reluctant to start Wynn in '09, was because the plan was for Terrance Cain to start for two years, Wynn to redshirt in '08, with all eyes focused on a pro-style offense this season.

In High School Wynn played in a pro-style offense. That's why he will have an an easier adjustment to Norm Chow's

offense than many expect. Also part of the recruiting of the past few years includes, Tyler Shreve, a pro-style QB, and the re-emergence of the tight end at Utah. A position that Urban all but decimated during his two year stint.

Does this mean the days of the high scoring, long passes are gone from the Utah offense? What about these rumors of a West Coast mentality being introduced?

Worry not. There will be three main differences between this offense and the offense we've been seeing the last few years.

First, and most obvious, the shotgun will be minimized. Instead we will see Wynn line up under the center, with the running backs sitting in some semblance of an I-Formation. As mentioned before, this is the type of offense Wynn ran in High School, so it's something he's comfortable with.

Secondly, running plays will be actual running plays. Eddie Wide III, Matt Asiata, and Darrel Mack have done outstanding at the running back position the past few years. The thing is, they didn't run many actual running plays. Instead Utah insisted on running the Zone-Read option play. Considering that Wynn is not much of a runner, and therefore not much of a threat to actually keep the ball, this is a smart move. Instead there will be actual running plays (dives, tosses, stretches, etc.) that will open up the passing game via play action passes.

Finally, the Tight End position is going to be used more often. And considering that the Utes have the best tight end in the state in Kendrick Moeai, this will be a real weapon for the Utes.

Other than that most of the changes will be hard to recognize. You can still expect the Utes to try and lean on a running game in order to open up the passing game. You can also still expect the Utes to take their chances down the field.

Downhill Run Game

In order to have an effective downhill running game, a team needs a good running back. With the graduations of Asiata, and Wide, the medical retirement of Sausan Shakerin, and the departure from the team for personal reasons of Shawn Asiata and Tauni Vakapuna, the Utes entered spring camp without a single division one carry on their team.

Up for the starting position is Junior College transfer John White IV, True Freshman and the State of Utah's highest rated Recruit Harvey Langi, and Rugby convert and fan favorite Thretton Palamo.

What a difference a couple of camps, and a competition make. At the start of fall camp Vakapuna and Shawn Asiata rejoined the team. As camp has progressed the running back situation has started to shake itself out with two players moving ahead of the pack, while others have struggled a bit.

Right now your starter is going to be John White IV. White is a smaller, speedier back. His backup right now is Vakapuna. Vakapuna is the younger brother of former BYU Fullback Fui Vakapuna. This means Palamo and Langi are battling it out for third.

Now while some might think it's bad that the highly recruited Langi is struggling, I'll tell you why this is actually great news. One of the big differences between High School, and College football for a running back, is how much running backs are required to pick up blitzes. From all accounts this is where Langi, and Palamo are both falling behind. However with White and Vakapuna both looking to have the top 2 spots secured, this will afford the Utes the opportunity to Redshirt either or both of Langi, and Palamo. Redshirting Langi gives him an extra year to develop, remember he's only 18 right now, as well as a year of practicing at the college level. It also gives the Utes an extra year, with what looks to be a very solid running back in the backfield.

Weight On His Shoulders

Commanding the offense will be Junior Quarterback Jordan Wynn. Wynn had a very up and down 2010. Although he put up good numbers early, he was injury prone during the season. Wynn missed two games early due to a thumb injury. Wynn also struggled late in the season thanks to a shoulder surgery sustained against Iowa State.

Wynn is coming into the season after having went through shoulder surgery shortly after the regular season ended. The fate of the season rests on that surgically repaired shoulder. The Utes don't have much of an option for a backup, although Junior College transfer John Hays has surprised some during camp. The Pac-12 is considered the conference of Quarterbacks, and there are definitely some high profile QB's in this conference. Wynn when healthy has shown flashes of being deserving of being mentioned with some of these QB's.

What Utah needs, however is consistency from Wynn. Consistency and health.

Opening Holes And Protecting The Shoulder

One major area of concern for the Utes is on the Offensive Line. The Offensive Line was already pretty shallow depth wise to start camp, and that depth only got worse as the line was beset by injuries. Starting Guard Sam Brenner, someone the coaching staff has been high on for a few years now, but has been injury prone, injured his elbow. His backup, true Freshman Isaac Asiata suffered a High Ankle Sprain.

To assist with the depth issues, the Utes moved Defensive Tackle Latu Heimuli to the Guard spot. Heimuli responded by injuring his thumb and requiring surgery.

The good news is that all three are expected to be back within the next two weeks. However it has shown just how shallow depth on the line is. The first string should be fine, as it's anchored by returning tackles John Wayne Cullen, and Pre-Season All Conference member Tony Bergstrom. But once you get past that first string experience drops drastically.

If the Utes can't block anyone, or can't open any holes for the running game, the season will suffer badly.

The Air Force

For once when I refer to The Air Force I'm not referring the Falcons, who constantly give the Utes fits. Instead I'm referring to the name that the WR corps of the Utes call themselves. And it's a deep corps.

DeVonte Christopher was the leading receiver last year, and looks to pick up in his Junior year, close to where he left off in his Sophomore year. DeVonte was responsible for some of the more jaw dropping, highlight catches of the year. BYU fans will remember one in particular from last year where he tipped the ball from behind a defenders head, and caught it while falling over the defender into the end zone.

The other returning receiver who contributed last year is Luke Matthews. Matthews was the fourth option for the Utes last year, and this year should be targeted more often.

Kendrick Moeai may be a tight end, but he's just as dangerous catching the ball as any of the other WR's. If anyone were betting, I'd say he'd be a safe bet to be the 2nd leading receiver at the end of the year.

After these three come some highly talented youth. Junior college transfer Anthony Denham was impressing before a hamstring tweak in camp and happens to be the tallest WR on the team. Dexter Ransom was the most targeted wide out during the Red/White spring game. Reggie Dunn was the fastest player on the team last year.

But the one I'm most interested in, not only this year, but for the next 4 seasons, is a WR to speaks to the heart of 9 year old me. He also happens to be the fastest player on the team this year.

One Of The Best Nicknames Ever

Pop quiz, name the WR who holds the record for most receiving yards in a game?

There's a lot you WR's you might name, Jerry Rice, the greatest to ever play. What about freak of nature Randy Moss? Surely throw me the Damned Ball Keyshawn Johnson?

Nope, most people would have a hard time name the WR. For me it's easy. See when I was a kid he just happened to be my favorite player, on my favorite team.

Not only that, but his 15 reception, 336 yard record performance against the New Orleans Saints is a clear memory for this Rams fan. I remember very clearly Willie "Flipper" Anderson taking over in that game, and leading the Rams from behind to an overtime victory.

But that's not all. I also remember in 1989 divisional round playoffs the Rams facing the Giants. The game went into overtime. Jim Everett takes the snap, drops back and throws a deep pass. Who should be streaking down the sideline? None other than Flipper Anderson. Flipper not only caught the pass, but he kept running. He ran past the defense, he ran into the end zone, and he didn't stop running until he ran out the back of the end zone and straight into locker room.

Victory secured, the Rams were going to the NFC Championship where they were just one game away from the Super Bowl. Despite the fact, that the evil, reviled, hated 49ers stomped the dreams of a 9 year old boy the next week, the images of Flipper Anderson throughout his NFL career have always stayed with me.

What does this do with the Utes? Turns out that Flipper's son Dres is currently slotted to be the starting Z-Receiver. Dres is a redshirt freshman, and while I'm sure he'll be his own player, watching him every week will transport me back to my 9 year old self, when I was first falling in love with this beautiful game.

The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same

It seems like every fall we're talking about Utah rebuilding their defensive backfield. Over the few years the Utes have had to say goodbye to players like Eric Weddle, Sean Smith, Brice McCain, Brandon Burton, RJ Stanford, and Robert Johnson, all of whom now play on Sundays.

This year is no different, as the Utes will be bringing out 4 new starters in the back field. Graduated are Justin Taplin-Ross and Lamar Chapman. Brandon Burton left a year early to go to the NFL. The lone returning player is super freshman stud Brian Blechen.

Blechen is now the starting stud linebacker.

So once again, Utah must rebuild that backfield.

The starting cornerbacks look to be Conroy Black, and Ryan Lacy. Black is a senior who, unfortunately for him, most Ute fans remember getting burned often and badly versus TCU last year. He obviously wasn't alone, as the entire defense struggled against the Rose Bowl bound Horned Frogs. Ryan Lacy is a sophomore, who's height might worry some. Lacy stands 5'11". Just remember Utah fans, Burton was also 5'11".

At the Safety position it looks like once again a True Freshman is making waves. Eric Rowe is a True Freshman out of Klein, Texas. So far through camp he has also been the news maker, and it looks like he has wrapped up one of the starting safety positions.

Normally this would be a worrisome aspect, but you only need to look at Blechen last year, or any of the long line of defensive backs to come out of the Whittingham defensive system. One thing that has been consistent over the years, is the Utes can produce defensive backs. It's a major reason why they are always able to turn over that back field.

So Strong It Was A Weakness

One major issues the Utah defense has last year was a lack of pressure on the Quarterback. This despite having an extremely deep and talented defensive line. The lack of pressure on the QB allowed the opposing team to get comfortable in the pocket. No pressure lead to opposing QB's being able to pick the defense apart.

The problem was that Utah was extremely talented, and extremely deep on the line. Utah rotated so many defensive linemen trying to keep all of them fresh. Also because all of them were very talented. Problem is, football is a rhythm game. Players get into a rhythm and like to stay in a groove. The Utes rotated between 13 and 16 players on their defensive line last year. All the rotation prevented players from getting into a groove, and prevented the players from getting pressure.

This year, the Utes have drastically cut their rotation. However they remain just as talented. Especially on the interior line where Starr Lotuleilei is considered by many an all conference possibility.

Joe and Dave Kruger return, as does Derrick Shelby, who was hampered by injuries last year. Good news for Utah is that it looks like the Defensive Line depth will be here for a few years. True freshman Nate Fakahafua has been making plays so far in camp, and has, as a defensive lineman, snagged 5 interceptions. Fakahafua won't start, but he is definitely earning some playing time.

Another name to watch on the defense this season will be Trevor Reilly, who may not start, but will make plays.

In fact the Utes may very well have the best defensive line in the entire conference. It's a defensive line that had 11 sacks in the 2nd scrimmage of fall camp. It's not only possibly the best defensive line in the conference, this line, and this defense altogether, with a linebacking corp led by local favorite Brian Blechen, and Tackling machine Chaz Walker,

is making a push to be one of the best defenses in Kyle Whittingham's entire tenure at Utah. Something that is no small feat.

New Names, New Faces, New Opponents

Obviously, the most noticeable change for the Utes football program this year, is that they've joined the Pac-12. You can see the new patches on the uniforms. The new logos on the field, the banners around town.

This also means we get to see a new crop of conference opponents. Gone are New Mexico, Wyoming, and thankfully Air Force. Instead the fans will see a new caliber of opponents coming into Rice-Eccles stadium.

Here's how the Utes new Conference foes, even the ones that Utah can only face in the Conference Championship Game, shape up for 2011.

California - The shine may be starting to come off of the Jeff Tedford era in Berkley. 2010 saw the first losing season of Tedford tenure, and many Golden Bear fans are starting to question the continually mediocre offenses of the past few years. Another losing season may not cost Tedford his job, but the seat could be warming up.

Oregon - Coming off of a loss in the National Championship game, the Ducks have had an offseason to forget. The Coach, and players are probably in a hurry to get back to playing football. 2011 could be the year the "Blur" Offense starts to be figured out, but if that happens it probably won't be till the end of the year, and closer to next season. Their last season matchup against Stanford is probably going to decide the Northern Division, and in all honesty the Conference.

Oregon State - The Beavers are probably the hardest team to figure out in the Conference. A Civil War loss away from the Rose Bowl in both '08, and '09 the Beavers struggled last year. James Rogers is the only remaining part of the fantastic Rogers duo still in Corvallis. Hard fighting, and persistent have been the calling card under Mike Riley, and that should continue in '11. The Beavers could be a surprise contender in the North, or be sitting at the bottom of the division.

Stanford - The Cardinal were a 2nd half collapse against Oregon away from a perfect 2010. Following the season their Head Coach bolted for the 49ers, but they were able to stumble into a bit more Luck. As in Andrew Luck, the super QB, and pre season Heisman Favorite deciding to come back for his Senior Year. Luck is by far the class of the conference for QB's. The question around the Cardinal has been how much of their recent success was Harbaugh. It should take a couple years for any dip, if there is one, to occur, which means the Cardinal could be battling the Ducks again for the division.

Washington - Head Coach Steve Sarkisian has done a good job of bringing a renewed sense of belief to the Huskies. One big concern for Washington will be replacing first round draft pick QB Jake Locker. The good news for the Huskies is that they played better last year, when they stopped emphasising Locker so much.

Washington State - The dregs of the Conference for the past few years, with a total of 5 wins over the past three season. However an out of conference schedule that is fairly favorable has some in Pulman thinking possible bowl berth. While 6 wins may not be required to save Paul Wulff jobs, 5 wins may be. The Cougars will surprise many this season by being the final Pac-12 Bowl team thanks largely to a 3-0 out of conference schedule.

Arizona - After almost pulling off the upset of Oregon in 2009, the Wildcats opened up 2010 with a 7-1 record. In typical Mike Stoops fashion however, it was too good to be true as Arizona under-achieved and lost their next 5 games to finish the year. Returning QB Nick Foles will battle with USC QB Matt Barkley for the claim of 2nd best QB in the conference, but with Mike Stoops inexplicably still the Head Coach, expecting anything other than under-achieving will only lead to heartache for the Wildcats.

Arizona State - With USC ineligible for postseason play, the Sun Devils seem to be everyone's pick to win the Southern Division. Most of this is based on 6'8" QB Brock Osweiler. Problem is he's only played two games, and is very raw and unknown. If Osweiler stumbles the Sun Devils are in trouble. If Osweiler lives up to the Hype all eyes will be on their games against the Utes as the gateway to the Pac-12 championship game.

Colorado - The other Pac-12 newcomer comes in during a prolonged down time. They also join the conference with a first year coaching staff. 2011 looks to be another down year for the Buffs, but only time will tell if Embree can return them to prominence.

UCLA - UCLA has been in complete turmoil for the past few years. Head Coach Rick Neuheisel is firmly on the hot seat. Knowing this he revamped his coaching staff to try and go all in for this season. Neuheisel is a perfect example of the good ole boys club. Hopefully after he fails to even make it to the end of the 2011 season, schools will wise up and stop giving him their programs to lead.

USC - As tempting as it would be to blame USC's mediocre '10 on their sanctions, the truth is that since it was under appeal, the scholarship and roster reductions weren't in effect. 2010 was mediocre for USC just off of hard work. While the sanctions won't really hurt USC this season either, the fact that they have a terrible coach will. Talent alone will be enough to keep USC competitive in most games. Unfortunately for USC that talent is mostly on the offensive side, as the defense will struggle once again. At the end of the year the big question will be if consecutive 8 win seasons going to be enough in Troy? Combine the terrible coaching of Lane Kiffin, with the now in effect sanctions, and 8 wins may be the most USC sees for a few years.

Expanding the Red, Blue And Pigskin Bubble

Now that I've previewed the local teams, it's time to start talking about College Football as a whole. Next week brings the prediction issue. I'll run down the entire schedule for Utah, BYU and Utah State, and give you what should be expected to happen. Not content with just some local predictions I will make predictions for all of College Football as a whole in 2011.

Not having a good track record with my predictions you may want to bookmark that issue to have plenty of ammo to rub in my face when I end up completely wrong.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 07:46

Wednesday, August 10, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Recently the BYU Cougars had their Football Media Day. It was a day spent in their new state of the art broadcasting center that will be used by BYUtv. From all accounts it is a very, very impressive center, rivaled only by the studios in Bristol, Connecticut. Also judging by the comments of Tom Holmoe and Bronco Mendenhall, the mere fact that they have such a nice broadcast center, means BYU is guaranteed to win a National Championship soon.

However the best quote to come out of BYU's media day wasn't made by Bronco Mendenhall, or Tom Holmoe. In fact it wasn't made by anyone related to BYU. Instead it came from Utah State Head Coach Gary Andersen, who when asked how he felt about BYU trying to stiff them by only wanting to do 2 for 1 contracts, responded by joking "Maybe Bronco and the Cougars are too afraid to make the drive through Logan Canyon".

Well fear not, because Red, Blue And Pigskin isn't afraid to make the trip, as today we will be doing just that, at least linguistically, as we'll talk about the Cougars down in Provo, and the Aggies up in Logan.

One of these two teams just so happen to have the best Running Back, and best Linebacker in the state, and it isn't really close. In fact these two players could make an argument for best two players in the state period. And it's not from the team you expect.

But first, a couple red related notes. Supporting Arguments

Last week I mentioned that Utah's ascension to the Pac-12 makes them still the flag-bearer for Non-AQ's. At least for the next few years. For this reason, I mentioned that BYU fans, as well as fans of Boise State, and TCU would be wise to cheer for Utah success in their new conference. I also mentioned that Utah in the Pac-12 will have more of an effect than TCU in the Big East.

Apparently I wasn't the only one thinking the same thing.

The Tucson Citizen calls the Utes the most important team in College Football during the upcoming season.

But Boise State cares. TCU also needs Utah to win. Interestingly enough, so does BYU. Any outsider program that wants its 12-0 record to be taken seriously needs the Utes to find big success in their new home.

On the other hand, the teams that have the most to gain if Utah fails are the members of the big six conferences, including the other 11 schools in the Pac-12. They don't need an extra argument in favor of somebody from the Mountain West playing for a national championship. They don't want two undefeated teams from Conference USA and the WAC claiming they both deserve BCS bowl bids in the same year.

And just in case, they aren't a prestigious enough publication, Sports Illustrated also tackled the subject.

But it's also possible that perceptions around college football would be altered, bolstering a non-AQ team's shot at playing for the national championship while at the same time reinforcing Shurtleff's contention that the current system should be blown up because deserving teams are denied access. Which is why Boise State and yeah, even archrival BYU, should feel invested in the experiment. Right or not, the Utes' success or failure this season will reflect on those they've left behind.

Superhero Origin Story

Many Ute fans who watched Brian Blechen's play as a true freshman last year, started to think he was destined to become a super hero like Defensive Back, starting with his game clinching interception against Pitt in week 1.

Blechen is no longer a safety, but he now has his own superhero origin-like insect related incident.

During the first day of Fall Camp, Blechen had to leave practice early thanks to a bee flying into his mouth and stinging him in the back of his throat. Not to be trifled with, Blechen ended up swallowing the bee.

History tells us what happens when mere bugs intertwine themselves in the affairs of man. And in true fashion, Blechen didn't miss much time, as he was back out there the next day. So beware opposing offensive players who dare go across Blechen's middle, because there just might be some extra umph to those hits this season.

'Rise Up' In Excitement

Down south there seems to be a lot of excitement surrounding the team as fall camp starts. So much excitement, that Bronco's annual inspirational run up to the Y had to be cancelled, because there were too many fans in the parking lot, and lining up the path to the Y.

Fans are excited to see the revamped offense, now that Brandon Doman has taken over as Offensive Coordinator. Fans are excited to see an offense that sees Jake Heaps be the starting quarterback from day one, and not have to deal with a stupid quarterback rotation.

The excitement surrounding this team is at levels not seen since right before they began a "Quest".

All of the excitement seems to have made fans forget that this is a 7-6 team. Fans are excited over the way the team finished last year, and how the offense seemed to get rolling in the second half of the season last year, and culminated with a close loss to the Utes in the rivalry game, and a dismantling of UTEP in the Bowl game.

One point that seems to get skipped over, is that the schedule that corresponded with the second half turnaround last season included only two teams with winning records. BYU went 1-1 in those games, with both games having been tainted by a horribly wrong replay.

So what do we have in these Cougars? Will they be good? Honestly we really don't know.

One Cook, But Maybe Too Much Stew?

After the embarrassment up in Logan last year, Cougar Head Coach Bronco Mendenhall scape-goated fired Defensive Coordinator Jaime Hill, and took over the defense. Over the rest of the season the defense had a fire that was missing the first half of the year.

Mendenhall has decided to keep the Defensive Coordinator duties, along with his head coach duties. This is a very high-risk, high-reward move for the Cougars. Without a doubt, Mendenhall is the best defensive mind on the team, but I worry very much about Bronco being able to maintain correct focus on everything, while having to worry about the entire defense, as well as the head coach duties.

About That Defense

On the field, there are questions abounding in that defense. The secondary, which has never been BYU's strong point, is losing two of its best players. Safety Andrew Rich, and CB Brian Logan are both gone. Of course, Logan's replacement will be an improvement as long as he's taller than 5'6". I don't care how good of a CB someone is, if they are only 5'6", as Logan was, there has to be a better option.

The Linebackers, may actually be the strength of this defense. Sophomore Kyle Van Oy is a beast. One of the idiocies of Jaime Hill's defense at the beginning of last year, was that Van Oy was not on the field. It's not a coincidence that once Bronco took over, Van Oy got on the field, and the Linebackers had more energy, more fire, and just made more of an impact. Van Oy will be an NFL linebacker soon.

Oft Injured Jordan Pendleton, says he's healthy and ready to go. Pendleton is a big hitter, which can also be an issue, as his big hits, have at times left himself injured. If Pendleton can stay healthy, he's a major defensive contributor.

The line has talent, but is a bit of a worry. Romney Fuga is coming back off of a cheap shot induced knee injury that caused him to miss most of last season, and will probably still be affected by the knee as he comes back. Brian Meuhlmann, and Eathyn Manumanaleuna will have to be the anchors of the defensive line.

Light Up The Scoreboard

To be honest, I'm not 100% sold on Quarterback Jake Heaps. Heaps showed great flashes last year. Heaps definitely played the best of the three people to take Quarterback snaps in last year's rivalry game. At the same time there was a lot of question marks that showed up.

Heaps is entering his sophomore season. Unlike last year, this is Jake Heaps' team. He won't have to worry about splitting reps with Riley Nelson, who is now going to be the third quarterback, which begs the question what the heck was Bronco doing last year? One huge benefit of this, is that the WR's don't have to keep adjusting to a different QB throwing the ball each drive.

That's good for BYU, because they are deep at WR. McKay Jacobsen was their best WR last year, and may end up being their third best WR this season. Chase Hoffman, and Ross Apo round out a WR corps that is not just a single threat, and will allow BYU to spread the field.

As far as the ground game, it will be a two man crew, with JJ DiLuigi being the primary back, and Josh Quezada being the secondary back. Quezada is the better of the two, but JJ DiLuigi is one of those players that nobody can quite figure out why he's as successful as he is.

There is a lot we don't know about this BYU team, and even if Jake Heaps goes through Sophomore Struggles, with the teams the Cougars will be playing this year, they will still be able to put points up on the score board.

The Stench In The Room

One of the reasons that BYU will be able to put points up on the board, and one reason why the fact that most of BYU's 2010 success came against a bunch of second rate teams is irrelevant, is that this year's schedule is even worse than last year's schedule.

Oh Sure BYU starts the season with names such as Utah, Ole Miss, Texas and Oregon State. That is until you realize the only one of those teams that had a winning record last year was Utah. It's true that you can't really predict how a team will change from year to year. For example, many don't expect there to be any way possible Texas doesn't improve dramatically. There's also a chance that Utah isn't quite as good in 2011 with a step up in competition. However Oregon State, and Ole Miss are teams that seeing them stay where they were last year wouldn't be a surprise. At the same time seeing either of those two teams beat BYU, wouldn't surprise me either. None of the 4 games above, are games that BYU can take for granted.

Most BYU fans I know hated last year's home schedule. Of their 6 games, only Utah, and UCF have been any good recently. After that comes Utah State, which one can actually talk themselves into, by remembering that they kicked BYU's teeth in last season. The rest makes last year schedule look like a buffet of prime rib, compared to the array of Turd Sandwiches they face. The rest of their home schedule is San Jose State, Idaho State, Idaho, and New Mexico State.

The Schedule, especially the 2nd half of the schedule is going to be a big road block to BYU being taken seriously this year, no matter what happens in the first 4 weeks.

Traveling Through The Canyon

Up in Logan, the leash is getting tighter. After consecutive 4-8 season, Gary Anderson must start showing results soon. Utah State no longer is accepting two money games per year. This year they only have the one at Auburn. With a WAC Conference that is ripe for being dominated starting in 2012, the time for the Aggies to make their move is now.

Anderson has now had 2 years of recruiting, to get his players in. Another 4-8 season, may not get Gary fired, but it will certainly be considered unsuccessful. Last season Gary helped the Aggies break through against BYU. Now the Aggies need to break through the next barrier and get to 6-6, and a bowl game.

Difference Making Players

It's not often that the Aggies have one player who can be considered among the best at their position in the State of Utah. This season though, they have two players who are the best at their position.

In the preseason last year, Running Back Robert Turbin suffered a knee injury and was lost for the season. Most Ute fans remember Turbin as the guy who sprinted 98 yards for a Touchdown in 2009. After rehabbing for the offseason Turbin is back, and so far looks like he not only has he not lost a step, but seems to actually be a bit better. Needing to break in a new QB, the Aggies are going to lean heavily on Turbin for the offensive production.

Defensively, the Aggies are led by Senior LB Bobby Wagner. Wagner had 135 tackles last year, and starts this season

on the watch lists for the Nagurski, Lombardi, and Butkus awards. An impressive feat for a player from the WAC.

Issues Standing In Their Way

Of course some major issues standing in the way of the Aggies breaking that 6 win barrier is the fact that they do have a new QB this year. Last season Borell was a play maker. This year the roster includes 3 freshmen and a Junior College transfer. In other words, the Aggies have no experience at the position, and can expect some major growing pains. Let's hope they paid attention to BYU last year, and decide on a single player, and don't attempt a committee approach.

The Path They Trod

The good news for the Aggies is that the schedule breaks for them, to actually be able and break through to a bowl game. Gone are multiple money games, Gone is Boise State.

Of course they still have one Money Game as they open the season at Auburn. Even though Auburn is now without the best quarterback that money could buy last year in college, I'm pretty comfortable saying this one is a loss for the Aggies.

Fresno State, Nevada, and Hawai'i don't bolt for the MWC until next year, and look to be the cream of the WAC crop this season. The Aggies also travel to Provo to face off against BYU. This is an embarrassed BYU team, one that will be looking to get vengeance for last year.

The rest of the schedule includes Div. 1-AA and in-state foe Weber State. Home against a down Colorado State, and a home game against Wyoming. As well as conference clashes with the same type of Turd Sandwiches that also happen to be BYU's home schedule this year, Louisiana Tech, San Jose State, Idaho, and New Mexico State. A 4-3 conference record may not be a certain, but is a realistic possibility. The Aggies should also beat Weber State. That means that the Aggies need only win one against CSU, Wyoming, or BYU, or pull off an upset against the top 3 in the WAC to break the barrier. As long as the Aggies find their QB early in the season, they should be able to pull off one of those wins, and yes I'm looking at your Austin Carta-Samuels-less Wyoming.

Joining The Club

So it looks like the Aggies should be able to join the bowl eligible club this season. One club we know has been joined, is the big boy club. Next week I preview Utah's inaugural Pac-12 season, as well as a quick breakdown of the rest of the Conference.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:49

Thursday, August 4, 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Do you feel it? The excitement that's been bubbling just under the surface for the last six months? The anticipation that has only been enhanced by the most momentous off season in this state's history? The tingling feeling that can mean only one thing, Football Is Back!

With the Utes reporting to camp on Thursday, and the Cougars beginning work this weekend on Saturday, the long national crisis comes to an end.

No matter how momentous an off season is, it's still just an off season, and nothing beats the actual cracking of helmets and pads.

Camps don't just bring the return of football up on the hill, or down south. It also brings about the return of Red, Blue and Pigskin.

As camps heat up will preview both seasons, and make some predictions for the upcoming football season in general. This week however we will recap the off season that saw the Utes officially join "The Cartel" the BCS, and saw the Cougars officially take the ball to go play by themselves.

Also this week I will explain, why Cougar fans must do something that goes against every fiber in their being. They must cheer and root for the Utes. Don't worry Cougar fans you aren't alone, as Boise State, and TCU Fans should also be rooting for Utah.

So without further ado, here is the first Red, Blue And Pigskin of the 2011 season. Where To Begin

A lot happened during the previous off season. Some of it was just making official what we knew last year. Some of it was a surprise. Some of it won't really have an effect until down the road. A lot of it proved how inept Craig Thompson was as a conference commissioner, and just how lucky both Utah and BYU are to be rid of him, while proving just how unfortunate Boise State is to now have to deal with him.

Either way rarely is an offseason as full of information, and at times excitement as this past one was. Usually when there is this much excitement going into the season, it's usually because great things are expected for a team.

In 2004, there was some national talk that Utah could go undefeated and break into the previously unbreakable barrier of the BCS.

In 2008, BYU fans had a level of excitement as they were preparing to go on their "Quest".

This year though, there is a high level of excitement for both teams, and yet no one is sure what to expect for either team. 6-6 is a possibility for both teams, 10-2 is a possibility for both teams. Predictions are all over the board for both teams. No one knows what to expect. That hasn't stopped preseason excitement from going through the roof.

Not Just For Holidays Anymore

On July 1st, BYU officially left the Mountain West Conference to Join the WAC become College Football's 4th currently Independent team. While this is a move that has brought BYU great publicity, and a nice ESPN contract that will see them on an ESPN network between 8 and 10 times this season. Of course, it's also a very high-risk/high-reward gambit, that requires that BYU win, and win a lot.

However winning by itself isn't enough. BYU must win against high level competition, and while the Cougars do play Texas, Ole Miss, and Utah this year, quality competition isn't exactly on high supply on this year's schedule. Something that must absolutely change in future schedules.

Moving On Up

While July 1st saw the Cougars celebrating Independence day 3 days early in Provo, the Utes were celebrating on that

day in the State Capitol as well. The move that was part of last year's major shakeup in the College Football landscape became official, as Utah became a member of the Pac-12, along with Colorado.

This is a move that will see Utah's competition make an extreme jump. Gone are the days of New Mexico, UNLV, and Wyoming. Instead the Utes will now face such stiff competition as Washington State, Colorado, and UCLA.

Oh and they also face USC every year, with the Oregon Ducks thrown in 10 out of every 12 years.

Dollar Dollar Bills Y'all

One big reward for both the Cougars and Utes, is the amount of money that both team will now reap, and be able to re-invest in their programs. Gone is the paltry 1.5 million per year of the MWC TV Deal.

The numbers for the ESPN contract haven't been made publicly available. There is a lot of speculation out there, but it does seem the consensus is, that BYU will be getting a minimum of \$800k per home game on ESPN. Oh, and they don't have to share.

Utah on the other hand, must scale up to the TV money. They will receive \$0 from the Pac-12 TV Contract in 2011, followed by a 50% share in 2012, and a 75% share in 2013, before becoming fully invested in 2014.

That's the bad news. The good news is that starting in 2012, the new Pac 12 TV Deal kicks in. This is a TV Deal that is the richest in the land, and will see each team garner about \$21 million per year. Utah's 50% in 2012, still means they will have gotten more in 2011, and 2012 than they received the entire time they were under the MWC tv contract. The 75% in 2013 alone, is more than they would have received had they stayed for the entire life of the MWC contract. Only this time, people will actually be able to see their games.

None of those figures take into effect the money from the new Pac 12 Championship game, which will see the Utah get \$2 million per year starting in 2011, and the newly announced Pac 12 TV Networks (yes plural), which Utah will receive a full share of immediately.

Then there are the Bowl Payouts. Utah will receive a conference share of bowl payouts from such prestigious bowls as the Rose Bowl, and Holiday Bowl. Cougar fans can rest assured knowing they already know their postseason destination, for the next three years.

Not Rid Of Each Other Yet

With the two teams headed in different directions, you would think that outside of the Rivalry game, the two teams wouldn't really need each other anymore. Or to put it another way, the two fan bases, wouldn't need to worry about how the other team is doing, and would be free to hope for the worst for their rival team.

That's not true, kind of.

In truth one group needs the other team to do well, more than the other way around.

While the Utes are officially a member of the BCS now, they are still being considered the flag bearer for the Non-AQ's. The argument used against Non-AQ's for the past 12 years is that they couldn't hold up under the week in, week out demands of a BCS Conference Schedule.

The last time a team from a Non BCS conference made the jump was in 2004 when UConn, and 2005 when Louisville, and South Florida all joined the Big East. The difference between now and then though is UConn was coming from FCS status, and all three were more of a Basketball member. This was all part of the ACC/Big East shake up, created primarily for Basketball reasons. If they were competitive in Football, it was a bonus.

Times have changed in the last 6 years. Football is now in control, and drives the sports landscape.

This is the first time in the BCS era, that a top Non-AQ team is making the jump. This is the first time that the theory is up for a legitimate test. If Utah fails, it hurts all Non-AQ teams. The BCS will use it to show that they were right all the time. It will be pointed to as the reason why there are "Haves" and "Have Nots". Any top Non-AQ team, will hear the doubters even louder. The schedule argument will be deafening. It will be the example of why we don't need a playoff. Success, while not completely opening the door for Non-AQ's, does help the argument. Playoff proponents will use it to argue that a playoff is necessary, and that these teams can compete. An argument that will only be helped by TCU

joining the Big East in 2012.

Sure BYU will be getting a lot of push, at least the first couple years, from the ESPN Contract. They also don't have the stigma of the MWC on them. But they are still a Non-AQ Team. In fact, in terms of BCS Access BYU is less than a Non-AQ.

If BYU finishes a season with an undefeated record, it's not out of the realm of possibility they could finish outside the top 2, but in say the top 5. Now say a 1 loss Boise State or TCU finishes in the top 12 of the BCS Rankings. Guess who gets the Automatic Non-AQ Bid. I'll give you a hint, they aren't from Provo. The only guarantee that BYU gets for BCS access is if it finishes in the top 2.

BYU is really susceptible to the schedule argument. BYU's schedule in the next two years is terrible. In fact as of right now it's 2011 Strength of schedule is ranked about 50 spots lower than their final MWC record. It's something that must change if BYU wants to be nationally relevant as an independent, but it's something that couldn't be helped in these next two years.

So as much as it pains them, it would be wise for BYU Fans to hope for, and root for Utah to be successful in the Pac-12. At least for the first few years. But you aren't alone Cougar fans, because TCU and Boise State fans, should also be cheering on Utah. Right now, even as a member of the club, Utah is still the flag bearer for Non-AQ's. Next Year, TCU makes the jump. They make the jump to a much easier conference. In Fact one could argue the conference they are joining is easier than the one they are leaving. But for now, a lot of judgement on Non-AQ's will be based on how well Utah performs.

Upcoming

For the next few weeks I will be previewing BYU and Utah's season. I will also preview a bit of Utah State, who happen to have the best LB, and best RB in the state. I'll do a run through of the Pac-12 conference. There will also be some wild predictions.

Finally, the last week of August we will be talking about actual games that are about to be played.

Time to get excited folks. Camps are back in session, and Football is back.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:25

Monday, April 18. 2011

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Unfortunately, this does not signify that College Football is upon us. Head Coach Kyle Whittingham ponders the future of his team. However, 15,000 fans came out to Rice-Eccles Stadium this past Saturday, to get their first look at these Utes, as the Utes closed spring camp with their 8th annual Red/White spring game.

There were many things for the Utes to display in the game. Who was going to be the new RB? How is the new offense coming? Is Wynn's job in danger? Will the Utes have a pass rush?

I was among those 15,000 fans, and while I came away with a face as red as the Ute jerseys, I also came away with some thoughts on these questions, and the Utes in general, as they prepare to enter the Pac-12. **Onto the Game**

Defense was the theme of the day, as the Red team defeated the White team 7-0. The lack of offense, isn't to surprising though considering, there were many starters not playing (Jordan Wynn, Devonte Christopher), and that the Utes were installing a new offense. Also it's very typical for the Defense to be farther along than the Offense at this point of the year.

While points were at a premium it doesn't mean there wasn't any offense, as both sides were able to gain yardage. The drives just weren't converted into points.

Wynning?

One major concern though was the QB situation. The game showed without a doubt that Jordan Wynn is your starter in 2011.

QB Tyler Shreve was the winning quarterback for the Red team, while last year's 3rd stringer Griff Robles was the QB of the White team. Neither QB made a great impression. Shreve, was a highly sought recruit in 2010. However after an altercation where he assaulted his High School coach, the Utes pulled his scholarship. Shreve went through Whittingham's requirements to earn his way back on the team, and ended up grey shirting last season, before coming in this year as a Freshman.

Shreve is the better of the two backups, and showed that he has a strong arm. However, his accuracy, and form still has a lot of work that needs to be done. After scrambling to avoid the rush, Tyler Shreve (8) prepares to pass downfield.

On the day Shreve outdueled his counterpart by going 9 of 20 for 122 yards. He connected with WR Dexter Ranson for a 15 yard Touchdown late in the first half. Both he and Griff Robles threw an interception. Robles went 11 of 23 for 74 yards. While the passing game wasn't working for Robles, he did show the scrambling ability that many will remember from his limited action in 2010.

Both QB's struggled in many of the same areas. Neither QB did a great job of leading the receiver, or reading the defenses that well, or looking off of their primary target.

Shreve solidified his spot as the number two quarterback in 2011. Assuming Wynn is healthy there won't be much of a competition in spring.

Even though some fans, stupidly were calling for Wynn's benching last year, especially late in the season while he was struggling as he played with an injured shoulder, truthfully Terrance Cain is not a QB who should have seen playing time against anyone other than the UNLV's, and San Jose State's of the world. While this year's backup QB situation seems dire, it isn't any worse than last years. The big difference is that competition will be much better.

The good news is that Whittingham recognizes the issue, and will have a new QB be part of the program during fall camp, to hopefully shore up the hole.

The New Offense

A lot has been made about the changes to the offense for the Utes this season. First off they brought in Norm Chow as the offensive coordinator, and secondly they have decided to make some changes to the style of offense at the U.

When he was hired, both Chow, and Head Coach Kyle Whittingham both talked about a desire to introduce more pro style offensive elements into the system. Specifically more West Coast style elements.

Does this mean the Spread Offense, that has been so successful at Utah is going the way of the dodo? Do we really have to suffer through the dink and dunk doldrums of the West CrapCoast Offense?

Short answer: No!

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 07:17

Tuesday, December 21, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

So you know all those people arguing against so many bowl games? UTEP helped prove their point? You know all those people talking about the tradition and celebration of the Bowls? UTEP helped disprove their point. 6-6 should not be enough to warrant a bowl game. Sure once in a while you get a team like BYU who struggled through their early season, and is actually better than their 6-6 record, but more often than not, you get a UTEP.

UTEP wasn't the only team embarrassed during the bowl openers as all three games were blowouts.

Meanwhile, Utah is in Vegas preparing for the Broncos, and time to discuss BYU's season. New Mexico Snore

So is a 6-6 MWC team better than a 6-6 C-USA team? By miles. BYU jumped on top of the Miners early in this game, and never let up. Heaps totaled 4 TD's, and the hookup "Heaps to Hoffman" showed, that it's going to be heard a lot over the next three years. Mitch Payne became BYU's all time leading scorer.

UTEP was outmatched, offensively, defensively, coaching wise, and any other way you can think of. Much like the rest of the opening day bowls, this one was a bore after the first few minutes.

Season in Review

Before we start the BYU review I want to take you back to a conversation about the Utes in 2009, between myself and a Cougar Fan after the Utes lost to Oregon.

BYU Fan:... you know for a fan who's team also lost on Saturday...

RB&P:... Plus the nice thing about knowing the season is a rebuilding year, is the losses don't hurt as bad

BYU Fan: wasn't favored... but was ranked and the other team was not

RB&P: Yes, but still the Utes were a road underdog

BYU Fan: rebuilding... i don't believe in that term.

It's the last comment in particular. BYU did something this season, that Cougar fans don't like to admit they have to do. They had to rebuild. Truth be told, they haven't had to rebuild in the previous four seasons, but they seemed to have forgotten the years before that.

So if BYU doesn't rebuild, then 2010 was an absolute failure. But even this particular BYU fan admitted this season was a rebuilding year, and it's under the guise of a rebuilding year that this season needs to be looked at.

And under that guise, 2010 was a success for the team. Despite starting slowing with a terrible decision to play two QB's, the team rebounded, and ends with a 7-6 winning record. This season was very similar to Bronco Mendenhall's first in Provo. The Cougars not only turned the ship around this season, but with the emergence of Jake Heaps, Josh Quezada, Cody Hoffman, and Kyle Van Oy, they may have found some solid freshman building blocks for the future. Although their coach seems intent on possibly screwing that up.

Sure the Cougars would have loved to have rebuilt with a season like the Utes' 10 win rebuilding season in '09, but the Utes had more in the cupboard than BYU did to start this season. But to look at the 2010 season as anything than a success, means you had unrealistic expectations to begin with.

Was It All A Success

While the team had a successful year, I'm not so sure you can be as generous when talking about Bronco Mendenhall's season. While Bronco did a great job in the second half of this year, to get this team in position to be in a bowl game, it was largely his fault that they were in such dire straits to begin with. Personally I though 2009 was perhaps Bronco's best while in Provo. 2010 may very well have been his worst.

First of all, one must question why they had to go with so many freshman and sophomores to begin with. Where was

the recruiting the previous years. Granted turnover is part of College Football, but to travel as many as 60 freshman/sophomores for their first road game is shocking.

Beyond that though, was the decision to go with two QB's. It seemed obvious to anyone who saw that Heaps was by far the better QB. It didn't take 4 games and a shoulder surgery to make that obvious. Yet Bronco insisted on sticking with the system. And to make things worse, he would reflect responsibility for the decision as it started going bad. Heaps is the QB of the future for the Cougars.

Bronco seemed detached, and disinterested in the first half of the season as his team sputtered to losses. He never seemed willing to take responsibility for it, instead throwing his coordinators under the bus, eventually firing his defensive coordinator. As I said before, I had no problem firing Jaime Hill. I personally think both coordinators should have been let go before the season, but Hill was nothing more than a scapegoat to take blame away from Bronco.

However that scapegoating was the turning point. Bronco took over as Defensive Coordinator, and life was breathed back into that unit. Not only that but their seemed to be a change of mentality on the offense as well, relying on the run game to take pressure off of Heaps.

Overall, I think Bronco deserves a C for 2010.

Vegas Baby, Vegas

The Utes have touched down in Vegas and are preparing to get absolutely slaughtered. At least if you listen to everyone that's what you must believe. Utes are a heavy underdog, and not many in the media are giving them a chance.

After all, wasn't Utah just a paper champion to get up to #6. They don't have their starting QB. They've been frauds all year.

I'm pretty sure more people gave the Utes a chance against Alabama in 2008 than are giving them a chance this year.

Granted this team isn't anywhere near as good as they were in 2008, but I wouldn't completely write off the Utes yet. Coach Whittingham has shown, that when given extra time to prepare, he can come up with a good gameplan.

Going from Wynn to Cain, is a slight dropoff in talent, and control of the offense. However, the big complaint I've had with the Utes in the latter half of the season, is that they put too much trust in Wynn, and seemed to abandon their workhorse senior running back Maddie Widsiata III.

In order to beat the Broncos, the Utes must do two things offensively, control the clock, and not turnover the ball. Cain may actually be the better QB for those two things. Because the coaches don't trust Cain as much to control the entire offense, they will rediscover, and re-focus on the running game. Although, Cain will still need to pull the ball out during the Zone Read once in a while. This doesn't mean Cain won't be asked to throw the ball. The one thing about Cain is, when the offense is geared towards his strengths, he is a very efficient QB. He won't take the same risks that Wynn will. While that means Wynn is more likely to give you big plays, there is also the worry about turnovers.

Defensively, the Utes absolutely must get pressure with their front four. They cannot allow Kellen Moore to get comfortable. Pressure with the front four will allow Brandon Burton and Lamar Chapman to put their WR's on an island.

It's going to be a tough game, but the Utes are out to prove their season wasn't a fluke. They deserved their 10 wins.

The MWC No-Lose Bowl

While they won't say it publicly, you can bet that Craig Thompson and the MWC want Boise State to win the Vegas Bowl. They'd rather see their future succeed, and not their past.

But the conference, and the worst commissioner in college football are in a position where no matter the outcome they are winners. Either they are sending off one of their best teams as a winner, so they can show the big boys how it's done, or their incoming team will end this season by beating a team that is abandoning the conference to go onto greener pastures.

Either way, expect a smiling Craig Thompson at the end of the game.

Blog Export: Annals of the Homestarmy, <http://www.thehomestarmy.com/s9y/>

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 09:53

Wednesday, December 15, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

In a week where the only on-field action was the game between Army and Navy, most of the news this week came from off the field. For Utah, not a whole lot going on. Jordan Wynn successfully completed his shoulder surgery that will keep him out till next May. Meanwhile the rest of the team prepares for the Broncos and the Las Vegas Bowl.

BYU has a bit more news than that. Of course, they start off the bowl season on Saturday with the New Mexico bowl. But that isn't the only bit of news to come out of Provo. We now know who they'll play during their regular season next year, as well as postseason destinations for a future two years.

But first let's preview that bowl. So Many Bowls

There are 35 bowl games, and 70 bowl teams. Two numbers that combined with the BCS has strived to make the bowls pretty well irrelevant. It's not much of an accomplishment anymore when you don't even need a winning season to make a bowl game. What makes a bunch of bowling 6-6 teams even more sad, is to see a team like Temple, who had a great year, and ended with an 8-4 season, sitting at home without a bowl game.

Land of Enchantment

As usual there needs to be a start to the bowl season. This year it's the New Mexico Bowl versus 6-6 BYU and 6-6 UTEP. Last year this bowl ended up being my favorite bowl of the entire season. It featured 6-6 Wyoming upsetting 8-4 Fresno State in double overtime.

This year the matchup is between two teams going in opposite directions. We all know BYU, thanks to the brain dead decision to have a two QB system, started the season 1-4, getting embarrassed by Air Force, Nevada, Florida State, and Utah State. Bronco decided to take over the defensive coordinator duties shortly after, and led his team to a 5-2 record down the stretch. The Cougars were actually lining up to kick the winning field goal in rivalry game, before Brandon Burton blocked it, and blocked the Cougars chance at a winning regular season.

However the strides made by the defense in the second half of the season, have greatly improved the Cougars.

The Miners of UTEP however started the season on a bit of a roll, starting with a 5-1 record. However, as the season progressed the Miners suffered a few injuries and come to New Mexico losing 5 of the last 6 games. The Miners rank in the middle of the pack in most major statistical categories, not really doing anything great, but not being bad at anything either. Depending on how healthy they are, they should be able to hang in the game for a while, but if BYU plays the way they did down the stretch, they should be able to separate themselves in the final quarter, to secure a winning record overall on the year.

Let's Go Bowling

The New Mexico Bowl isn't the only bowl on the Cougars minds this season, as it was announced yesterday that BYU has accepted bowl bids for 2012, and 2013 season, In 2012 they will face the MWC 2nd team in the Poinsettia Bowl. In 2013 they are scheduled to face the 6th ranked Pac-12 Team in the Kraft Fight Hunger Bowl.

Both of these bowls have a payout of 750,000 dollars, but unlike any bowl they've had the last few years, BYU doesn't have to share it's purse.

A couple of thoughts. First. Both of these bowls are lesser bowls than the Las Vegas Bowl. The Vegas Bowl Committee, has not been shy in their love of the Cougars, as the fans sell out that stadium every time they are there. So why was a deal not reached with them? BYU, and especially Coach Mendenhall has not been shy in voicing their displeasure over the Las Vegas Bowl. Did the Cougars not want to work a deal with them? Figuring that 100% of 750,000 beats going back to Vegas, or did the MWC step in and refuse to give up their spot to the Cougars.

Secondly, this continues a tradition the Poinsettia Bowl has, and the Fight Hunger Bowl has started to have of scheduling Independents. The Poinsettia Bowl has long had an every other year agreement with Navy to be the MWC opponent. Navy is facing off against San Diego State this year. The Fight Hunger bowl has Army, Navy, and BYU for

it's next three years. This seems to show, that right now, BYU is just another Army/Navy in the eyes of the Bowl committees. I'm not sure that is exactly the perception BYU is hoping for.

Of course all of the above bowl agreements are not in play if BYU clinches a BCS bowl, or fails to be bowl eligible.

2011 Regular Season

We'll go over this in more detail next week with the BYU Review/Preview, but they Cougars announced their 2011 Regular Season Schedule. Cougar fans better get in all the jokes about Utah's soft schedule while they can, because the schedule for the Cougars is not much better. They do face Ole Miss, Texas, Utah, and Oregon State. But then the final 8 games are worse than any MWC Conference schedule could ever create.

The Cougars only hope is that Texas rebounds from what was a disappointing 5-7 season. Texas must replace 4 coaches on it's staff, including defensive coordinator Will Muschamp, but Texas is still Texas, and should be a strong opponent.

While it's understandable that BYU had to scrounge together a schedule for the next couple years, their scheduling is going to have to improve drastically, if BYU wants to stay relevant as an independent.

Bowl Season Begins

While they may be irrelevant, the bowl games are still fun to watch. BYU may start it off this Saturday, but they aren't alone. Also on Saturday is the uDrove Humanitarian Bowl which features the Boise State smurf turf. Oh and Northern Illinois will be playing Fresno State, as well as the R+L Carriers New Orleans Bowl pitting Ohio vs. Troy. Monday is Beef-O-Brady's St. Petersburg Bowl which has Southern Mississippi playing against the first AQ Bowl team of the year, Louisville.

Wednesday is the Vegas Bowl, which we'll preview next week.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 09:34

Thursday, December 9, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

So the Bowls have been announced, and contrary to popular belief, the BCS didn't get it right with their matchup. It's impossible to get it right when you are choosing only two teams. Especially when at least 3 teams are undefeated.

Meanwhile the BCS had a bad week, that started with a dominant 4 loss team earning an automatic qualifying while a 1 loss riff-raff was left out, and has continued with one of their computer rankings being shown to be incorrect, and shining a light on the fact that there is no transparency or contingency plans.

Locally the Utes got bad news, and then got their bowl announcement. The Utes will put up their 9 game win streak against the toughest opponent of the stretch. The Cougars meanwhile kick off the post season with a battle of two teams trying to get winning records. The Big One

Honestly I can buy the argument that Oregon and Auburn should be playing in the National Championship game. Where I have a problem is the fact, that TCU also deserves to play in that game. I think Oregon is by far the best team. I think Auburn would get worked by TCU. Unfortunately the Big Crappy System cannot handle 3 or more undefeated teams. And of course, the non-aq never stood a chance to get in that game.

TCU's Consolation Prize

TCU didn't get into the Championship game, but they will get to play in "The Granddaddy of Them All". The Rose Bowl is arguably the most well known bowl out there. It's probably the only non championship bowl that is still relevant. It is a great honor for TCU to be able to play in that bowl. However, the people who say TCU should be happy about their consolation prize are morons. TCU should be playing for the whole enchilada.

Your Powerful Automatic Qualifiers

Boise State went 11-1 and gets a crappy bowl. Nevada went 12-1 and gets a crappy bowl. In automatic qualifying conferences Michigan State went 11-1 and gets to go to a crappy bowl. Heck Temple went 8-4 and doesn't get to go to a bowl game at all.

All of the above are made even worse by the fact that the University of Connecticut won the Big East automatic qualifier, and gets to go to the Fiesta Bowl, despite the fact that they went 2-2 out of conference, and finished the season in a 3 way tie for the Big East, and had the most losses of those three teams.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I present your 4 loss, Big East Co-Champion, Automatic Qualifier.

More BCS Mess

On Monday, the day after the Rankings were announced, and bowl matchups set, it was discovered that one of the computers used in the BCS were wrong. They had left out a FCS playoff game. This exclusion was enough to cause Boise State to move up to 10, and LSU to move down to 11.

Some will say it didn't have an effect since neither team were in a BCS Bowl. The MWC however counters that they are trying for AQ status, and Boise counts for them.

Give the Colley Matrix credit, they are the only one of the 6 BCS computers that makes their formula public. This brings up a few big questions. Since there is no checks and balances to make sure that the computers are correct, how do we know this hasn't happened before? Why are the formulas so secret? Are they secret so that they can be finagled with if necessary. The BCS doesn't have much credibility to begin with, what little it did have is now out the window.

Their needs to be transparency, not just with the Computers, but with the Coaches poll as well, and not just in the final week. All votes should be made public.

Start the Season

After starting the season 2-4, the BYU Cougars ended the regular season on Brandon Burton's blocked field goal, and a 6-6 record. It was enough to earn them a bowl appearance. The Cougars will actually start the bowl season off on December 18th in the New Mexico Bowl. They will get to face former WAC Rival, UTEP Miners, a team going in the opposite direction as the Cougars by losing 5 of their last 6 games.

Viva Las Vegas

Thanks to Burton's Block, the Utes are going to the Vegas Bowl. With them they bring their 9 game winning streak. However they put that streak up against the most difficult opponent they have faced during that stretch, thanks to ESPN working a deal to get Boise State as the opponent.

Due to a lack of Pac-10 bowl teams, this traditional Pac-10 vs. MWC matchup looked like it wouldn't be happening. Instead we get a future Pac-12 team versus a future MWC team.

Will Cain Be Able?

To make the game even more difficult for the Utes, it was announced that Jordan Wynn, who had been suffering with a shoulder injury since the Iowa State game, and had it re-injured against BYU, will miss the game, due to shoulder surgery. The surgery was necessary in order to get Wynn back for next season.

This means that Terrance Cain, will get one last chance to redeem himself.

Next Week

Next week we will preview BYU's New Mexico Bowl matchup, and give a review of their season.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 15:50

Thursday, December 2, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

And thus ended the third age. And how else would this age end, than with a game going down to the wire. In a rivalry that has the most 7 point or fewer games since 1997, this year's version wasn't any different. After suffering through Harline being open, Magic Happening on 4th and 18, and the Blue Streak the last few years, Utah finally ended up with some magic of their own, thanks to mid week film study pointing out a hole in the Cougar field goal unit. Blocked!

After 59 minutes and 56 seconds of gameplay, BYU who had led most of the game was trailing by one, with the score 16-17, when they lined up for a game winning Mitch Payne 43 yard field goal. The Utes desperately needed to block the attempt. And thanks to mid-week game film study, they knew BYU was weak on the right side, so they moved speedy Brandon Burton to that side. What happened next will join Harline, Magic, Blue Streak, 34-31, Kaneshiro's Doink, and all the other memorable moments in this rivalries lore.

Burton came off the edge, got his hand on the ball and the Utes covered it up to seal the victory, as the Utes, and Ute Fans became enveloped by the joy of victory, while those of the Blue persuasion were left with the agony of losing a game in which they had held the other team scoreless for 3 quarters.

Of course not all BYU fans wanted to admit that their team blewa 13-0 lead, and rather than put the blame on their team, they would rather look elsewhere for answers.

Under Review

Seven Weeks ago, the San Diego Aztecs were robbed against BYU by a horrible replay call on what was a J.J. DiLuigi fumble. While the Aztec fans all whined, the truth is that call is not what won BYU the game. During my write up for that week, I didn't even mention the call, because of the fact that BYU did enough else right to win, and San Diego State did enough else wrong to lose.

This weekend, Karma came back against BYU. Leading 16-10 with five and a half minutes left in the game, Jordan Wynn threw an interception to Brandon Bradley. During the return, Kendrick Moeai ripped the ball out of Bradley's hands and gave the ball back to Utah. Two plays later Utah scored what would be the winning TD.

The fumble was replayed and ultimately upheld. It shouldn't have been. While it wasn't as atrociously wrong as the San Diego State game, it still seemed to be pretty obvious that Bradley's knee was down a couple of frames before the ball was ripped out. What the replay official saw that made him leave the call as is, I don't know. This replay combined with the SDSU game, showed a major flaw in the replay system. You can't ask officials to overturn the calls of their official buddies. It should be a third party.

While that call did swing momentum into Utah's favor, and Utah scored two plays later, don't believe for half as long as Bradley's knee was down before the ball came out, that it cost BYU the game. Much like there were plenty of other reasons that BYU beat the Aztecs, this fumble replay isn't even in the top 7 reasons why Utah beat BYU.

Here are those reasons.

1a. The Block

The obvious reason that the Cougars lost the game was that Brandon Burton blocked Mitch Payne's game winning field goal attempt. However, what hasn't gotten enough play in my opinion is the fact, that block was made possible by something found mid week by the Utah coaching staff.

During film review they found a weakness in the Cougars field goal unit. Knowing they absolutely had to have the block, they swapped Burton to the opposite side he usually mans during field goal block attempts. Coach Whit just told him to get hit that ball, and the next thing Burton knew his hand was stinging.

Now the reason this play doesn't get the number one spot by itself is because...

1b. Cougars Forgoe The Figgie

...the field goal would never have been required by the Cougars had Bronco done the smart thing earlier in the third quarter, and kicked a field goal, instead of going for it on 4th and inches. With a little more than twelve minutes to go in the third quarter, the Cougars, aided greatly by a Terrance Cain interception, faced 4th and inches at the Utah 14 yard line. Now I understand the desire to go for it on such a short distance, and possibly break the opponents will.

However at this point it was only a 6-0 lead for the Cougars. A TD By the Utes gives them the lead. Points were at such a premium so far this game, that the only sane option is to kick the field goal, and make it a two score game.

Instead, Bronco outsmarted himself. First he thought he could break the Utes and went for it on 4th and inches. Then it was Offensive Coordinator Robert Anai's turn to outsmart himself. Instead of running it up the gut with his power running back Brian Kariya, or with his workhorse J.J. Di Luigi, or even QB sneaking it for a measly few inches, Anai called a play action pass, which Brandon Burton knocked away from the receiver, giving the ball back to the Utes.

That field goal there would have meant that Utah would have been trailing 17-19, and the Cougars wouldn't have had to have a field goal to win the game.

3. Utah Wanted It More

Most of the time when a game comes down to the wire, the team that wants it more, is the one that comes out victoriously. In this game, Utah wanted it more.

4 moments that prove that Utah wanted it more.

In the 4th quarter, after a BYU fumble, Jordan Wynn threw the ball to DeVonte Christopher. Brian Logan had good coverage, but knowing that Logan was just 5'6" Wynn threw it up making it a jump ball. As both Players jumped for the ball, it seemed as if Logan would be able to do just enough to prevent the catch. However, Christopher reached around Logan, tipped the ball up, caught the tip, and fell into the end zone, all while keeping his hands under the ball to prevent it from hitting the ground. Brian Logan had stellar coverage on the play, Christopher just wanted the ball more.

Brandon Burton's block, was a player needing to make a play, and going out and making the play.

Even though Bradley's knee was down, Moeai ripping the ball out of Bradley's hands was a moment where two men battle, and Moeai's sheer will won out.

And finally Eddie Wide's performance all game. Wide suffered an injury in the first half. It was only worsened thanks to a Horse Collar tackle in the second half, yet wide kept coming back into the game, shrugging off the injury, and being the workhorse for Utah.

Another way you can tell that Utah wanted it more...

4. BYU Unable To Convert Field Goals Into Touchdowns

Four times during the game BYU had the ball at the Utah 26 or closer. Of those four drives, only one went for a touchdown. Twice the Cougars were within the Ute 15 yard line. They ended up with 3 points from those two drives.

BYU had plenty of times to score TD's, and put this game out of reach. They just could not do it, instead they ended up kicking field goals, which let Utah climb it's way back in the game.

5. Halftime Adjustments

Utah's playcalling in the first half was terrible. Aaron Roderick continued a 4 game slide that has been worse than QB Jordan Wynn's. Apparently Roderick forgot that he had two stud senior running backs, because for the majority of the first half, the Utes abandoned the run game. And when they did try to run it, they just called simple dive plays. Utes went into halftime with 9 running back rushes for 11 yards.

After halftime, partially precipitated by a lack of trust in now playing Terrance Cain, the Utes re-discovered their running game. In the second half the Utes ran 15 times for 78 yards. Not only that, but they used both running backs in the passing game as well coming out of the back field.

The re-focus on the running backs sparked the offense, and was a good reason why the Utes, who were stuck with

miserable field position in the first half, was able to start moving the ball.

Defensively, the Utes focused more on the run game for BYU. The Cougars had amassed 47 rushing yards in the first half. This running game had allowed Heaps to get comfortable and is what allowed the Cougars to take a 6-0 halftime lead. The second half, the Cougars only got 18 yards, and dared Heaps to try and beat them. Fortunately for them, the Coaches didn't seem to really trust Heaps with this job, until they absolutely had to, and even then not enough. With the running game stuffed, BYU struggled offensively, and weren't able to keep switching field position, and pin the Utes deep, as they had been in the first half.

A key to Utah stopping the run, was the realization that BYU didn't do anything but run the ball out of its I-Formation set. So everytime in the second half when the Cougars would line up in this set, Utah would load the box and get the stop.

6. BYU Didn't Trust Heaps

As mentioned above, BYU didn't put their faith in "Saint" Jake. When they'd get deep into Utah territory, they were more than happy to try and play it safe, and settle for field goals. Only once did they actually take a risk, and as mentioned above, it was a terrible time to do it. That said, on the 4th and inches, Heaps actually made a good, quick, throw under pressure. Brandon Burton just made a better play.

The lack of trust was never more evident than on BYU's final drive. BYU got the ball with about 4:20 left in the game. First two plays of the drive were runs. They both got stuffed, and a minute was now off of the clock. With no other choice, BYU put the ball in their freshman QB's hands. And he delivered. 5 play later, 4 of which were passes, BYU was sitting at the Utah 24 yard line.

Apparently BYU was fine settling for a 40+ yard field goal, as out went the WR's, and in came the I-Formation. 3 plays later BYU was at the Utah 25, and Mitch Payne was coming out for a 42 yard field goal.

Sure BYU couldn't afford a turnover, or a sack that would have taken them out of field goal range. Sure all BYU needed was a field goal to win, and sure Mitch Payne was already 3 for 3 on the day, including 2 from 42+. And yes Mitch Payne is the all time kicking scorer in MWC history. Mitch Payne has only ever missed 4 kicks less than 40 yards in his career. However once he goes beyond that 40 yard line, his numbers drop. In his career, he is 9/16 on kicks between 40 and 49 yards. So despite having made 2 already that day, a 42 yard field goal was no gimme.

BYU should have trusted Heaps to get about 5 more yards. Instead, as they had done all day long, they took the ball away from their QB, and played not to make a mistake. Which in and of itself, was the mistake.

It's kind of funny that although Heaps was the better of the QB's, he was the one who wasn't trusted. While the one who struggled, but had the most trust of his coaching staff is the one who became victorious.

7. Couldn't Stop Utah

Bad calls are part of the game. It's the human element. There is no way that officials will always get it right. You hope those missed calls don't have a huge effect, but in truth rarely has a missed call actually cost a team a game. In this case there were more than five minutes in the game, and the Cougars had a 6 point lead. Utah still had to score.

That's just what they did. BYU wasn't able to deal with the adversity. On the next play they gave up a huge pass down the middle to TE Dallin Rogers that set the ball up on the 3 yard line. On the very next play, Matt Asiata scored. One stop is all BYU had to do, and that fumble call was moot. On some earlier bad calls that went against the Utes, Utah was able to overcome and make a stop. BYU failed to do so here.

8. Still Plenty Of Time

There was no guarantee that even had the officials got that call correct, that BYU would have held on. There was over five minutes left in the game at the time of the call. Although BYU was just coming off of a 15 play drive, that was aided by a controversial replay of its own, BYU really hadn't been moving the ball that well in the second half. Their other drives that half had combined for 16 plays, 58 yards, 1 TD, 1 punt, 1 fumble, and 1 turnover on downs. This despite two drives starting inside the Utah 23 yard line. Momentum had clearly swung in the favor of the Utes.

Utah also has the ability to strike quickly. Their first TD was a 1 play, 37 yard TD pass. Their 2nd TD ended up being a 3 play 38 yard drive. All through the year they have shown the ability to move down the field with quickness. The week before, the Utes had two 3 play, 60+ yard TD drives.

The Utes also had all three timeouts. So say Utah had forced BYU to a three and out, and BYU had taken 1 1/2, or 2 minutes off the clock. The Utes would have gotten the ball with 3 1/2, or 4 minutes still to go in the game. With three timeouts, and the college timing rules that stop the clock on first downs. And considering that a three and out would have really had momentum on the Utes side, who's to say Utah still doesn't score a TD. Only this time there wouldn't be any time on the clock for BYU to mount a drive.

9. The Other Calls

Pinning all the complaints on that one call, also discounts the fact that even though there weren't many penalties called, officiating in the game wasn't at the highest level. It also ignores the assistance that BYU received from three other calls during the game. The first half was war of field position. What really assisted BYU was the ability to pin Utah deep in their own territory. In the second half, BYU made a pass deep to Devin Mahina, and he was hit hard by Brian Blechen. Blechen was flagged for a "hit above the shoulders", aka a Helmet to Helmet hit. Replays would show that Blechen did nothing wrong. Blechen hit with his arms extended into Mahina's chest. The only helmet contact came from the fact that Mahina was in the air, and came down onto Blechen.

Mahina ended up dropping the pass. This play was a third down. Instead of forcing a punt from BYU's side of the field, the Cougars got a new set of downs in Utah territory. They would eventually punt and force Utah to start at the 10 yard line.

Later in the second half, Eddie Wide ran for a first down. On the tackle out of bounds, the BYU defender clearly grasped Eddie Wide under the shoulder pad for a horse collar tackle. No flag, even though it hurt Wide, and he was down for a few minutes. Terrance Cain would eventually throw an interception on this drive, but who knows how play calling would have been different in the 15 yards from this penalty had put the Utes in BYU territory.

The above two examples came on drives where neither team scored. Only field possession was affected. However the third one did occur on a drive where BYU had scored. All second half BYU had been struggling to move the ball as well as they did in the first half. On 2nd and 10 from the BYU 31, Heaps was under pressure, scrambled and eventually threw a pass to Devin Mahina on the sideline. Mahina bobbled the ball as he fell to the ground. The play was ruled a reception. It was sent for review. During the review you can see Mahina Bobble it twice while his feet were in bounds, than Mahina fell to the ground on his back. As he hits his back, you can see once more the Mahina bobble the ball, still trying to get control. However since he was already out of bounds, and a WR who goes to the ground in the process of making a catch, must control the ball throughout the process, the play should have been ruled an incomplete pass. Instead BYU had a first down, and what would become a field goal drive was extended.

This replay was as obvious as the fumble replay. It was also just as blown. However much like BYU failed to stop Utah, Utah failed to prevent BYU on the rest of the drive. BYU got a field goal out of the drive.

The truth is as bad as these calls were, and as bad as the fumble call was, they were not even close to being the reason Utah won, and BYU lost. Utah won because they wanted it more. BYU lost because they made enough mistakes to allow the Utes victory. BYU fans should be looking at their team, and their coaches, not the men in stripes.

Be Careful What You Wish For

Despite coming off of a career week against the Aztecs, many Utah fans were foolishly calling for Terrance Cain to play in place of Jordan Wynn. Obviously Wynn had struggled the second half of the season. There were many reasons for this, some of which were Wynn's fault, some of which weren't. Wynn never was comfortable against TCU, and became gun shy. You could also tell that the constant booing by Utah fans, had started to affect Wynn mentally.

However during that stretch where Wynn had slumped, the Utah offensive line had suffered some it's worst weeks of the year with protection. The WR's were also turning into BYU WR's by not being able to catch the balls Wynn did throw. Worst of all was that Aaron Roderick was in the middle of a stretch of terrible play calling.

But football is a what have you done for me lately business, and fans don't want excuses, so when Wynn struggled in the first half, out came the boo-birds, and the foolish calls for Terrance Cain to start. As the Ute offense came out for the first offensive drive of the second half, fans got their wish, as Cain took the field, and was cascaded by Cheers. Terrance Cain would then go to show fans they need to be careful what they wish for.

Terrance Cain is a good quarterback. He could be a successful starter for about 40-50 division 1 schools. However he isn't as good in a complicated offense such as Utah runs. He has never had the grasp of the offense the way Wynn has.

And remember, I am someone who said it would be a mistake if Utah burned Wynn's redshirt last year.

Cain came in, and his first three passes were as bad as any Wynn had thrown that day. He hopped one off the ground, then his height caused issues as his second pass was batted. Finally on his third pass, he locked onto a WR, then threw a pass he never should have thrown, as it ended up in BYU's hands.

On his next possession Cain once again threw a pass he never should have thrown. Fortunately for him BYU ran out of room and was unable to get the interception in bounds. You could tell that Utah coaches didn't trust Cain, as the playcalling from there on out consisted of run plays, and short, short passes, as Cain led the Utes on a bit of a drive. However, with BYU realizing that the Utes didn't trust Cain, they started stopping these passes, so Utah called a pass play. Cain proceeded to throw an even worse interception than the one previously.

Two drives, two interceptions, and BYU now led 13-0. Wynn was re-inserted, shook off the benching, and led Utah to the victory.

So now the question is what about Wynn for next year. Part of Wynn's struggles were that the Utah coaches trusted him a little too much. Combined with the excess of trust for Wynn, was the fact that there was a lack of trust in Cain. Utah would consistently put the game in Wynn's hands, and go without the run for long stretches of games. While this would work against the dredges of the nation, against better teams it didn't work.

Don't forget that Wynn is also just a sophomore. As a freshman, there isn't a lot of pressure put on you. The playbook is slimmed down, and the play calls are simpler. However with a year under his belt, the coaches started asking more of Wynn this season. While he handled it well to begin with, when adversity struck, and the fans started turning against Wynn, he didn't quite have the mental fortitude to shake it off.

The other problem were the unreal expectations, and praise leveled on Wynn. During the season, even Whittingham said this offense had the potential to be the greatest in Utah history. Comparison's to Brian Johnson and Alex Smith were being heaped on him. Alex Smith was a rare college talent. But many forget that Brian Johnson didn't become the Brian Johnson we all think about until midway through his senior season. Utah fans didn't fully trust Brian Johnson as he started his senior campaign. Johnson didn't start to show the leadership that he is known for until the Air Force game of that final season.

Next year Wynn will be a junior. He will probably be the best QB on the roster, and he still has all the tools, and talents to become a really good QB for Utah. However, the job should not just be given to him next season. He needs to earn it in spring and fall camp. Utah also needs to help him out, by making sure they get a good running back recruit, and making sure not to forget about him. Wynn also needs to bulk up, and learn to take a hit while running the ball.

Speaking Of Unreal Praise

Jake Heaps had a good game for what was his first taste of the rivalry. While he struggled early, including a few bad passes, one of which ended up as an interception, Heaps hung in there, and got comfortable with the game. On that final drive Heaps led his team down the field with confidence.

It was also during this final drive that the Mtn started talking about a conversation with Bronco Mendenhall they had earlier in the season during the week leading up to San Diego State. According to the Mtn, Mendenhall had said that Heaps had shown enough in practice to make him believe that not only did Heaps have the possibility to become one of the best QB's in BYU history, but that he believed he would become the best.

Heaps had a solid freshman season. He showed a lot of talent, but he also has some holes in his game. However, this is a dangerous road of comparisons, and expectations to start putting on Heaps. BYU has a proud history of QB's. One would have to be really good, to beat out the likes of Jim McMahon, Steve Young, Robbie Bosco, Ty Detmer, Marc Wilson, Gifford Nielson, and Steve Sarkisian, who currently top the list of all time QB's. They along with Virgil Carter are the eight All American QB's BYU has produced. Heck, BYU's all time winning QB was Max Hall, and he wouldn't even be considered a top eight QB in BYU history. One might even say that Brandon Doman, and John Beck, who aren't part of the All-American crew, were better than Hall, meaning Hall isn't even a top 10 QB.

Heaps will now enter his sophomore season, as the guy, hopefully. One can never trust Bronco fully not to make the stupid decision to reinstate the two QB system. However, the sophomore season will also mean, more trust and responsibilities for Heaps. Heaps will have to start getting all of his offensive weapons involved, and not just rely on J.J. DiLuigi. Heaps has the talent, but let's make him earn the praise first.

View From The Red Zone

The crowd was a mixed bag for this rivalry game. On the plus side they were loud, and rambunctious. You could see they were wild enough, that multiple times during broadcast, they made the tv cameras shake. They kept that emotion going through most of the game.

On the negative side, was the ridiculous treatment of Wynn, especially coming off of Wynn's play the week before. Fans were also "rewarded" for their treatment of Wynn by the appearance of Cain. While Mad Giggler and I were vocal about it being a mistake when Cain came in. I did find the cheers for Wynn's return funny though.

As we entered the fourth quarter, and Utah got to 10 points, there started to be a sense of inevitability. We knew what was going to happen. When BYU was driving for their field goal to make it 16-10, Giggler turned to me and said, "Here we go, they'll get a field goal, and then Utah will drive down for the winning TD." Even as trouble started to occur and Utah had to punt, that sense of inevitability was still there.

However, when Utah did score and everyone realized there were four plus minutes on the clock, the Ghosts of Harline, Collie, and Andrew George entered the stadium. And especially as BYU started to drive for that final field goal attempt. A sense of inevitability turned into a bit of dread, of here we go again. While the crowd stayed loud, there were a lot of prayers as BYU lined up for that final kick, begging the Football Gods, to please allow Utah to get one of these last second miracles.

After the game fans stormed the field. I was one of them. And while I was down there in the midst of the chaos I ran into a few of the players. However it was Brian Blechen that stood out to me. As Blechen was trying to make it to the middle of the group with the rest of his teammates, he was constantly asked for people to take a picture with him. Blechen stopped and let all of them take pictures with him. Never once trying to hurry them up.

While I was watching him, he stopped and noticed my face paint job, done by my wife. He shook my hands and complimented the face paint. So I just wanted to share with my wife the player love. But overall I was impressed with Blechen. Sure it was a short sample size, but from what I could see, is that despite being as successful as he was in his freshman year, he was still very nice, and humble. It's going to be fun watching him.

Upon Re-Watching

I don't know if it was because I knew the outcome, but as I watched the game twice more, BYU didn't seem to dominate the game as much as I thought they had, while in the stands.

I was surprised to see that Utah led the stats at both the end of the first half, and the game. I did remember Utah playing sloppy during the game, and maybe because I focused on Utah during the game, I was kind of surprised to see that BYU also played very sloppily.

Interestingly enough, penalty wise this was one of the cleanest games in years. However, as has seemed to be the rule lately in the rivalry, it was still very sloppy. This wasn't a case of one team dominating and letting it slip through their hands. Upon a third total viewing (one in the stands, two at home), this was a game, where both teams made enough mistakes to lose, while only one made the plays to win. Kind of a like last year, only with a different team winning.

I wonder what it is about rivalry games that cause the sloppiness?

Proof The Rivalry Will Survive

One of the biggest questions as we enter the fourth age, is whether this rivalry will be able to survive, and remain one of the more intense, and best rivalries in the nation, now that both teams are not in the same conference.

This game is proof that it will. There wasn't anything really important on the line this year. Neither team had a chance at the Conference title. There wasn't a BCS Bowl or a National Championship on the line. All that was on the line was a better record, and a possible better bowl.

Yet this game was still an intense, dogfight all the way to the end. While the game needs to be moved away from the third week of the season, and moved to the season opener, as long as both teams remain competitive, this rivalry will be just fine.

Bus Crash

Boise State's bus ride to the national championship came to a screeching halt in Reno, Nevada this week. Despite being ahead 24-7 at halftime, the Broncos let the Wolf Pack back in the game.

Kyle Brotzman lined up for a game winning kick at the end of regulation. He missed it. Boise, then was unable to get a TD in overtime, and again lined up for field goal. Brotzman would later admit the first kick was still on his mind, as he sailed the second kick wide. Nevada would connect on their field goal and had the Broncos the first loss of the season.

The true hypocrisy of the BCS will be shown next Sunday when the bowl selections are released and a one loss Boise team is not selected as an at-large team for a BCS Bowl, but a one loss Ohio State will be. This will be made even worse by the fact, that Boise's strength of schedule, the one thing that the power conferences always rely on to say that Non-AQ's are unworthy, is in fact better than Ohio State's.

Season's End

With the end of the Holy War, the season for the Utes and Cougars are done. They both have accepted bowl bids, Utah to Vegas, and BYU to New Mexico, and next week we'll find out opponents. Over the next few weeks I'll review their individual seasons, as well as preview the bowls. We'll discuss the 2011 outlook for both teams. We'll also review the entire season as a whole, and make fun of my terrible preseason predictions. We will also show off my wife's work this season with a year of game faces.

And Finally

I don't mind BYU, in fact I love them. I love everything about them. I love their program, their fans. I love everything. I think the whole university and their fans and the organization is classy.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 14:15

Tuesday, November 23, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

So quick question. Who books the flights for the Utes, and why would they put the defense on a flight that didn't get to San Diego until halftime? The Utes finally woke up and shook off two and a half week's of doldrums by coming back from an early 17 point 2nd quarter deficit to beat the Aztecs. The cool thing about this game, was the I got to see my first ever Hail Mary work live as I watched the game.

The Cougars also did what was expected and dispatched of the Lobos to become bowl eligible.

But honestly who cares about all that. This week is about one thing, and one thing only. It's rivalry week. The game that defines seasons is upon us. We all know the history, and the memorable moments. We know about Doinks, Magic, Shutouts, and BCS Busting. However, due to major changes for both teams next season, this isn't just any rivalry game, this is the end of an age.

Actually we've come to the battle, or Holy War, to end the third age. Third Age?

This rivalry has been going on for so long, that it can be evenly divided into three distinct ages. Each age has a specific event that causes the change to a new age. Each age also has a specific feel to it. So what are the ages? See below

The First Age

Also known as the age that no one remembers. This is the beginning of the rivalry. The old times. All that's really left of this age, is stories, old newspaper articles, and if we're lucky, really old and grainy black and white video footage.

It started April 6 1896. Sorry BYU fans, but the years as Brigham Young Academy do in fact count. It was the longest of the ages so far, lasting until 1972. It was an age dominated by the Red, with the Utes going 41-8-4. Those 4 ties are the only 4 ties in the rivalries history.

The Second Age

The second age started with the hiring of LaVell Edwards. Years before Kyle Whittingham would cross enemy lines to be coach at the U, the Cougars hired a University of Utah graduate to become their head coach. LaVell brought in a new era of football to the Cougars, and in doing so changed the rivalry for good. No longer were the Cougars the whipping boys of the Utes. Instead, the roles were completely reversed, as starting in his very first year, LaVell took the Cougars to a 16-2 record over the next 18 years. This was the time during Utah football that beating BYU really was the only thing that mattered.

The Third Age

While it wasn't immediately apparent, the Third Age began in 1990. This was the hiring of Ron McBride. At first it seemed business as usual as the Cougars won the first 3 matchups of this age. But McBride was slowly building a program that would return Utah to relevance. It was the work of McBride, that eventually led to Urban Meyer, and the success the Utes still seem today. It was McBride who originally made The Utes competitive again. Not only in the rivalry, but nationally.

This age has been a very hard fought age, with the rivalry all square at 10-10.

With the Utes, and Cougars leaving the conference and going their separate ways, the Rivalry will continue, but it will definitely be a new age of the rivalry.

This Year's Breakdown

So how does this year's matchup break down? How do these two teams compare? Last year, I broke this game down, comparing both teams, by position, by schedule, by stats, and by coaching. It was one of my favorite posts last year, so I'm doing it again.

Statistics

Once again, I'll spend just a little bit of time on stats, because as they say, "Stats don't lie, Statisticians do!" Besides, when the game starts, stats don't mean jack, and are only a comfort for those looking for moral victories to soothe the agony of defeat.

BYU, helped mainly by the early struggles rank towards the bottom in most categories. They rack up 186.9 yards per game in the air, but get 172.8 yards on the ground. The Cougars have turned this into 24.7 points per game, but have given up 21.8 points to the opposition.

Utah, helped mainly by the early easy schedule, rank quite a bit higher. They get 251.7 yards through the air and nearly match the Cougars with 162.9 yards on the ground. The Utes are 14th in the nation with 37.3 points scored, and thanks mainly to TCU, Notre Dame, and San Diego State, the Utes give up 20.2 points to the opposition.

Advantage: Utah

Non Conference Schedule

BYU had one of the toughest non conference schedules in the nation. They went 1-3 in non conference play with the only victory coming at home in the opener against now 4-6 Washington. The rest of the opponents had their way against BYU with Florida State, Nevada, and Utah State beating the Cougars by a combined score of 92-39. Of those three opponents, only Utah State won't go to a bowl. Overall BYU's non conference opponents are currently 26-17, having gotten that record against teams themselves that have gone 244-222

The Utes on the other hand, unfortunately had an easier schedule. Though not for trying. They started the season with a win against mediocre, but probably Big East champ Pitt. Their only non conference loss was against just barely bowl eligible Notre Dame. In between they beat San Jose State, and Iowa State. Overall their non conference opponents are currently 18-26 against opponents that went 305-172

While Utah's opponents played a tougher schedule, BYU played the tougher non conference schedule.

Advantage: BYU

Conference Opponents

So how do the two teams compare against common opponents?

TCU: TCU beat both teams, but BYU was more competitive in their 31-3 loss than the Utes 47-7 dismantling. - Advantage: BYU

San Diego State: BYU was lucky to win helped mainly by a terrible call and review on a fumble, however BYU did dominate the first half of their 24-21 victory. Meanwhile SDSU jumped out to an early 17 point lead, by torching a Utah defense in the first half that had more holes than the Titanic. However they couldn't stop Utah themselves, as the Utes came back for a 38-34 victory. - Advantage: Push

Air Force: Falcons dominated BYU winning 35-14, while the Utes and Falcons enjoyed another close game with Utah coming out ahead 28-23. - Advantage: Utah

UNLV: Both teams dominated the Rebels. BYU by the score of 55-7, Utah by the score of 38-10. - Advantage: BYU

Colorado State: Another team dominated by both. BYU 49-10, Utah 59-6. - Advantage: Utah

New Mexico: A team beaten by everyone but Wyoming. BYU beat them last week 40-7, while Utah destroyed them early on 56-3. - Advantage: Utah

Wyoming: BYU escaped against Wyoming 25-20, while Utah had a tougher than expected 30-6 victory. - Advantage Utah

Overall Utah performed better in 4 conference games, compared to 2 for BYU with 1 push.

Advantage: Utah

Quarterback

Finally we are talking about the players. BYU started the season, moronically, with a 2 QB system. However an injury to Riley Nelson paved the way for True Freshman Jake Heaps. Heaps has been putting up the numbers the last few weeks against the lesser competition and on the year he is 172 of 312, for 1,824 yards, 10 TD's and 7 Interceptions. He has slowly started to seem a bit more comfortable with the offense. However, he is a true freshman, and as such, is prone to mistakes, especially when pressured.

Jordan Wynn struggled the 3 weeks, before having a great game against San Diego State. Wynn will press at times, and can make the mistake. While he didn't have the season that it looked for a while he would have, he's easily a top 3 QB in the conference, and may even be top 2, depending on your feelings about Ryan Lindley. For the year Wynn is 173 of 269, for 2,135 yards and 16 TD's with 9 INT's.

The other part of this argument is Terrance Cain. If Wynn goes down, Cain has proven more than capable. While he may not have the control of the offense like Wynn, Cain is very efficient and less likely to make mistakes than Wynn. Not much is known about BYU's backup in James Lark.

Advantage: Utah

Runningbacks

BYU is probably deeper at running back with J.J. DiLuigi, Brian Kariya, and Josh Quezada. DiLuigi has become Heaps' safety valve, and primary target in the offense. DiLuigi is a speedster who must also be accounted for out of the backfield in the passing game, while Kariya is a North/South power runner. All three have a propensity to fumble the ball however.

Utah might not have the depth, but their 2 stars are better than all of the Cougars backs. Matt Asiata, and Eddie Wide III are both capable of being the starter, but they split the duties with the Utes. This makes both players fresher. Both backs can run up the middle, or on the edges, and both make plays in the passing game.

Advantage: Utah

Wide Receivers

For most of the season, BYU's WR's couldn't even catch a cold. Junior O'Neill Chambers was dismissed from the team twice. This leaves them with McKay Jacobsen, and Luke Ashworth carrying the bulk of the duties. Both have improved in the last couple weeks.

Utah doesn't have a single dominant WR, instead bringing out a whole bunch of speedsters. Jereme Brooks, Devonte Christopher, Luke Matthews, and Shaky Smithson all are threats to break a long pass.

Utah's depth wins this position

Advantage: Utah

Tight Ends

Tight End is historically a strong position for BYU. This year not so much. Andrew George and Dennis Pitta have given away to... well, not exactly sure what. Even BYU fans couldn't really tell you who their Tight Ends are. On the season Richard Wilson, Mike Muehlmann, Austin Holt and Devin Mahina have combined for 18 receptions. BYU doesn't use their TE's this year, instead loving the RB out on the flat this season.

At Utah, the TE actually lives. As coach Urban ignored the TE, instead opting for another fast WR. It's taken time but Utah has finally revived the position. Kendrick Moeai leads the way for the Utes, and is a threat in the middle of the field. However Utes also get good production out of Dallin Rogers, and Brad Clifford. Interesting fact about Clifford is that he's the only remaining member of the Fiesta Bowl team.

Last year if Utah threw to the TE it was probably a mistake. This year it's BYU's mistake whenever a pass to the TE happens.

Advantage: Utah

Offensive Line

Both teams have had consistency all year on their line. The Cougars line is anchored by preseason Playboy All-American Matt Reynolds. The Utes are centered around seniors Zane Taylor and Caleb Shlauderaff. All three of these players will be in the NFL next year. While both teams started off strong, not allowing a sack in the early games, the Cougars eventually started giving up the sacks. Starting with 8 against Florida State, the total for the season is 19 sacks. Utah however has maintained it's protection giving up a total of 7 sacks, one of which came against the second stringers at the end of the Notre Dame game.

Advantage: Utah

Defensive Line

BYU's defensive line took a big hit when Romney Fuga's season was ended thanks to a very cheap shot during the Nevada game. However since Bronco Mendenhall has taken over as Defensive Coordinator, the line play has improved led by Vic So'oto and Eathyn Manumaleuna. Outside of those two, the Cougars are young, and haven't been able to replace the leadership that was provided last year by Jan Jorgensen.

Utah however is deep on the Defensive Line. Utah likes to have a rotation of 12 players that includes, Derrick Shelby, Sealver Siliga, Christian Cox, Joe Kruger, Dave Kruger, Junion Tui'one, Star Lotuleilei and others. The Line is keyed on pressure coming from Siliga and Shelby.

The one weakness both teams share is they at times struggle to get pressure with just the front four.

Advantage: Utah

Linebackers

Both teams replaced three seniors at the Linebacker position this season. Cougars linebacking core is led by Jr Jordan Pendelton who unfortunately missed a few games earlier in the season with an injury. The future of the Cougar linebackers is Freshman Kyle Van Oy. That is as long as Van Oy can stay eligible both academically and through the Honor Code. Since being placed in the starting line up, it is a common occurrence to see Van Oy making plays and being around the ball.

The Utes have a bit of a no name line backing core. J.J. Williams was supposed to be the anchor of the squad but a foot injury has limited him to just two games. Instead the Utes bring out Chaz Walker, Matt Martinez, and Chad Manis with Trevor Reilly to spell them. The Utes linebackers aren't the studs they have been in past years, and are probably the weak point on the team.

Advantage: BYU

Safeties

Safety Andrew Rich is not only the best player on the Cougars Defense, but he nudges out Matt Reynolds as the best player on the Cougars. He flies around and is always willing to lay some wood. He's appeared on more than one injury report with a "full body contusion"

Robert Johnson is gone, and while true Freshman Brian Blechen looks to carry on the great tradition of Safety play at Utah, he is still learning. Blechen and Tap-Tap are both able to make great plays, but also are capable of making a coverage mistake.

While I think Blechen will eventually be a stud, Rich currently is a stud.

Advantage: BYU

Cornerbacks

I don't care how good a player is as a corner back, if he's only 5'6" than there has to be a better choice. Cougar staring Corner Brian Logan can make plays, and was a big part of the victory in last year's rivalry game, but he is a 5'6" corner.

Even Jereme Brooks is taller than he is. The rest of the Cornerbacks are young, and haven't shown much through the season.

Despite what's been a bad 3 game stretch for him, Brandon Burton is going to continue the Utes tradition of putting corners in the NFL. Burton is the best corner in the conference, and someone who is fully capable of shutting down a WR all by himself, like he did against Pitt's Baldwin. On the other side Lamar Chapman is also a very good cover guy, but prone to mistakes, however he is the teams leading sacker, as Utah likes to blitz with their corners. When the corners are on, the Utes' Man to Man scheme can really shut down a passing game.

Advantage: Utah

Special Teams

Both BYU and Utah have very reliable kickers, and both have punters who can be questionable at times. Utah has had a punt blocked three times.

The difference in this matchup is Shaky Smithson. Shaky is the nation's best punt returner, with 2 Td's this season, and 3 returns of greater than 70 yards. In the kickoff game, Smithson is joined by super speedster Reggie Dunn who has also returned a TD to the house.

Advantage: Utah

The Coaches

They will forever be linked. Ever since Kyle Whittingham said no to the Cougars, and instead chose the Utes, forcing the Cougars to go with Bronco as their second choice, these two have been forced to be compared against one another. I'm no different.

Bronco is 52-20, Kyle is 57-19

Bronco leads the Rivalry game at 3-2

Bronco is 3-2 in Bowl Games, Kyle is 6-0 (Kyle is recognized as Co-Head Coach for the 2005 Fiesta Bowl)

In Big games, which are games against TCU, The Rivalry Game, Bowl Games, Notre Dame, or any AQ School, or Ranked Team the teams, Bronco is 12-15, Kyle is 17-10

Bronco is 2-4 versus TCU on a 3 game losing streak, Kyle is 3-3 on a 2 game losing streak

High Point: Bronco - 2006-2007 2 consecutive years undefeated in conference, 11 wins both seasons, wins versus Oregon and UCLA in the Vegas Bowl. Kyle - 2008, 13-0, Sugar Bowl, Alabama. Enough Said.

Low Point: Bronco - The beginning of this season. The decision to go with two quarterbacks. The decision to stay with two quarterbacks an hour before Riley Nelson announced season ending surgery. Throwing his Anai and Doman under the bus about the 2 QB system. Kyle - At about halftime of the San Diego State game I would have said that what looked to be an ugly 3 game slide would have been Kyle's low point, but the Utes pulled that out, making the 2007 shutout loss to UNLV still the low point.

Personality: Bronco still doesn't have one. No, seriously. Is there anyway we can get a fundraiser together to buy him one? Kyle can often times be heard cracking jokes with the radio personalities. Doesn't sound like a robot reciting coach speak during his press conferences.

X-Factors: Bronco does double duty as the Defensive Coordinator and has seen improvement from that squad. However there are still many questions about Bronco's ability to make in game, and sometimes in season adjustments as evident from his team going into the fetal position offensively during last year's game in the second half. Also his coordinators are weak, with Anai as the Offensive Coordinator being a true Joke.

Kyle doesn't double up like Bronco, and can sometimes be a bit fiery. But Kyle is also the kind of player to run on the field and yank a player back to prevent a penalty. Offensive Coordinator Aaron Roderick is more creative than Anai, and Defensive Coordinator Kelani Sitake is comfortable now in his role. Kyle's teams tend to start slow while the Utes figure out the opponent and then make adjustments to overwhelm them.

Advantage: Utah

The Crowd

This game will be at Rice-Eccles Stadium, and thanks to Max Hall's rehearsed, and recycled comments after last year's game, the crowd is going to be in a frenzy. Ever since Max Hall's idiocy, Utah fans have laughed at him, and mock his

classless allegations by making it a rallying cry. While Max was trying to anger Utah fans, all he's done was given Utah fans something to laugh at and treat as a joke. Last year, in one fell swoop Max Hall symbolized all the stereotypes that Utah fans have about BYU and their fans. Look for plenty of references to Max Himself, to pride in classlessness, and to beverages being tossed.

When the game starts it will be a complete sellout including Standing Room only. And it will be loud. BYU's only chance it to jump out early and hope the crowd quiets down. The fans will be excited to leave the Mountain West on a loud, and rowdy note, while sending BYU off to independence with the impression that nobody likes them.

The only thing I hope is it all stays non violent, which both fan bases failed at last year.

Advantage: Utah

Final Thoughts

On paper this should be a dominant Utah victory. At almost position they are the better team, mainly due to BYU's youth and inexperience. While I think it has the chance to be a Utah landslide, this is the Rivalry game, and I know better. This is a rivalry that hasn't had many blowouts recently. Both teams are going to want to end this third age with a win. Both want to leave the conference on top. BYU doesn't want to end the regular season .500. Utah wants 10 wins. So if this game is close, don't be surprised.

The Fourth Age

This rivalry is a great rivalry. I personally enjoy all the animosity that is within the rivalry, as long as it doesn't get violent, and people remember it's just a game, and don't get carried away, which is something that both sides have a tendency to do sometimes. I also don't believe that no longer being conference mates will dull the rivalry any, as long as both teams are competitive. The loss of a chance at a conference championship being on the line will not have a negative effect, because truthfully, the conference championship was rarely at stake in this game. Utah isn't going to want to lose to a Non-AQ BYU. BYU will love to show up their AQ Rivals from up north. While BYU couldn't prevent a Rose Bowl appearance, a loss to a BYU team, could prevent a National Championship appearance. Utah however could put to be a hindrance to BCS dreams for the Cougars.

I think this game shouldn't be the 3rd game of the season as it is next year, and I hope, and pray it eventually gets moved to the season opener, where a big national spectacle can be created. Eventually the nation will see how great this rivalry is.

Enjoy the Game, and Go UTES!

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 09:54

Friday, November 19, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

The concern was there all week. The quotes coming out of practice spelled doom. Their enemy was wounded, but dangerous. Sure enough the Utes walked smack into the trap at South Bend. Now they are in the midst of a disastrous two game losing streak, and a 4 game slide to end the season isn't out of the question. Especially with a much improved Aztecs this week, followed by the big rivalry game against a Cougar team that seems to have found itself finally.

Meanwhile down south, with only hapless New Mexico between them and the Holy War, it's looking like BYU will get bowl eligible this week. Unfortunately do to a DVR error, I wasn't able to watch the game, so this week will be light on the Cougar talk. But you BYU fans stick around, because this week will be heavy on the Ute bashing, a past time I know you all enjoy. Apologies Don't Mean Jack

After being destroyed on their home field by TCU two weeks ago, Coach Whittingham spent the majority of the next two days apologizing for the performance of the team. Well, the apologies don't mean anything, when the team comes out the next week, completely flat, unprepared, and still dwelling on the loss the week before. The concerns started showing up during the week, when players would talk about how they were taking the TCU loss hard.

But the Coaches job is to get the team ready. Help them move past tough losses, and look ahead. This is a team that for the last 3 years has taken the 1 game at a time mantra. Now was a terrible time to abandon that mantra and focus on the last game as they prepared for the next game.

Coach Whittingham and staff did a terrible job during the week getting this team ready to move on. Even NBC announcer Mike Mayock could see that the Utes were hungover from the loss last week. Especially as he brought it up time and time again. This loss falls mainly on the coaching staff. There were some positional issues, which I'll get into later, but if you take away distractions, and put this Utes team on the field in South Bend against this Irish team, Utes win 8 out 10 times, and in none of those games do they get blown out. The fact that they were so flat, and performed so poorly speaks to how much stock was put into the TCU game, and how hard of a time they have had dealing with it.

Not The Only Coach Who Did Poorly

Whit wasn't the only coach who did a poor job. Offensive Coordinator, and play caller Aaron Roderick is in the midst of a terrible two game streak. The play calling for both of the last two weeks has been atrocious. Against TCU the run was abandoned way too early. In addition to not running the ball, the calls that were made were designed to attack the edges of TCU. A plan that fits perfectly into the speed and system the Horned Frogs use.

At least against Notre Dame, they didn't abandon the run. Instead they kept with it, and didn't panic. The main problem with the playcalling against the Irish, was that it never adjusted. Thanks to mental lapses, the Utes were frequently seeing themselves penalized, ending up with long down and distances. Frequently on these 3rd and 13 or greater, though, the call was designed with two passing routes running short of the first down, meaning if the receiver did catch the ball, they'd be short, and have to run for a first down.

Overall the playcalling the last couple weeks, just hasn't had that same creativity as there was leading up to the Air Force game.

A Pansy Slide

I originally though burning Jordan Wynn's Redshirt was a bad idea last year. But it became clear quickly that he had a greater control of the offense than Terrance Cain. That's something I don't think has changed this year. This offense runs better with Wynn, than it does with Cain. That's why even after TCU I didn't think Cain was a smart choice to put into the game.

For the most part my opinion doesn't change after the Notre Dame game. Jordan Wynn has played terribly the last couple games. It was clear he was uncomfortable. I don't think his lack of comfort in the offense is a coincidence that it happens as the OL has forgotten how to block, and that he was constantly in obvious passing down, meaning the ND defenders could pin their ears back.

Wynn isn't without fault. His interception was just a great defensive play, but like against TCU as the game Wynn started trying to make plays, and he'd start pressing. As he would press his passes became less and less accurate. Although late in the game he did drive the offense into the Notre Dame Red zone. Although, for some reason, the red zone is not kind to Wynn, as he could never finish off drives.

There has been only one time I thought that it might be worth benching Wynn for a couple series. It was the first play of the 2nd quarter. Utes down 10-3, the game hadn't gotten away from them yet. Wynn drops back, has no one open, and starts to run, he's at the first down marker, and he slid one yard short.

Unacceptable! It was a pansy move to slide there. It's 3rd down, you take the freaking hit, and get the first down. You do not slide. If you can't take a hit, you shouldn't be playing. Wynn let the entire team down with that slide. What should have been a continuation of the drive, was instead a punt, all because Wynn didn't want to take the hit. You are a QB for a Division 1 top 15 ranked team. You take the freaking hit at that point. This isn't second down, it's wasn't a mandatory 4 down situation. This was the drive, and Wynn failed miserably.

This was the moment where I think Cain should have come in temporarily, but only for a couple drives. Wynn is still the better of the two QB's, and he's still young with a lot of growing to do. But that slide was completely unacceptable. And it appeared to me, that was the turning point of the game. The team seemed to lose heart after that play.

The Last Road Hurrah

This week the Utes will play their last road game as a MWC Conference team. They face a much improved San Diego State Aztecs. The only good news that came out of last week's game is the fact that the Irish were a non-Conference team. This means the Utes are still in control of their own destiny for 2nd place in the conference.

But in order to get that accomplished, the Utes must wake up from the slumber they've been in for two weeks. The Aztecs are 7-3 overall. They lost on a last second run against Missouri. Their second loss was heavily assisted by a terrible blown call against the Cougars. Their final loss was last week, when they gave the Horned Frogs their toughest test of the season. This isn't the same old Aztec team that was just another MWC bottom dweller.

With Wynn's play the past few weeks, one could make the Argument that Aztec QB Ryan Lindley is the second best in the conference, and freshman RB Ronnie Hillman has rushed for over 1000 yards, and 12 TD's. The Utes who two weeks ago were 8-0, are actually the underdog against the Aztecs, with many thinking this will be loss number 3 in a row. We know the Utes aren't a great team. Time to find out if they are a good team though.

The Other Finale

After dismantling the Rams in Colorado last week, the Cougars are participating in their own MWC finale this week. They host the 1 win New Mexico Lobos for what will be the final MWC game in Provo. The Cougars have clawed their way back to .500 on the season. Earlier in the season it looked like being bowl eligible was not going to happen. However there is no way the Cougars will lose this week against an inept New Mexico team, even if Heaps reverts to his earlier season form. Truthfully if there is any justice, there will be a 3rd MWC finale this week. This should be the last road game of New Mexico Head Coach Mike Locksley's career.

One More Farewell

With the departure of BYU and Utah from the Mountain West next season, it means we don't have to deal with the terrible Mtn tv channel. The Mtn, while improved slightly this season is still a steaming pile of dog crap of a channel. With the Holy War being simulcasted on CBS College Sports, this will be the last weekend that either team's fan bases will be stuck with The Mtn.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:21

Thursday, November 11, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

That large deflating sound you heard around 500 south and 1400 east on Saturday, that was the sound of 45,000 fans being taken out of the game almost immediately. In a game that meant everything, the Utes came out extremely flat. Now Head Coach Kyle Whittingham is facing the toughest challenge of his head coaching career. Meanwhile, in Provo, the Cougars finally found some offense. Talk about flipping the script. An offense that couldn't be stopped can't get out of the garage, while an offense that couldn't get started, didn't have a brake pedal. Over-rate-d

It didn't take long for TCU to make the Utes look as overrated as their early schedule was easy. The Utes came out flat, and it seemed almost from the opening kickoff that the moment of this game had overwhelmed them. On the first drive of the game the Horned Frogs moved at will down the field, before finally burning backup DB Conroy Black for an opening TD. Defenders were frequently out of place, and seemed as if they were all a bunch of high schoolers playing an NFL team. On first down, the Horned Frogs were frequently getting 6 or 7 yards, setting up 2nd and 3 or 4's. On those second downs the Horned Frogs would get 6 or 7 more yards.

When the Utes were actually able to force a long 3rd down possession, the Horned Frogs frequently answered the bell. Particularly bad games were had by the DB's, specifically Black who was a favorite target of TCU QB Andy Dalton early and often. 20 points later the first quarter had ended.

The terrible start by the defense put the offense in a deep hole early in the game. A hole they were unable to get out of. QB Jordan Wynn never seemed comfortable in the game, and was frequently unable to get into a rhythm. Wynn would frequently overthrow easy passes, and let the ball sail over his target. Of course when he did try to settle down, and actually deliver a nice pass, his WR's turned into BYU WR's, and dropped everything they possibly could.

Wynn wasn't helped by the playcalling who seemed to abandon the run almost from the start. Of course being down 20-0 doesn't help, but there was still time to come back, but the Utes would need to run. The few run plays they did call, though, seemed intent on attacking the edges. Something that is a terrible decision with TCU's speed.

By the time it was done, the final score of 47-7 wasn't anywhere indicative of the overall demolishing the Utes took on the day. Oh and by the way, on the lone Ute score of the day, he was short. Knee down with the ball outside of the goal line, I actually took a picture that shows it. And with as bad as the Utes played that day, there's no guarantee they would have converted.

How Much Blame For Wynn

QB Jordan Wynn seems to be the favored whipping boy for last week's debacle. While he definitely deserves his share of the blame, he wasn't helped out one bit by anybody. Not his offensive mates, certainly not the defense which couldn't stop anything, and definitely not the coaching gameplan.

It's hard to remember but Wynn is just a true Sophomore, starting only his 11th game last weekend. And yes, the moment definitely was too much for him, and he made some terrible mistakes. Especially as he kept trying to press to make plays, and instead caused turnovers. In fact, he easily played worse than last year as a true freshman making his 2nd career start. But he wasn't alone. Everyone on the team was playing well below their ability. If all those veterans were overwhelmed, and if Whittingham was as outcoached, and outclassed as he was, imagine how Wynn felt.

And for anyone calling for Cain to come in, how easily you forget how often the offense stutters and stalls with him in there against bad teams.

What Did You Have To Lose

Although someone who does need more blame is Coach Whittingham, Defensive Coordinator Sitake, and Offensive Coordinators Dave Schramm and Aaron Roderick.

It's clear that this game became too much for the players. That falls onto the coaching staff. Defensively players were frequently out of place, and during the game, the team was slow to adjust. During the first half TCU would frequently line up in a trips formation. Everytime they lined up in this position, the play was a quick bubble screen to the back

player of the "trip". Yet Utah defense never adjusted. They never moved a guy out whenever this position was shown, and sure enough this play would go for 7-8 yards.

Offensively, the biggest glaring issue early was that they put this game on Wynn's shoulders from the start. While it's great that they had the confidence in their sophomore QB, once it became obvious that Wynn was uncomfortable, and that the moment was bigger than Wynn, they should have adjusted and tried running up the middle more, since the middle was the one area that seemed to be a weakness for TCU.

Not only that, but as the game was slipping away, the staff seemed unwilling to get aggressive. Many times in the 2nd quarter, and early in the 3rd quarter, the Utes would face a 4th and short. Every time the punting units came out. With the game already 23-0 or worse, what did the Utes have to lose. So what if the ball was on your own 35. Show some fight, show some heart. Show the team, and the fans that were still there, the fans that were trying so hard to stay in the game, show them that you were still going for the win.

Instead out came the punting unit, and out came the boo birds.

View From The Red Zone

Got to say, I've got mixed feelings about the crowd this week. On the good side, they tried to get into this game multiple times even late in the 3rd, and beginning of the 4th quarter, long after it looked like this game was over. It didn't help that the team just couldn't do anything on the field. However, I have to say I was disappointed to look around early in the 3rd and see a lot of emptying seats.

As far as the team, there was one play that summed up their attitude to me. Late in the 2nd quarter, I believe it was, TCU was kicking off, again. The kickoff went to Dunn and was about 7 or 8 yards deep in the end zone. It was obvious they were going to down it for a touch back. However, Dunn didn't field it cleanly and it dropped to the end zone. While Dunn eventually did get to the ball and down it, he was very very slow doing it. So slow that TCU players had actually gotten to the goal line before he did.

Kickoffs are live balls, Had TCU recovered it would have been another 7 points for them. Seeing Dunn's body language as he slowly got to the ball laying in the end zone, made it clear that on that day, this team had been clearly defeated.

3CS Busted

Chance at a national championship game. Never realistic, but busted! Chance at a 3rd BCS game. Busted! Chance to avenge last year's humiliating defeat. Busted! Chance to leave the MWC with a conference title. Most likely busted!

So now Coach Whittingham has his toughest coaching job ahead of him the next three weeks. Most of the goals that were there for the Utes to begin the season are gone if a Horned Frog flash. Coach Whit will have to make this team wake up, shake off any hangover, and go out and play. The Utes can still pull off an 11-1 season. A season that would include victories over possible Big East Champion Pitt, Air Force, Notre Dame, and BYU.

If things bust right they could end up in the top 10 before the bowl season. This could go down as possibly one of the top 4 seasons in Utah history. But only, if Coach Whit does the best coaching job of his career over the next few weeks.

Holy Offense Batman

While the Utes were struggling, the Cougars appeared to put their week off to good use. For the first time all season the Cougars showed some semblance of an offense, as they rolled UNLV 55-7. It was already 55-0 before UNLV spoiled the shutout.

While Jake Heaps finally had a good day through the air, don't let that fool you. The offense was set up by the run. The Cougars came out running first, and then after softening up the Rebels, they started finding a passing game.

Defensively, the improvement that BYU has seen since Mendenhall took back the defensive coordinator job continued. UNLV was unable to find any rhythm offensively, and weren't ever a threat to score until the very end.

Admiral Ackbar Saturday

So with BYU rolling, and Utah struggling last week, I am going to deem next Saturday "Admiral Ackbar Saturday". The reason, both teams face serious trap games.

Utah had their season explode in their face last weekend. Now they travel to historical Notre Dame. Home of Touchdown Jesus, The Golden Domers, and Rudy. Also home to an extremely overrated school that has been living off of past history for the past 15 years. This year's team is also extremely down. They are sitting at 4-5, and have lost their starting QB, starting RB, and starting TE, who was likely to be a 1st round pick.

You would think that this is exactly the type of game the Utes need to get back on track. That's just the problem. As weird as it sounds, it's too easy to overlook this Notre Dame team. If the Utes are dwelling at all on last weekend, they will get caught in a trap. Not only that, but the aura of going to such a bastion of college football history could become overwhelming. Utah must have their heads on straight.

As for BYU, everything seems to be going right. They finally had an offensive outburst that was very BYU like. Defensively they've been much improved the last 4 games. It seems like they have righted the ship. What looked like a few weeks ago would be a season without even a bowl berth, is now a season that they control their own destiny for 2nd place in the conference.

Don't be fooled by CSU. They are a better team than their record. This is exactly the type of game that could come back to bite BYU. Especially since this game is on the road. CSU held TCU to 6 points in the first half on the road. CSU's offense and defense have both come on as of late, and this is a team that shouldn't be taken for granted.

Both teams go into games, that on paper they should win. But both teams are in situations where they could be tempted to get caught looking behind at what could have been, or get caught looking at what might still be. They both be careful or they might be saying "It's a trap!"

Congrats Air Force

Two consecutive losses didn't mean anything to the Falcons as they rolled the Black Knights of Army and captured the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy. This marks the end of Navy's 7 year reign, and makes Air Force the supreme football service academy. While winning the conference, and bowl games, and all the other stuff is important each year to all of the service academies, this trophy, also helps mark a successful season.

Winless No More

Well apparently miracles do happen. The Lobos of New Mexico won a game. This makes the grand total of victories under Head Coach Mike Locksley double to 2. Hopefully it doesn't fool the AD of New Mexico into thinking that they haven't got worse, and give Locksley a 3rd year.

Rankings Game

After their loss, Utah dropped 9 spots to 15th in the AP/Coaches polls, and 14th in the BCS. It's too bad, because other games went well for Utah last week. Alabama lost their second game, so at least the snake Nick Saban's squad will maybe stop getting National Championship love. Iowa State also took Nebraska to overtime before losing by 1.

With the loss, the goals have changed. Now Utah should look at getting back into the top 10. The loss seems to have helped TCU get a ton of love as they jumped Boise State to become 3rd in all polls. Now Utah, will have a hard time proving they are anything other than overrated.

Believe it or not, this week's game will actually help. Sure Notre Dame is down, but Notre Dame is Notre Dame. They still get love. Plus it will be nationally televised. Not nationally televised like The Mtn, or CBS-C is nationally televised. This game will be on NBC (channel 5). If Utah can go out and put a whooping on the Irish, it will help remove some sour tastes from the mouths of voters. Also TCU must continue to go out and take care of business.

Around Utah there isn't much going on. Iowa right in front of them plays Northwestern who upset them last year, so don't expect it to happen twice in a row. Michigan State plays Purdue, Oklahoma plays Texas Tech, and Oklahoma State plays Texas. None of those higher ranked teams should lose. The only chance at an upset may be #12 Alabama facing off against #19 Mississippi State. However it's at Bryant-Denny Stadium.

Most likely unless there is a major upset, expect the rankings to have very little movement this week. Especially since a lot of the top teams are playing crappy teams right now.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 13:06

Wednesday, November 3, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Well, sure glad that's over. Air Force week lives up to it's miserable history as they play yet another close game against the Utes. The Utes survived and set up the most important football game ever to take place in the state of Utah. #6 in the AP, and Coaches Poll, #5 in the BCS, the Utes welcome #4 in the AP/Coaches Poll, and now #3 in the BCS to town for a massive showdown. Meanwhile BYU was off last week, and now face a 3 week stretch that should be easy, but based on the way they've played this year, you never know. [What Can We Take From Air Force Game?](#)

The truth is, absolutely nothing. Air Force is such a different animal. For one week a season the Utes, have to abandon their normal defensive scheme, and come up with something designed to handle the tricky triple option. The Offense gets extremely scaled down, as the Utes focus on time of possession and keeping the ball out of the hands of the Falcons.

That said there were a few things that present either hope or worry. On the hope side is the fact the Utes forced 5 turnovers. Wynn had a terrible interception to make the Utes a +4 on turnover margin. Their season total was brought down drastically from -5, to -1. Going into the game the Falcons were a +22 in turnover margin. The Utes can't rely on their laurels though, and will need to force some turnovers, while holding onto the ball themselves, this week with the Horned Frogs coming to town.

The thing to worry about, as is always the case with Air Force, is injuries. WR Devonte Christopher didn't make the trip. During the game, eventual Defensive Player of the Week Brian Blechen played with his hand wrapped in a cast. Even more scary was towards the end of the game when before a play he went to the ground and needed to be helped off the field.

The other major injury was linebacker Chad Manis, who needed to be taken off the field in crutches. Supposedly all three are listed as questionable on the injury report, but all are expected to play.

Never Again

I enjoy watching the service academies play football, especially Air Force. That said, I don't ever want to see them play the Utes again. Air Force is a guaranteed 60 minutes of never give up football. Through 27 games in the series, the Utes and Falcons are now separated by 14 points. Air Force is the only school in the MWC to have a winning record against Utah at 14-13.

I'm okay leaving that record right where it is. I never want to see Air Force on a Utah schedule again.

The Showdown

Calendars have been marked since the schedule was released. Everyone has been waiting for this week. ESPN is even rolling into town with College Gameday. The last two years, the winner of this game has gone onto a BCS bowl game. As much as I doubt it would happen, the stakes could be even higher for the winner this year.

It's TCU week.

We know the recent history. 2008 Utes score with a little over a minute to go to take a 13-10 win in the first ever blackout game. Last year, Utah scored more points against TCU than any other team, but still was blown out 55-28.

So what can we expect during this year's matchup?

TCU isn't quite up to the standard that last year's team was, but they still come in sporting the #1 scoring defense in the nation giving up 8.7 points per game. In the last 5 games the Frogs have given up 16 total points.

The offensive side of the ball the Frogs come in scoring 40.8 points per game, 9th in the nation in scoring offense.

As for the Utes, they aren't slouches themselves. Last year was a rebuilding year, and the TCU game was Jordan Wynn's second ever start, and his first start on the road. The lessons learned in that game has helped the Utes offense

this year. The Utes bring in the 3rd overall scoring offense with 45.3 points per game. Defensively the Utes are 6th in the nation at 14.1 points per game.

TCU is slightly better on defense, while Utah is better on offense. This is going to be a battle.

Slow Starts

The Utes have been a bit slow starting out games this year. The Utes have scored more than a TD in the first quarter only once this season, and are averaging only 6 points in the first quarter. Of course the Utes have been making up for it by exploding in the 2nd quarter, averaging 17.6 points per game in the second quarter.

TCU has also been a bit slow to start out games. Not counting the game against Div 1-AA foe Tennessee Tech the Horned Frogs are scoring 9.8 points per game in the first quarter.

Both Utah and TCU are like championship boxers who use the first few rounds to feel out their opponents and find the weak spot before going for the kill. The key to this week will be which team can find the other team's weakness and capitalize the fastest.

Wynn vs. Dalton

Jordan Wynn is a true Sophomore making his 11th career start, is a 5th year senior. They are the top 2 QB's in the league, with only San Diego State's Ryan Lindley even being close.

Both QB's are really good QB's who can move their team through the air. Both QB's are also very efficient.

The other thing both QB's have, is they can both be a bit reckless. Wynn has thrown 6th int's this year, while Dalton has thrown 5. The key for both teams, will be to put pressure on the qb, and force them to make mistakes. Whichever QB can keep themselves reigned in, and stay within the offense, will be the team to watch.

Special Teams Battle

The matchup to watch during this game, may not be on either offense or defense. This game features two of the best special teams players in the nation. TCU's Jeremy Kerley and Utah's Shaky Smithson have seemed to trade off special teams player of the week awards this season.

Kerley averages 28 yards per return for a kickoff return. Shaky is averaging 22.4 yards per punt return and 24.1 yards per kick return. Shaky is the only returner in the nation with 3 punt returns of over 70 yards.

So what this means, is both teams will be trying very hard to keep the ball away from the returner.

Gameday And the Blackout

So with all the attention this week being on the Non-AQ teams this week thanks to the TCU/Utah game as well as the game between Hawai'i and Boise State. With this being a matchup of top 6 teams, ESPN will be arriving into town for the game. This marks the second time that Gameday has been at Rice-Eccles Stadium. The first time of course being for the 2004 Utah/BYU game when Utah became the first ever team to bust the BCS.

Gameday taping is Saturday from 7a.m. to 10 a.m. in the West parking lot of the stadium.

The TCU game 2 years ago started the Blackout game for the Utes. I still don't like the tradition. I'm not much for gimmicks, especially gimmicks designed only to make money. The other thing I don't understand is why use the Blackout for a team that already wears black uniforms at times. That said though, being at the game, the stadium looked really cool with all the black in the stands. I also really like the blackout uniforms for the Utes.

This year though isn't a typical blackout. The Utes have joined with the Wounded Warrior Project, and is instead doing a Camo-Blackout game. While this is still just a gimmick designed to sell jerseys, ones which by the way are kind of ugly, at least I can respect the overall thought behind it.

The Other Game This Week

After a week off to fix some of their many issues this season, the BYU Cougars are also at home this weekend. They

welcome in the Rebels of UNLV. New coach Brady Hauck has had a rough freshman season in Vegas, as his team is 1-7 this season, with the only win coming against New Mexico. The Rebels haven't been close in any of their losses.

BYU is sitting at 3-5, and is fighting for their bowl hopes this season. While the offense has continued to be dismal, and may have in fact continued to get worse as the season has gone on, the defense for the Cougars seems to have found a spark since Bronco took over the duties as Defensive Coordinator.

The next three games will be the easiest stretch of the season for the Cougars. UNLV will be one of only two games left where you can think that this is a game the Cougars will win hands down. The stretch to carry momentum into next season starts with this week.

The Bad Get Worse

New Mexico is in the middle of what has to be the worst two seasons in school history. How head coach Mike Locksley still has a job is beyond reason. Now the Lobos have lost their starting QB for the season after Brad Gruner had season ending surgery on this throwing hand.

So how did Gruner injure his hand? Did he hit it on a helmet? Did he use it to cushion a fall? Did it get trampled on by a defender? Nope. He sliced his pinkie while carving a Halloween pumpkin. I guess when it rains, it pours.

The Commander-in-Chief's Trophy

Air Force wasn't able to pull the upset against the Utes, no matter how scary they made it. However, they have, arguably, their biggest game of the season this week. Thanks to their 14-6 victory over the Navy Midshipmen earlier this season, the Falcons simply need to defeat Army this week to reclaim the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy. A victory by Air Force will end Navy's 7 year hold on the trophy.

Rankings Game

The number of undefeated teams in the country is down to 5 after losses by Missouri, and Michigan State. Three of those undefeated teams come from Non-AQ schools. At least one of the remaining undefeated teams will suffer their first loss in Rice-Eccles Stadium. This unfortunately means that the chance to really screw with the BCS with a large number of undefeated teams is down the drain, as the BCS has survived a 4 undefeated team season previously.

With the losses of those two undefeated teams, the Utes were able to move up two spots in the AP Poll, and 1 spot in the Coaches poll, coming in at 6th in both. Thanks to their season schedule reaching the tougher stretch, the Computers showed a bit more love to the Utes, and helped them move 3 spots to 5th overall.

Utah faces BCS #3 overall TCU this week. Loser of this game can kiss BCS dreams goodbye. #4 Boise State, who was jumped by TCU this week, faces 7-2 Hawai'i. This is the first of three tougher games for the Broncos this season. A loss by Boise State, and their dreams are caput as well.

#6 Alabama travels to the Bayou to play #10 LSU. Alabama is the biggest threat to all Non-AQ's by a 1 loss team. Win out and a 1 loss Tide will be in the title game, even if two Non-AQ's are undefeated. LSU probably wouldn't get the human love to ever jump Utah, TCU or Boise, but this game will at least completely eliminate one of these two teams.

#7 Nebraska travels to Ames Iowa to face the Iowa State Cyclones. A victory by the Cornhuskers shouldn't cause a jump, but an upset by the Cyclones would be unbelievably huge for the Utes, as the Utes crushed them a few weeks ago.

The rest of the teams close to the Utes play average competition that should equal easy wins. Fortunately though the caliber of opponents isn't enough to cause a jump this week.

When Nationally Televised, Isn't

Technically the Utah/TCU game will be nationally televised. Unfortunately thanks to the terrible MWC TV Contract, it'll be buried on a channel that many don't get, or don't realize they get.

It's too bad that after all the hype about the game that ESPN will give it, and after Gameday, many people will have to scour their listings to find it. The game this week will be on CBS College Sports. On Direct TV it is channel 613. Of course it could always be worse, at least it's not The Mtn.

Blog Export: Annals of the Homestarmy, <http://www.thehomestarmy.com/s9y/>

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:30

Tuesday, October 26, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

We've been talking about it for weeks, and now we have finally arrived. After a wet and rainy day in Rice-Eccles Stadium, the Utes prepare for their tough final stretch. It all begins with Hell Week. For the Cougars, every weekend has seemed like that, even when they win. This week the Cougars get to dry out with their bye week. Consistently Inconsistent

Well at least the Cougars keep everyone guessing. I'd say they keep the games interesting, but the display of inept offenses in their game last week from both them, and Wyoming made that game very uninteresting. Thanks to some great kick returning by MWC Special Teams Player of the Week, Cody Hoffman, the Cougars had good field position often during the game. They used it to their advantage on the first drive as they scored a TD.

Throughout the game, Wyoming had problems with the snap. I'm guessing they had problems adjusting to the rain. After Wyoming QB Austin Carta-Samuels saved the first snap of the game from going over his head, he couldn't do the same with the second, as his Center sent it 20 yards over his head for a Safety.

After the free kick the Cougars got the ball near midfield but couldn't do anything with it. After a Wyoming punt bounced off a Cowboy player giving the Cougars the ball at the Wyoming 33, BYU was able to punch it in to take a 16-0 lead, and it looked like the Cougars may have finally fixed their offensive woes.

It was not to be. The Cougars failed to get any consistency, as they would be unable to do anything for about the next 2 and half quarters. During this stretch they had 3 consecutive drives gain a total of -3 yards. Later on at the end of the 3rd they managed to put together something a score a TD, and spent the rest of the game holding on before escaping with a 25-20 victory.

Heaps And Anai

BYU went through on Mendenhall's claim that this team is going to become a power running offense. The question is what does this mean for Heaps and Anai? Anai has been under a lot of heat. I personally don't think there is a way for him to save his job in the offseason, but I think as long as they win their next game, Anai will make it to the offseason. Normally you would think it's a foregone conclusion that the Cougars win their next three games versus UNLV, CSU, and UNM, but as inconsistant, and at time downright terrible, as this BYU team has been, you can never tell. Remember the Cougars would tend to let the lesser teams hang around even in '08, and '09 when they were clearly superior to them.

What this means about Heaps though is another question altogether. Is Mendenhall losing faith? Has Heaps not developed as well as they would have liked? Is this more a question about the supporting cast? I know Heaps is a true Freshman and he's only starting his 5th game, but remember Jordan Wynn's 5th start was the Poinsettia Bowl versus Cal. Granted, the Utes in '09 definitely had better talent than this year's Cougar team, so let's use a better comparison. Colorado State true freshman Pete Thomas.

Thomas has been the starter for every game for the Rams, so he's got 3 more starts than Heaps, however Heaps did play in those 3 games earlier this year. On the year the two QB's have the following stats. Heaps: 120/229 1057 yards, 2 TD's 7 INT's. Thomas: 170/251 1751 yards, 8 TD's 9 INT's. The important thing for Thomas is that in his first three starts he had 6 interceptions and 1 TD. Since then he's had 7 TD's and 3 INT's so he's starting to turn the corner.

Jake Heaps meanwhile threw his first TD as a starter this year last week, his 2nd overall. Unfortunately he had an ugly interception that got returned for a TD. I think it's fair to say Heaps isn't progressing as well as many expected. But how much of that is his supporting cast. It's been mentioned the problems the WR's have had holding onto the ball, as well as the difficulty of gaining confidence between QB and WR thanks to the disastrous QB rotation at the beginning of the year. Cougar fans better hope that this is just a rough year, and it's not because of the supporting cast, because the only WR who won't be back next year is Luke Ashworth, and he's the one WR Heaps seems to be getting a rapport with.

Tuned Up, But Is It Ready To Run?

The Utes finished their tune-up portion of the schedule with a 59-6 victory over the Colorado State Rams. Even in a

downpour for the first half of the game QB Jordan Wynn bounced back nicely from his 3 INT game last week. Wynn ended up as the MWC Offensive Co-Player of the Week with his 23 of 29, 321 yard, 3 TD performance. The important part of his statline was the 0 INT's. In fact the only one of his 29 throws that came close to being intercepted happened when he got hit as he threw it. Wynn made smart decisions the entire game, including choosing to throw it away at key times, instead of forcing a play.

The Utes opened up their playbook a bit, just to give their next 5 teams something to look at on field. Like last week, they attempted a flea-flicker pass for a large gain. This week it didn't score a TD, but it set up the first TD of the 2nd half.

Another play they decided to show everyone was a surprise onside kick in the second half. It was executed to near perfection. Phillips kicked it softly in a straight line, giving it just enough juice to roll 12 yards so he could recover it. As Phillips watched the ball, the rest of the kickoff team went and blew up the CSU Kick Returning team. They did such a good job, that when Phillips recovered, there wasn't a Ram player within 5 yards. All told, this was about the most perfect onside kick I've ever seen.

Still Turnovers

It wasn't all perfect for Utah though. Early in the game Shaky Smithson fumbled a punt return, setting up the Rams deep in Utah territory. While I'm willing to give Shaky the benefit of the doubt because of the rain, and Shaky did redeem himself with his performance throughout the game, the Utes really need to stress ball security.

During the game they managed to force three fumbles, but only recovered one of them. Meanwhile super speedster Reggie Dunn also fumbled one other time, but the Utes were able to recover. The Utes added a late 4th quarter interception, to actually win the turnover battle, and decrease their year long margin to -5, but they still need to do much better.

Especially with Air Force coming up next. The Cadets have always been good at forcing turnovers. That's how they win the majority of their games. Last year they forced 3 turnovers in the first half against the Utes. If the Utes really want to prove they are worthy of their record, this game is the perfect time to start protecting the ball, and not let the Falcons stay in the game.

View From The Red Zone

While it was a pouring rain for most of the first half, at least the Utes made it worth it with the offensive show in the first half. One fear in a rain like that, is that teams will get ultra conservative. Neither team really did that, as both really tried to move the ball through the air. Besides that perfect onside kick was almost worth it.

A fan a couple rows behind us asked Mad Giggler if he would sit down because they couldn't see. To him, and all fans like him I say get a clue. You are at a football game. You shouldn't go to a game to sit down. You go to a game to cheer. If you can't see because the person in front of you is standing up, that means you are the problem, not them. Get up on your feet, and off your butt.

Hell Week

So why do the Utes struggle against the Falcons? In 2008 it took an overtime stop to preserve the victory. In 2004 they actually had a 14-0 lead, and were the team that came the closest to defeating that team. In 26 games between the two teams they are separated by 19 points. It's a game that always comes down to the wire. But why?

I think it's because of the defensive system the Utes run. The Utes employ an aggressive man-to-man scheme, that likes to blitz, and bring pressure from odd places. It's a defensive system that allows for playmakers to make plays, and unknowns to become playmakers. This is especially true of the LB's and Safeties.

Air Force, meanwhile requires, assignment sound, unselfish, defense. Instead of making a play, each defender must pick a spot, and protect it. You are given an assignment, and that is all you are to worry about, play after play. The Utah defense is set up, so that everyone helps everyone out, and if a player makes a mistake, the rest of the team is aggressive enough to help cover it up. Against Air Force, one mistake leads to a big play.

Playing Air Force almost requires a defense to tone down on the aggression, and play within itself. The Utes feed on aggression and play making with it's athletes. It's no wonder these games always go down to the wire.

Wounded But Dangerous

Unlike the past few years, the Utes play the Falcons in the second half of the seasons, when they start to wear down thanks to being undersized. To make things worse for the Falcons is a string of injuries they've suffered in recent weeks including preseason all conference fullback Jared Tew. The Falcons also come into the game on a two game losing streak.

But make no mistake, this team is still a dangerous team. The Falcons still have the nations #1 rushing offense with over 300 yards per game. They also can throw the ball. They don't do it a lot, but QB Tim Jefferson is an accurate passer when asked. Each of the last two years, the Falcons have thrown the ball against the Utes more than expected. In both games, the Utes were so focused on the run, that Air Force was able to find success through the air.

Media and fans have already started to look ahead. Everyone is preparing for the November 6th showdown with TCU. Utah cannot afford to do the same. Even though the Falcons are limping into this game on a two game losing streak, Utah must give them their full attention, or we can all forget about November 6th.

Undefeated Watch

Well #1 went down for the 3rd consecutive week. This week it was Missouri knocking off BCS #1 Oklahoma. Two other undefeateds went down as well. Auburn beat fellow undefeated LSU in their SEC showdown. The only undefeated that played a non-undefeated team and lost were the Oklahoma State Cowboys. However since Oklahoma State plays in the Big XII they would eventually have had to face the winner of the Missouri/Oklahoma game.

We are now down to 7 undefeated teams in the nation. Of those 7 the only two who even have a chance to play another undefeated team are TCU and Utah who match up in two weeks. We now know which teams to root for to create the biggest possible BCS mess.

Rankings Game

Utes are now 7th in the Coaches poll, and 8th in the AP/BCS polls.

Of the teams ranked ahead of us this week, #1 (#2 in BCS) Oregon travels to USC to what is always a close battle between the two teams. Although I fully expect the Ducks to take care of business.

Fellow undefeated, and the nation's feel good story of the year, travels to Iowa for it's last real test of the year. While upsets can happen, should they win this week, Sparty will most likely finish undefeated.

Three weeks ago South Carolina beat #1 Alabama, then lost the following week. Two weeks ago Wisconsin beat #1 Ohio State, then escaped with a 1 point victory last week. How will Missouri react to defeating BCS #1 Oklahoma? They travel to face #14 Nebraska.

The three teams in the best position to jump the Utes (Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and Ohio State) all face average teams. They should all win, and none should be close games. However, none of their opponents carry enough cachet for a jump of Utah. Especially if Utah can buck history and actually have a comfortable game against Air Force.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:12

Tuesday, October 19, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

They say a head coach isn't truly happy unless he has something to gripe about with his team's performance. After playing two really clean games against San Jose State, and Iowa State coach Whittingham should be ecstatic this week as he will have plenty to complain about after an unimpressive performance by the Utes. While his Utes were exposing holes in their game, their rivals from down south were doing the same against TCU.

Elsewhere around the country, the final games before the release of the official BCS standings, became shakeup weekend. Three top 10 teams lost, two of them to unranked teams. For the second straight week one of those three teams was the #1 overall team, as the Buckeyes lost to the Badgers. Air Force, Nevada, and Oregon State all dropped close games late in the evening/early morning. The Beavers going to double overtime before losing.

Lackadaisical in Laramie

The Utes went to Wyoming, for the last time, possibly ever, and came away with a 30-6 victory. During the process of the game, the Utes extended a shutout of Wyoming, that started at halftime of last year's game, to 5 quarters, and 49-0. While the score looks okay, the win wasn't as great as one would hope.

First off, Utah loses the battle with TCU and Boise State, who both happened to beat Wyoming by 45. (Good news is Utah tied with Boise State with both having 48 point victories over San Jose State.) Secondly the offense had it's struggles. Specifically QB Jordan Wynn. Wynn threw three interceptions, two of which were bad throws towards the back of the end zone. This now makes 3 of Wynn's interceptions this season, that were supposed to go to the back of the end zone, but ended up under thrown (1 vs. Pitt, 2 vs Wyoming). This is a bit unsettling. When in the red zone and getting close to scoring, the room to throw a pass decreases. That's why a lot of teams have started to favor the fade route. The thing is, whenever any QB is making a throw to the back of the end zone, the ball needs to be either at the back of the end zone, where only his WR can catch it, or 5 rows up in the stands. Under throwing the ball in that area is only begging for an interception. So far, Wynn has shown the inability to correctly make this particular pass. I don't know if he misjudged the throw, was in a hurry, or if he is currently unable to physically make the pass, which is a difficult pass to make. Until he proves otherwise, the offense needs to stop calling the play.

The INT's weren't the only issues with Wynn this week. All game he didn't seem quite as decisive as normal. This helped lead to the first 1st string sack the Utes had given up all season.

Wynn's slow, erratic play was made even more disappointing by the fact that on the first drive, he connected with Luke Matthews, on a flea-flicker, for a 45 yard td pass, and it looked like this was going to be another 50 plus point output. That was also the end of the creative play calling for the day, as the rest of the week, they went with a more basic game plan.

The good news for Utes fans, is that all week since the game ended, the main thing that Wynn has talked about is how he is not satisfied with his performance last week. That's good, and hopefully that means he will fix the issues. He better, because we all know Whittingham isn't satisfied with Wynn's performance either.

The gameplan this week had some changes from previous weeks. Firstly, there was an obvious focus on the run. And it worked, as the Matt Asiata had his best game since coming back from his knee injury. Asiata accounted for 109 of the Utes 188 rushing yards on the day. The Utes had a dominant 5.1 yards per carry average.

Defensively, the Utes started slow. Wyoming QB Austin Carta-Samuels was able to escape the Utes pass rush multiple times to run for decent gains. Samuels had rushes for 43 yards on the first two drives in the first quarter, before the defense finally woke up and was able to stop him in the back field. After Wynn's first interception, ACS was able to drive from the Wyoming 20, down to the Utah 21. Fortunately for the Utes, the Cowboys missed the field goal.

After that the Defense woke up. In the 2nd quarter, Wyoming ran 11 plays, and netted a total of 4 yards. On the day, the defense gave up 67 rushing yards, and 183 total yards. However there was one number that glared out at Coach Whittingham. 0 Turnovers forced. The one area of concern on the Utes defense is the lack of takeaways this season. On the year, they are -6 on the season in turnover margin. This is an abysmal number. This is not the number of a winning team. Part of it is caused by the offense being careless with the ball, but the other half is the defense must start

forcing some turnovers.

On special teams, Shaky was his normal self. He didn't get into the end zone, but he consistently had great returns in the punt game, helped greatly by some tremendous, solid, sound blocking by the punt return team. It's too bad, that Shaky is a senior, because he is unbelievably fun to watch. The good news though, is that the Utes may have found his replacement, and have started grooming him, for next season.

Dunn Deal

The second wrinkle to the offense, was a new formation for an old play. One of the keys of the Ute offense is the zone read handoff. This week however, they added in a fake handoff to super speedster Reggie Dunn. Dunn is arguable the fastest player on the Utes. His first career touch, and the first play of the San Jose State game, Dunn ran a reverse 43 yards for a TD. The next game against Iowa State, he asked the coaches to let him return a kick. They relented. He repaid them by taking it 103 yards for a TD, including bursting through a very small hole between two Cyclone defenders, with speed that was amazing to watch.

The Utes have said they are looking for ways to get him the ball, it was obvious, as they ran the new wrinkle with the fake reverse multiple times in the first half. It was obvious they were setting the defense up. Sure enough, eventually they faked to the running back, and let Dunn do his thing. 19 yard gain. They tried it on the next play as well, and unfortunately the play didn't get much of a gain, because of an issue with Dunn handling the hand off. But what made that play interesting was that even having to take time to recover the hand off, he still managed to use his speed to make a defender miss.

Final Tuneup

This week the Utes will play the last team they can win, with a mediocre performance. Sure Colorado State is coming off of a 43-10 victory, but that victory was against UNLV. Colorado has only won 2 of their last 16 games. However those two wins have been in the last 4 weeks. While the Rams may finally be starting to get back to where it looked like they would be early in Coach Steve Fairchild's tenure, this game is still nothing more than a final tuneup as the Utes prepare for the gauntlet that is their final five weeks.

After a win against Pitt that was filled with many issues, the Utes spent the next few weeks fine tuning their game before the bye week. After yet another lackluster win against Wyoming, the Utes have fine tuning to do again. Part of the issues against Wyoming could have been caused by the lackluster competition.

Utah should win this game, however CSU can be a bit dangerous. This is the team that kept TCU to 6 points in the first half, before lose 27-0. The Utes need this game to be more like New Mexico, and San Jose State, and less like the Wyoming game.

I would also expect to see the Utes maybe attempt a couple unorthodox plays this week.

The Utes open up as a 31 point favorite. They will need a huge margin of victory to impress voters, but more important than covering the spread, is to do it in spectacular fashion.

A Stupid Controversy

Even after BYU wins a game, they can't make it through the week without controversy. This week the big deal was made about a blown call during BYU's final TD drive. During the drive J.J. DiLuigi fumbled the ball. It was clearly a fumble. You could tell it was a fumble live as it happened, and it became even more obvious when you watched replays that clearly showed the ball coming out long before DiLuigi hit the ground.

For whatever reason the officials on the field initially missed the call. While terrible, bad calls happen every game. That's why we have Instant Replay.

Inexplicably the replay officials determined the play would stand. It really is inconceivable how anyone could watch the replay. The MWC agreed, suspending 3 members of the replay booth for missing the call.

And that's where the controversy begins. It was later determined that one of the members of the replay booth was a BYU employee. Before the game, the MWC did not have any rules against employees of the home team working in the replay booth. Idiomatic. Even the perception of impropriety cannot exist. The MWC was just begging for a missed replay to cause a hail storm because of this rule. The fact that the BYU employee was in the booth was not his fault. It wasn't

BYU's fault. It falls squarely on the MWC. It shouldn't have taken this mess to make the MWC make a rule against such a thing.

However, the BYU employee being in the booth did cause a stir. SDSU fans have jumped on that fact, and cried foul. One buffoonish sports talk personality in San Diego went even further calling the entire BYU institution dishonorable, and claiming that the fans are racist.

However, harping on that one call, and it really was a bad call, misses the big picture. By focusing on that one play, a play, by the way, that also included two facemasks by the SDSU defense, fans, and media are excusing the Aztecs for the rest of the game. The Aztecs were behind in the game, not because of that fumble, but because BYU had outplayed them. SDSU was not ready at the beginning of the game. But because everyone focused on this one play, all the other issues were excused.

This is true for any fans that harp on officials. Constantly complaining about bad spots, or what should or shouldn't have been a penalty, or complaining because there isn't a good angle for a replay review only helps to excuse poor performances by a team. Rarely, has a blown call every cost a team a game. Calls are not made in a vacuum. Yes it's okay to mention bad calls, but constantly harping on them, or complaining about every single bad call that happens in the game, especially when you ignore favorable calls that went your way, is the sign of ignorance. It also shows that you don't hold your team accountable for what it does on the field, that put them in a hole to begin with.

Not All Blowouts Are Built The Same

The score may be similar to the past two seasons, but this season 31-3 loss by the Cougars to TCU isn't nearly as bad as the previous two seasons, at least defensively. Defensively the Cougars still had the same emotion and fire that they re-discovered last week. For the first time all year, TCU failed to score on their first drive at home. At the end of the first quarter it was only a 3-0 game.

It was still a 3-0 game late in the half, before TCU finally was able to manage some offense and scored a late half TD to make it 10-0. Jake Heaps then threw a terrible interception, to set up an easy TD to make it 17-0 at the end of the half.

The Cougars defense then held TCU scoreless in the 3rd quarter, while snapping TCU's two game shutout streak with a field goal of their own. If you had told BYU fans that going into the 4th quarter, they would still be in the game, which they were only down 14 points, they would have been happy. However, in the 4th quarter, TCU showed that it has better players, and finally wore down the Cougars, with two more TD's, including a "Screw you, we need style points, enjoy independence, hope the door hits you on the way out" TD at the end of the 4th. The Horn Frogs faced 4th and 3, with 4 minutes to go in the game. With the outcome already wrapped up, they decided to go for it, and threw a TD pass.

The past two years, TCU was the better, more athletic team from the start. BYU's defense had been beaten almost from the beginning of the game. This year, the defense actually had signs of life, and it wasn't till the 4th quarter, that they really began to show that they were outmatched.

The Offense On The Other Hand

BYU's offense was pathetic PATHETIC. In the first half they had a total of 13 yards. On the day they only managed 147 total yards, 70 of which came on their field goal drive.

Jake Heaps was terrible, rarely looking down field. He completed only one pass to a WR. On the few times he actually managed to throw to a WR, the pass was usually under thrown, or over thrown. Either way the pass could not be caught.

Offensive coordinator Robert Anai proved once again, why he should have been terminated along with defensive coordinator Jaime Hill two weeks ago. The offensive game plan was terrible. TCU has a fast, and stout defense. It's a defense that loves to blitz. It's a defense that is very hard to get around the edges on.

Did Anai take advantage of the attacking mentality by calling screen plays? Nope, I don't remember a screen being ran all day long. Did Anai put his offense in a place to win by avoiding the edges and attacking the middle of the TCU defense? Except for on the field goal drive, nope. Instead, Anai called sweeps, and passes to the edges, plays that allowed TCU to take advantage of their speed and keep the Cougars locked down offensively.

It's not like this is anything news. These were the same issues the Cougars had with their playcalling against TCU two years ago. It was the same thing last year. You would think after two terrible years, Anai wouldn't make the same

mistakes with the play calling. If Wyoming were to continue the Cougars woes this season, watch for Anai to join Hill in the unemployment line.

The offensive struggles are causing problems in Zion. Some BYU WR's have been complaining about the offense. They are tired of the bland, conservative play calling by Robert Anai. They are also tired of Jake Heaps' seeming unwillingness to look in their direction. It's true. Heaps is way too willing to dump the pass off short to J.J. DiLuigi, or some other RB. Heaps has not been making good decisions with his passes. Both of his interceptions this week, were passes that should not have been thrown. On the year, Heaps has only 1 TD and 6 Interceptions. Since becoming the sole starter he has 0 TD's and 5 Interceptions. Granted Heaps is a true freshman, and he has shows the arm strength to make some pretty tough throws, but we're starting to get to the point where that excuse is no longer valid.

Of course, before the WR's complain too much, they might want to look in the mirror and at their stone hands which have dropped so many passes, a few of which would have been TD's.

Good Riddance

One of the WR's who have probably been vocal is O'Neill Chambers. Ironically O'Neill Chambers is also probably the WR most guilty of dropped passes and half hearted effort. Earlier in the season he was suspended for two games for disciplinary reasons. When his suspension ended, he was asked in his opinion why was he suspended. His response: "for being a competitor." It was pretty clear at that point that he hadn't learned his lesson.

This morning it was announced that Chambers has again been suspended, this time for the rest of the season.

Chambers has frequently used facebook to post comments and criticism of the coaching staff and the team. Shortly after the suspension he hit facebook once again with the following, "Well I guess you have to be the person they want you to be, it's pretty funny I though you came to this earth to be the person you want to be but you can't, they want to play god."

Chambers has failed to live up to his promise his entire career at BYU. He always put himself above the team, and it's clear from comments following his first suspension, and now after his second suspension that he just does not get it. BYU will be better with addition by subtraction. Chambers is a junior, and while the suspension does not say anything about whether or not he would be allowed back with the team next season, you can pretty much count on him not joining the Cougars in independence.

It Should Get Easier

Fortunately for the Cougars, the TCU game represented the end of the tough part of their schedule. From now on, it's the lower half of the MWC until they play Utah. Of course, that doesn't necessarily guarantee victories, as even the past two years when the Cougars had a good team, they would tend to struggle with the lower teams before edging out victories.

This week's game will be a game between two teams that combined for 267 yards, and 9 points. It's a battle of two Anemic offenses.

Of course, BYU isn't the only team that is coming to the end of a brutal early schedule. Wyoming has had games against teams currently ranked, #2(Boise State), #4(TCU), #9(Utah), and a team that was ranked #5 when they played (Texas).

Wyoming's starting QB is also a running QB. The same type of QB that BYU has struggled with.

That said, BYU should win this game. Especially if their defense plays with the same emotion and fire they've had the last two weeks. This could also be a good time for the offense to start to write the ship. However, it is by no means, a game that Cougars can say for sure they will win.

A Good Rebound, And The Annual Wear Down

After falling flat in their attempt to join the upper half of the MWC last week versus BYU, the San Diego State Aztecs made a nice rebound this week by upsetting the Air Force Falcons. Although as the game came to an end, many Aztecs had to be having a serious case of deja vu. Last year, the Aztecs were unable to finish off many games, blowing them in the 4th quarter.

The inability to finish off teams reared it's ugly head again versus Missouri early in the year. So imagine how the Aztecs felt when they were awaiting a replay review of a close call to see if Air Force had converted a 2 point conversion to tie the game.

Instead the review went the Aztecs way, as the runner was ruled down before the end zone. The Aztecs then recovered an onside kick. Just to make sure there would be no doubt, RB Ronnie Hillman broke free for a score and iced the game away.

While the Aztecs were happy to see the past not overtake them once again, the Falcons weren't as lucky.

The service academies typically field undersized teams. These teams will usually start the season strong, but tend to get wore down as the season goes along. Air Force has suffered from this the past couple years. In 2009 they started 3-1 before finishing 4-4. 2008 was 3-0 before finishing 5-4 down the stretch.

With TCU and Utah next up on the schedule, Air Force could be looking at a possible 3 game losing streak. To make things even more difficult is the loss of fullback Jared Tew for 6 weeks to a broken leg. Fullback is a key part of the Air Force triple option attack, and Tew has been an anchor to the Falcon offense the last three years. Tew is the second leading rusher for the Falcons, and his loss will make the next two weeks even more difficult.

Of course, having lost to a team they should have beat, may cause the Falcons to come out with a vengeance against TCU this next week.

A Death We Can All Support

Sunday was the first unveiling of this year's BCS standings. In preparation for the event, Some Yahoo writers released their book *Death to the BCS: The Definitive Case Against the Bowl Championship Series*. The writers spent the past three years going through tax returns, filing freedom of information papers, and interviewing many people behind the scenes to come up with an argument of why the BCS, which they refer to as *The Cartel*, is actually hurting College Football and must come to an end.

Through the course of the book they present a playoff plan, that is completely separate from the Bowl games, except for the Rose Bowl, which they say should be the National Championship game. They then spend the rest of the book debunking the myths spewed by the Cartel, and explaining how a playoff actually helps College football.

As I read the book, I was amazed by the financial results from bowl game "payouts". They used tax returns to show how bowl game payouts are in fact mythical numbers. It's been known for a while that many teams actually lose money on bowl games, however it was surprising to see exactly how bad the losses are. The writers further go to show, that a dependence upon the bowl system is partially responsible for many universities being unable to balance their athletic budgets. They explain that it is because of the bowls that many universities have their hands out.

Chapter after chapter the writers take apart all of the BCS excuses, and show how a playoff could exist while improving, or at the very least, not worsening anything the way it is now. They show that a playoff would actually make the regular season better than it currently is. They show that it wouldn't adversely effect students any more than it does. They show it could make even more money for everyone involved. The Cartel members would get a smaller slice of the pie, but they would get much more money than they currently do.

One disappointing aspect of the book though, was how often they referred to people in television, marketing, and college football, that all supposedly agreed with their point of view. These people acknowledge that a playoff would be better. That schools would make more money. These people all acknowledge the BCS is wrong. I was left with one question. These were people who are in the know, and behind the scenes. People at big universities like Florida and Penn State. People in television at places like ESPN. So if all these people in the know, already acknowledge how much better a playoff is, and it still isn't here, why hasn't it already happened? It makes one wonder, if the Cartel would ever be overthrown, or if they are way too entrenched.

This is obviously a very biased look at the BCS. The writers do not pretend for a second to have anything less than absolute disdain for the BCS. And even with the little bit of disappointment brought up, the book does an effective job of dismantling all of the arguments that come out of the mouths of the Cartel. They argue, that College Football must go to a playoff to continue to thrive. Eventually, with all the money that's out their ripe for the plucking (They argue that a playoff would bring in at least 3 times the money the bowls/BCS currently makes), greed will eventually take over.

In 2004, before any national writer had written a proposal for a 16 team playoff, I proposed my playoff proposal.

Throughout the years I've updated and changed it, including last year. This book is the continuation of a proposal that Dan Wetzel originally released his plan in 2007. During the book the writers made two arguments that will cause me to no longer update my plan. First was the argument of why bowls must be separate, and secondly, the writers point out that all the different playoff plans, actually helps the BCS, because this way they don't have a specific, well thought out, concise plan to argue against.

That is no longer the case. This plan is the best playoff plan I've seen. It should be the argument that the playoff faction holds up. Otherwise, the Cartel will never die.

The Cartel Standings

Unfortunately for now, the Cartel still lives. The initial BCS standings were released this Sunday. The Utes are sitting 9th, the same that they are in both the AP and Coaches poll. The #1 BCS team is Oklahoma. #2 is AP and Coaches first ranked Oregon Ducks. Boise State is currently 3rd with TCU sitting at 5.

An Undefeated Mess

Of course there is still a lot of time left to play in the season. The rankings will change, and based on the first half of the season, it could change often. One thing that could cause a lot of problems for the BCS is the amount of undefeated teams. Since I am of the belief that there is no way a non-AQ Team will ever be allowed to play in the national championship game, as well as the fact that I think a non-AQ championship game participant would only give more fuel to the BCS Cartel so that they can proclaim "the system works, everyone can win a championship", it's something that I think all playoff supporters should root for.

Right now there are 10 undefeated teams. Of those undefeated teams, only Utah/TCU, the triumvirate of Oklahoma, Missouri, and Oklahoma State, and Auburn/LSU play each other. It is entirely possible for their to be 6 undefeated teams as the regular season ends. This should be rooted for. The more undefeated teams at the end of the year, the more of a mess the BCS will have. The more teams that will have a legitimate claim to be part of the national championship.

Rankings Game

For the second consecutive week the #1 team in the nation. Though unlike last week not only did the #1 team actually drop below the Utes, but the team that beat them did not jump the Utes. That combined with the losses of #5 Nebraska, and #10 (in the AP) South Carolina, allowed the Utes to move up to #9 in both polls. Unfortunately the current emotionally loved team du jour, Michigan State, did jump the Utes.

This week there are a few games to watch. First off we are guaranteed to not only lose two undefeated teams, but we're guaranteed that a team ranked ahead of us will lose.

#5 Auburn and #6 LSU face off in the SEC game of the year. Both teams are undefeated, and both teams are overhyped solely because they play in the SEC. The loser of this game will most assuredly drop below the Utes. In fact if the loser is LSU there is a chance that they could drop pretty far, as many believe that head coach Les Miles is extremely lucky, and that the Tigers are undefeated despite many coaching mistakes.

In fact, for that reason, as well as the reason that Auburn is the more likely of the two to go undefeated, or to eventually re-jump the Utes, Auburn is the team we should want to see win this game.

The other undefeated matchup is #3 Oklahoma versus #16 Missouri. This is a situation where Oklahoma losing may not drop them below the Utes, but may cause Missouri to jump the Utes. I also believe Oklahoma has a better chance to remain undefeated throughout the year, or eventually re-jump the Utes.

Freshly dethroned Ohio State is not really a danger to jump the Utes against Purdue. Their best chance will be later in the year versus Iowa.

After defeating #1 Alabama, South Carolina went out and lost to unranked Kentucky. This week it's #10 Wisconsin's turn to possibly follow up an upset of a #1 team with a loss. This week the Badgers travel to face #15 Iowa. I think Iowa will beat them, but the pollsters, seem hesitant to really move Iowa up, however a Wisconsin victory will almost assuredly move them ahead of the Utes.

Of course, Utah must do its part and win with style.

Blog Export: Annals of the Homestarmy, <http://www.thehomestarmy.com/s9y/>

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:49

Tuesday, October 12, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

During a week in which they didn't play a game, the Utes moved up a spot in the poll. This week, #1 ranked Alabama lost and the Utes played a game. The result? No movement in one poll, and dropping in another, despite racking up over 1,000 combined yardage, and posting the most points ever for an opposing team at Jack Trice Stadium. Meanwhile a tumultuous week in Provo led to all sorts of change, including a new coach, and a new offensive style. The change fueled an emotional first quarter that let the Cougars show a young upstart team that they still aren't ready for the upper half of the MWC. Farewell BCS

The Utes played their final regular season game against a team from an automatic qualifying conference as a member of a non-automatic conference. This was a game that many in the media were picking as a potential upset pick. Either way, most expected the Iowa State Cyclones, coming off of a 55-38 victory over Texas Tech, to provide a test for the #10 Utes.

Utah is not big on doing what is expected of them. Although for awhile it seemed like they were going to keep the Cyclones in it. Eddie Wide fumbled on his own 5 yard line on the Utes first possession and were down 7-0. The Utes drove into Cyclone territory before QB Jordan Wynn got shaken up and Terrance Cain came in for the Obligatory "Terrance Cain Figgie Drive". After the Utes forced a punt, which Shaky Smithson returned to the 2 yard line, Wynn returned for a quick TD pass. However Wynn's next throw wasn't as good as he threw a terrible interception, which Iowa State later turned into another TD and a 14-10 lead at the end of the first quarter.

And that, was the end of this being a contest. Wynn got into a groove, the defense locked down the Cyclones, and the Special Teams turned it on. There was a 53 yard reverse pass from Shaky Smithson to Devonte Christopher, a TD pass from Wynn to Shaky, Asiata and Wide running TD's, and a Joe Phillips figgie to cap off a 31-0 2nd quarter, as the Utes were on their way to a completely dominating 68-27 victory over the Big XII foe.

All said the Utes gained 1,026 total yards. This came from 593 offensive yards, 168 kickoff return yards, of which 103 came on Reggie Dunn's kickoff return touchdown, 156 punt return yardage, and 2 interceptions that contributed 109 yards. The 1,029 total yards was one of two pretty incredible stats from the game. The other being the fact the Utes held the Cyclones to 0 for 3rd downs. Of Iowa States 11 3rd downs, 0 of them were turned into first downs.

The Utes may have lost a spot in the AP Poll, but QB Jordan Wynn, and WR Shaky Smithson, who was suffering from food poisoning during the game, were rewarded as the Mountain West Offensive, and Special Teams players of the week.

Another Test, Little Learned

Unfortunately the game against the Cyclones didn't teach us as much about this Utes team as we would have liked. We did learn one important lesson about this team. When things go wrong, they do not panic. Two first quarter turnovers, and an early deficit did little to phase the team. Instead they settled down and took care of business.

Of course, the Utes wouldn't have put themselves in the mess to begin with if it weren't for the turnovers. Not only giving the ball up, but again not forcing turnovers. Sure the Utes did manage to get two by the end of the game, but if they want to really win the big games, they will need to win the overall turnover battle for a game, instead of being even with two giveaways and two takeaways. More importantly, the Utes must prevent early giveaways that put themselves in a hole.

45 Is The Magic Number

Like it or not, in the eyes and minds of the national pundits, Utah, TCU, and Boise State will constantly be compared against one another this season. Most of the comparisons are subjective. However, there is one part of the schedule that overlaps all three teams. And while comparing against common opponents is still subjective, it's the closes we'll get to see how all three teams stack up against one another. Of course, we'll find out exactly how TCU and Utah stack up in early November.

Early on in the season, Boise State went into Laramie and came out with a 45 point victory, thanks to a 51-6 victory. Last week, Wyoming went to TCU and got pasted 45-0. While a shutout is more impressive, Boise gets bonus points for a road victory. In the Wyoming showdown, TCU and Boise are essentially tied.

That means Utah must beat Wyoming by at least 45 points. Utah must also limit the Cowboys to as few points as possible. Going to Wyoming late in the year is never fun. The wind will probably be swirling, and it will probably be a bitter cold. While you can never overlook an opponent, the weather should be the only trouble the Utes have.

However, last year, Wyoming led the Utes at half time. It was at that point that Kyle Whittingham decided to burn true freshman Jordan Wynn's redshirt. This will be an anniversary of sorts for Wynn.

Riding The Emotion

San Diego State came into Provo with a 3-1 record, and lots of hype. Many thought this was their chance to show the rest of the MWC that they were ready to make a jump to the next level. They wouldn't be in the top 3, but with BYU's struggles, they were sitting their ready to stake their claim as the best of the rest.

BYU went into the game after a week of turmoil. A 1-4 record led to the scapegoating, but correct decision to release defensive coordinator Jaime Hill. Coach Mendenhall took over as the coordinator, and supposedly the defense was responding.

Sure enough, the Cougars were riding a wave of emotion as the game began. Fired up by the homecoming crowd, the Cougars came out and jumped on top of the Aztecs 14-0 in the first quarter. The emotional wave almost took them to a 21-0 lead before an end zone interception. As the first half came to an end, the emotional tide faded leaving the play on the field. However the early 14-0 lead was enough, as the Cougars managed to stop the Aztecs high powered offense on their final drive of the game, and escaped with a 24-21 lead.

Defensively the Cougars were more fired up than they had been the last few weeks. They were running around better. A surprise from this game was freshman knucklehead Kyle Van Oy got his first start, and he showed why the coaches were so high on him to begin with. If Van Oy can keep his mind right in the class room and off the field, he could be a spark plug for this defense.

While the defense had problems later in the game, as the Aztecs were able to drive the length of the field for two quick scores in the second half, the early tempo gave the Cougars enough of a cushion to halt the slide. The victory showed that the Cougars aren't just going to lie down and die. It also showed that the Aztecs aren't quite ready.

Last year the Aztecs were hampered by their inability to close out games in the 4th quarter. It was something they had hoped they had put behind them. But with the loss to Missouri on the final play, and now their inability to show up on the first big MWC test, one must begin to wonder, are the Aztecs going to make the jump, or are they going to falter away?

Goodbye Quarterback U

The defensive coordinator wasn't the only thing changed for BYU this week. The entire offensive gameplan shifted. Gone was the quick tempo, high passing volume offense of early in the season. BYU became a running team.

Two weeks ago I mentioned how RB JJ DiLuigi had become the catalyst of the offense. This week, the Cougars gameplan was built around him, and the rest of his running back mates. The Cougars ran the ball 63 times, compared to only 23 pass attempts. The running game gashed the Aztec defense for 271 yards. DiLuigi led the way with 134 yards, while Brian Kariya played the bruising change of pace role for 85 more yards.

Taking the focus off of the passing game, and Jake Heaps, and putting it on the running game will be a nice way for the Cougars to let Heaps become accustomed to the game.

The large amount of runs wasn't the only major change in offensive philosophy. The first 5 weeks the Cougars played a lot of no huddle, quickened pace offense. This week the Cougars made a concerted effort to run the clock down as far down as possible. Constantly they let play clock get to under 5 seconds. Accordingly the Cougars dominated the time of possession with a 45 minute to 15 minute advantage.

This mentality took the Aztecs by surprise, but continued use could cause problems. Firstly the Cougars were called for 6 false starts. Most of these were caused by an offensive line that is not used to waiting so long to snap the ball. Secondly, by making it obvious that you are going to snap the ball with less than 5 seconds to go in the play clock, you

make it easier for a defense, especially a blitzing defense, to guess the snap. This could also be seen in the second half, when the Aztec defense started to get into the Jake Heaps' head a bit.

Smartly though, when the Aztecs were starting to get an advantage, the Cougars went back to the run.

Bring On The Frogs

The Cougars better hope that the emotion they had last week is able to sustain them next week, because even an improved Aztecs team is nothing like what they are facing next. Up next for the Cougars are the TCU Horned Frogs. Not only are the Horned Frogs the 5th ranked team in the nation, but they have been the Cougars personal nightmare the last two years.

The last time the Cougars went to Fort Worth they were 7-0 in the middle of their "Quest for Perfection". By the time it was over not only was Perfection gone, but so was any pride the Cougars had that year. In fact the lack of speed and athleticism that has haunted the Cougars this season, was exposed for the first time in that 32-7 beat down in '08.

Last year the story wasn't much different, just a different location. Same speed disadvantages. Same lack of athleticism. Same beat down. This time 38-7. Not only have the Cougars been outscored 70-14 the last two years, but the games haven't even been that close. The Horned Frogs have gained over 800 yards and forced 6 turnovers.

For the first time in two years, the Cougar Fans go into this game, knowing they are not likely to win. Vegas has the Frogs as a 30 point favorite. The Cougars will just be happy to avoid the same sort of humiliation they have faced the last two years.

Win or lose, the lesson that we will learn is whether the improvement that was seen in the first half against the Aztecs is here to stay, or was it just a flash in the pan. Adversity is when we really meet a team. So far in 2010, the Cougars haven't dealt with adversity well, and this will be the next opportunity to show what they are made of.

This rivalry actually had more fuel added to the fire when BYU went independent. TCU Coach Gary Patterson had some harsh words when the news originally broke, telling BYU to "be careful what you wish for." Also TCU Will be looking for it's 3rd straight shutout.

The Rankings Game

Last week #1 Alabama fell, but they still remained ahead of the Utes. This week it may very well be Ohio State's turn to lose as the #1 team as they travel to face #18 Wisconsin. Of course, should Wisconsin win, it could very well be deja vu for the Utes, as Wisconsin may get enough votes to jump Utah, while it's doubtful Ohio State would drop below them.

South Carolina however may be prime for an upset coming off of the emotional victory over the Tide. A loss would drop them back to reality and move them to the mid teens.

Emotional team of the year, Michigan State, is right on the heels of the Utes, and face Illinois this week. The Illini are not very good, and how big of a win Sparty gets will determine if they are able to jump the Utes.

Another game to watch is Boise State versus San Jose State. Now the Spartans have zero chance of beating the Broncos, but the comparison game will be in effect. The Utes beat the Spartans 56-3.

When looking at the Utes chances to move up there are two key games. First Texas travels to Nebraska for the Big Red Revenge game. Last year in the Big XII Championship game, Nebraska had the lead as the clock read all zeros. However for some reason 1 second was added to the clock which allowed Texas to kick a game winning field goal. This year Texas is nursing a 2 game losing streak, and Nebraska is by far the better team. However this is still a big test for the Cornhuskers. A loss would definitely drop them below the Utes, and with the Longhorns out of the top 25, they wouldn't be a threat to the Utes.

The second game of importance is #12 Arkansas versus #7 Auburn. Auburn should have lost last week, but escaped with a win. Arkansas only loss was a choke job versus Alabama. This game is the beginning of the overrated SEC teams, who spent the non conference part of their schedule feasting on FCS teams, starting to cannibalize one another. Over the next few weeks the number of undefeated teams will start to dwindle, and there will be room for the Utes as they enter their true test portion of the schedule.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 11:21

Tuesday, October 5, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

The worst weekend of the season is over. We can wave goodbye to the bye. Utah did manage to become a top 10 team during their bye week. Up north however, things got a lot worse for the team down south. Apparently the Cougars big revenge for the Utes getting into the Pac-12 instead of themselves is to completely obliterate Utah's strength of schedule. In an attempt to change things around though, the Cougars have pointed out their scapegoat. The State's New 2nd Best Team

Conference Friday typically brings us the matchup between BYU and Utah State. This year the game was up in Logan, and for the first time in years, the Aggies seemingly had a legitimate chance to defeat BYU. Both teams were struggling so far during the season. They shared equal records of 1-3. The loser of the game could pretty well give up any chance of a bowl game in 2010. The winner could lay claim as the state's 2nd best team.

When all was said and done, there would be some doubt as to whether the Cougars could even claim to be the state's 3rd best team. A week after showing signs of improvement during the second half of the Nevada game, BYU was completely outmatched in every phase of the game.

Defensively, the Cougars showed why they have the worst rushing defense in the nation. The Aggies became the 4th consecutive team to rack up over 200 yards rushing against the Cougars. BYU also couldn't stop Utah State through the air either. Borel went 10 of 13 for 190 yards, including a beautiful 79 yard TD pass, that took advantage of Andrew Rich's aggressiveness.

Offensively, the Cougars weren't any better. The Aggies took away DiLuigi in both the run and pass game. With the catalyst of the offense taken away, the Aggies made it known they were going to force Heaps to try and beat them. Heaps made some nice passes, but he's a young QB, and he made some mistakes. Including on a goal to go play where he had his RB wide open out of the flat, for what would be a sure TD. Instead Heaps threw the ball way over his head. Only after the Aggies had taken their foot off the gas pedal with a 31-3 lead, did the Cougars show any ability to move the ball.

Who To Hang Out With During Cold/Flu Season

Of course, it's hard to move the ball down field, or show any offensive consistency, when you can't even catch the ball. The entire season, Cougar receivers, tight ends, and running backs, have shown a propensity for dropping easy catches. During the first three games, part of it could be explained by the idiotic two quarterback system that Mendenhall was running with the Cougars. When the drops decreased to just a couple during the Nevada game, it seemed as if the QB System was indeed a major part of the issue.

However, 10 dropped passes during the Utah State game, points to it being a larger issues. Keep in mind, this was 10 dropped passes without O'Neill Chambers even being in the game. It'd be hard for a 4 year starting senior QB to generate any offense with this many dropped passes, let alone a true freshman starting his second game. The dropped passes are a major problem for the Cougars. This many drops tells me that the Cougars are not focused. The Cougars just lack the concentration. And with the season quickly fading into nothing, the lack of concentration and interest could only worsen. The good news though, is that anyone who is friends with a BYU WR won't have to worry about getting the cold from them during this winter.

Scapegoat

On Saturday Head Coach Bronco Mendenhall responded to another embarrassing loss by firing defensive coordinator Jaime Hill. Let me start by saying that Jaime Hill should have been released as the defensive coordinator two years ago. The Defense has been dreadful for many years. It's given up a lot of yards, especially by the secondary, which is supposed to be Hill's specialty. It's gotten more and more basic as the years have passed, making it easier for offenses to figure out.

However, the defensive inefficiency, is not the reason that Hill was fired. Jaime Hill was fired simply because Bronco Mendenhall needed a scapegoat, and figured he'd have an easier time taking over the defense than he would the offense. Therefore he fired Jaime Hill.

The Defense is bad, but what else do you expect when you have a bunch of young and unathletic players back there. The Cougars lost all of their starting linebackers from last year, as well as their defensive line anchor Jan Jorgensen. Years of poor recruiting by Mendenhall left the Cougars without anyone to replace those players. The knock on the Cougars for the last few years was that they couldn't recruit the proper athletes to compete at a national level. This year is showing the fruits of that recruiting. After all when one of your starting cornerbacks is 5'6", you are already working with a short deck.

The defense got worse when Romney Fuga's season was ended by a cheap shot. In the first half Safety Andrew Rich, who is the best player on an extremely terrible defense, was lost with an injury. Later the only other good player on the defense, Jordan Pendleton, was lost for what could be an extended time frame.

There's no doubt that the defense is terrible, they can't tackle, they are constantly gashed in the running game, and can't stop qb's through the air. Even against Washington, they were saved by the fact that Washington was unprepared for the game.

But the real problem with the Cougars is on the offensive side of the Ball.

While it ultimately is Mendenhall's decision, he claims the inability to make the obvious choice of Jake Heaps over Riley Nelson (My words not his) was made by Offensive Coordinator Robert Anai, in conjunction with QB Coach Brandon Doman. Mendenhall let the Cougars down, by not overriding the decision, but that doesn't make Anai's initial decision any less ridiculous.

Add into the equation that Anai's offense, is extremely dull and basic. It's succeeded in the past couple years because the Cougars had talent. Austin Collie, Max Hall, Dennis Pitta, Andrew George, and Harvey Unga, did a great job of making Anai look good. Those players helped to hide the fact that Anai scheme wasn't that good. Two years ago the Offense consisted of Max Hall throwing downfield to Austin Collie, coverage be darned. That could mainly be blamed on Hall, however last year, the offense consisted of dinking and dunking to Pitta, George, and Unga, with Unga also running the ball.

Those three players were good players. They could make a bad offensive scheme look good. Without the horses this year, that short conservative playcalling just isn't cutting it. It's not moving the ball downfield, until the Cougars are already behind. Anai is just as deserving of termination as Hill was.

This season's disgrace falls squarely on the shoulders of Coach Mendenhall. He has made some terrible decisions this year. The main one being the QB Rotation. Even though last year's recruiting class was hailed as one of the best in BYU history, this season is showing the rewards of recruiting through Mendenhall's first five seasons. As the Crowton players have left the system (Remember players at BYU last longer than other schools because of the mission), we're starting to see that Mendenhall has not done a good job of recruiting athletes.

But Mendehall couldn't fire himself, so he needed a scapegoat. Mendenhall is a defensive guy. Jaime Hill also has had some personality issues with Mendenhall, and players in the past. So Jaime Hill became the guy to take the blame. Don't be surprised if Robert Anai joins him in the unemployment line in a few weeks.

Staring at 1-6

After the debacle against Utah State last week, the Cougars return home and welcome the San Diego State Aztecs . Through the first 5 weeks, the Aztecs are the surprise team in the Mountain West Conference. The Aztecs are 3-1 including a 41-7 dismantling of Utah State two weeks ago. If not for a missed block in the back on the last play of the game versus Missouri, the Aztecs would be undefeated.

This will be the first conference game for the much improved Aztecs , and the first chance for them to make a statement that they have really improved. The way the two teams have been playing, it really should be a no brainer. The Aztecs have been playing tremendously better than the Cougars, and are favored by 6 points.

It's a sad sign when a team is an underdog during it's homecoming week. That's what the Cougars face this week. Bronco has said that he hasn't been "successful at getting to this team's heart". It's unsure if the Cougars have any heart this year. If they do, they better find it quick, otherwise they will lose to the Aztecs. And with TCU the following week, they'd be looking at 1-6.

A Rush The Field Win?

As the final seconds clicked off the clock, Utah State Fans had gathered on the sidelines, and rushed the center of the field to celebrate with the team. Immediately two Cougar fans I know sent tweets, mocking the Aggie fans for rushing the field against a 1-3 team.

I agree, that rushing the field has lost the meaning it once had, as fans seem willing to do it for any victory. Two years ago, when the Utes came back from an 8 point deficit in the final minutes to beat Oregon State, fans rushed the field. This was a perfect example of a bad field rush. Sure the victory was a thrilling victory. But a thrilling victory alone is not reason enough to rush the field. Especially since Utah shouldn't have needed to come back to win that game.

However, I have no problem with the Aggie fans rushing the field last Friday. The Aggies had a 10 game losing streak versus the Cougars, that dated back 17 years to 1993. Add in a 10 game losing streak against the Utes, the Aggies had lost 20 straight against the in state powerhouses.

While it was a 1-3 BYU team, this victory also could be the early signature victory for Coach Andersen's regime. The Aggies are trying to overcome years of ineptitude, to try and become a player in this state for football. In years past it didn't matter if the Cougars were 1-3, because Utah State was so much worse. This is the first sign that Utah State is making advances.

A possible signature win, a 17 year, 10 game streak snapped, and an in-state rival. Add in the dominating fashion of the victory, and yes, this was a rush the field win. Just as long as the Aggies don't do it again next year when they win.

Admiral Ackbar Alert

Now that the Utes can say bye-bye bye, they prepare for their last regular season game against a team from an AQ Conference. as a Non-AQ team. Though the Utes still have a game against Notre Dame, who is technically a Non-AQ school, but has special BCS Benefits. In what originally was the first part of a home and away series against the Iowa State Cyclones, the Utes will travel to Iowa to take on the Big 12 foe. (Conference realignment has caused next years game between these two to be canceled.)

The Utes are the better team, and are 5-0 under Coach Whittingham when coming off of Bye Weeks. Adding in home openers (3-2), Bowl Games(6-0) (Whittingham was co-coach for the Fiesta Bowl), and weeks following a weekday game (8-3), the Utes are 22-5 under Whittingham with more than a typical week to prepare.

The Utes will bring the 7th ranked scoring defense, and the 6th ranked scoring offense to Jack Trice Stadium.

However, the Utes have got those stats against 3 of the worst teams in the nation. The Utes have had problems this year forcing takeaways. They only have 4 so far this year. To be a really good team, they need to start forcing more turnovers. This will also be the first time under Whittingham, that the Utes aren't facing a conference opponent after their bye. This will also be the third consecutive season the Utes will travel following their bye.

The Cyclones scored a big victory against Texas Tech last week, by jumping to a 24-0 lead, before putting the Red Raiders away 52-38. The Cyclones also pulled off a big surprise last year versus Nebraska. They have proven they are a team that will beat you, if you aren't prepared, and will look to carry momentum from last week into this game against the Utes. Following this game the Utes have two more MWC also-rans before they face the gauntlet that is the final 5 weeks. The game will probably be close at halftime. The Utes better make sure they aren't looking ahead. If they're focused on the game, they should be able to pull away in the second half to a comfortable victory. Otherwise they may find themselves trapped like a rebel.

The Rankings Game

The Utes were off last week, but thanks to losses in front of them, mainly Stanford, and Florida, managed to move up to become the 10th ranked team in the nation. This is the highest the Utes have been ranked, this early in the season. It also means that 33% of the top 10 is comprised of teams that can't play for the National Championship. With conference play starting to get into full swing, and the Utes having the toughest part of their schedule at the end, there will be chances for them to make major moves.

This week, the biggest chances for a ranked team ahead of the Utes to lose will be Nebraska playing undefeated Kansas State. Alabama also plays 19th ranked South Carolina, but if South Carolina were to pull the upset, chances are Bama would not fall far enough to drop behind the Utes, and the Gamecocks could very well get enough love off the victory to jump the Utes. I'm still cheering for South Carolina though.

The other big games involve two teams on the Utes tail. Always overhyped, and overrated, not to mention extremely lucky, LSU plays recently humiliated Florida. LSU is ranked 12th, and Florida is ranked 14th. The beating against Alabama is too fresh in voters minds, so even a victory against LSU probably would not cause a jump, but either way, one of these teams will drop significantly, and chances are they won't get back up this high.

The other game is Arizona versus the Oregon State Beavers. In the AP Poll Arizona is actually ranked ahead of the Utes at #9, while the Coaches have them 11th. With as quickly as they've been climbing the last couple weeks a win would almost assuredly cause them to jump the Utes in the Coaches poll. Oregon State has had arguably the toughest schedule so far this season with road games against the #4, and #5 teams in the Country. The Beavers are also notoriously slow starters before turning it on in conference play. Let's hope they turn it on this week.

Shameless Plug

Last week I mentioned that I was ABC 4's Red Zone Fan of the Game. If you weren't able to catch it on tv, here is that segment.

Sign The Mtn Up

Two weeks ago The Mtn chose to show the wonderful game between New Mexico and UNLV. This week there's a matchup I'm sure The Mtn finds even more intriguing. New Mexico plays its in state rival New Mexico State. Nevermind that the two teams are winless and have lost by a combined 74.3 points per game, I'm sure the Mtn must have this great matchup to help their lineup of games.

Again, can someone tell me why New Mexico head coach Mike Locksley still has a job?

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:05

Tuesday, September 28. 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

The fourth week of the season says goodbye to September with another loss for BYU, and the end to the first half of the Utah home schedule. Utah has shown that it used it's scrimmage season to improve upon first week issues. Meanwhile BYU actually showed some improvement for the first time this season. BYU is looking at the end of an unusually tough (for them) non conference schedule, while Utah is preparing for their toughest foe of the early season. Effective Scrimmaging

Unfortunately with a schedule against teams the likes Utah has faced so far this year, it's hard to decipher what about a team is real, and what is just a result of the easy opponents. After Utah's dominating, yet close, victory over Pitt to begin the season, there were a number of areas where the Utes had issues to be resolved. Ball security, special teams, Jordan Wynn's thumb, Shaky Smithson, slow starts and penalties were major issues for the Utes. The one nice thing about an easy early schedule is the chance to fix issues against inferior opponents.

Week 2 saw a decrease in penalties, and the redemption of Shaky Smithson. Fumbles, and blocked punts were still an issue. Week 3 saw Shaky become a legitimate return threat, penalties were at an acceptable level, and the Utes managed not to block a punt. Ball security however was an issue as the Utes fumbled 4 times, losing three.

Week 4 saw the Utes play almost a perfect game versus San Jose State. Jordan Wynn was back at QB, and led the Utes to an opening drive TD for the first time all year. In his return to action Wynn was solid going 14 of 18 for 124 yards and 2 TD's. The defense was absolutely dominating, limiting the Spartans to 172 total yards (3 less yards than Alabama held them to in week 1). There were 2 blocked punts, one by each team in the game. However both blocked punts were good for Utah.

In an attempt to keep the ball away from Shaky Smithson, the Spartans used their QB to attempt a rugby style punt. Only the punt bounced off of one of his lineman's head, and was picked up by Utah for a TD. On the very next drive, the Utes blocked the punt to set up Utah with another short field.

Utah went the entire game without a turnover, a sack, and almost the entire game without a penalty. The only penalty for Utah was a false start, by the second string offensive line with about 2 minutes to go in the game.

The only reason this game wasn't a shutout, was the Utes allowing a 71 yard kickoff return which gave the Spartans the ball at the Utah 20 yardline. The Utes did give up 17 yards on the drive, but eventually forced a field goal. That long kickoff return, and the the false start penalty, were the only real blemishes the Utes had. Now the Utes prepare to face their toughest foe of this early season.....

... themselves.

Bye Week

That's right, the Utes opponent this week isn't another team. The Utes must face themselves. The challenges for the Utes will be to fight off laziness. To fight off the urge to think they are better than they are. The tough thing for the Utes is that having such a good game, and blowing out their opponent 56-3, means the Utes now have 2 weeks before their next game. Two weeks thinking of what they did right. Two weeks of reading their own press clippings.

It's up to the Coaches to remind them that they have only played 4 teams with a combined record of 3-9, and one of those wins was because two of those teams played each other. It's up to the coaches to remind them that they face a brutal November. It's up to the coaches to remind them their next opponent is from an AQ Conference, and is only their second road game of the seasons. It's up to the coaches to find the things they've been doing wrong, and make them focus on that as opposed to what has been right.

Fortunately this isn't anything new for Utah. over the last 7 years, the Utes are 7-0 coming off of byes. This will be the third time they were undefeated during the bye. Add in the Utes 9 game bowl winning streak, and it shows that Utah is really good when given extra time to prepare. The good news is that Coach Whittingham, who's been around for all 7 years, and all 9 bowl wins, is 5-0 after bye weeks as Head Coach. The Bad news is there is no Utes football next week.

View From The Red Zone

Not a whole lot to point out from this game. Only two thoughts. First a repeat of a thought from a couple weeks ago, about how Terrance Cain just is not trusted by the crowd. As Cain entered the game in the third quarter, and promptly proceeded to overthrow a WR, Mad Giggler leaned over to me and said "Here comes the obligatory Terrance Cain Field Goal Drive." Have to say, I thought the same thing.

Secondly, ABC Red Zone is a weekly recap show that shows highlights of the game. About halfway through they have a Fan of the Game segment. This week, yours truly was that fan. I gave a quick interview, in which they interspersed clips of me cheering on the Utes throughout the game. The show aired Sunday at 10:30 on ABC. If you missed it I believe it is being replayed tonight at 9 p.m. on The Mtn.

A New Low

For the first time in Bronco Mendenhall's head coaching career, the BYU Cougars have lost three consecutive games. The Nevada Wolf Pack ended BYU's non conference schedule by handing the cougars their third consecutive loss 27-13. Unlike the previous two losses though, this one wasn't all bad for BYU.

Unlike against Air Force, and Florida State where they were ran over on their way to an embarrassing defeat, this one was more of a case, of BYU just wasn't as good as their opponent. Sure the Wolf Pack had 172 yards in the first quarter alone, on their way to 439 yards total. Yes, that makes the third consecutive game that BYU gave up 400 or more yards. There is also the fact that until the final minutes of the game BYU couldn't really move the ball. Their first TD came on a short field thanks to a bogus fumble call. After the first drive of the second half, it really looked like another blowout was inevitable.

It never came. In the second half BYU became the first team to prevent Nevada from scoring a TD in a quarter. While it's true that BYU struggled to stop Nevada, unlike the last two games, BYU didn't get beat by the big play. This is a defense that is young, and not very good, but for one week, at least, they weren't disastrous.

On the offensive side of the ball, the Cougars may have finally found the guy that their offense will revolve around. RB J.J. Di Luigi has become the focal point of the offense. For most of the game QB Jake Heaps rarely looked to throw the ball downfield. Instead the Cougars relied on a short passing game. Di Luigi has benefited from this. Even before this week, he had started to solidify himself as Heaps safety net. Di Luigi caught 8 passes for 56 yards. He also ran it 16 times for another 67 yards. Di Luigi is currently averaging a 6.3 yards per carry average. It's becoming clear, that as Heaps struggles through learning the D-1 game, Di Luigi is becoming the focal point of the offense. As long as he doesn't renew his fumbling issues.

Indefensible Act, Great Sentiment

I'm going to climb on a soapbox for a moment. I realize that football is a rough sport, and injuries are a part of the game. I realize that fluke accidents happen, or situation occur that cause serious injuries. Nevada OL John Bender's dirty, cheap block on Romney Fuga in the second quarter, was not a fluke. It was a cheap shot.

The Wolf Pack had set up a screen pass. Fuga was trying to make a move to get into position to tackle the ball carrier when Bradley cut his knees out from under him. Fuga ended up with a torn ACL, and is now out for the season. What makes the play completely indefensible by Bradley is the fact that he dove at the back/side of Fuga's knees. He did not have to. He could have made a standing block, instead he led with his shoulder and dove directly at the knees of a player who didn't even know he was there.

I don't know Bradley. I don't know what kind of person he is. I don't know if he had the intent to injure Fuga. I do however know that it was a stupid play by him. A cheap play and a very dirty hit. It was one of the dirtiest hits I have ever seen playing football. Just because none of the officials saw it doesn't make it any less so. Anybody who's ever played football at any level know that you don't go for the knees, especially when the player doesn't know you are there. Here's hoping for a good recovery for Fuga so that he can return next year.

In the second half, Fuga's teammate, Vic So'oto came out wearing Fuga's jersey. It was a great sentiment, and a nice show of support to his teammate. It's also something that would never have been allowed in the NFL. Only in college football would a player be allowed a jersey switch mid game like this. So'oto did record an interception in the second half wearing Fuga's jersey.

A Slight Break in the Schedule

BYU has played a very difficult schedule so far. A weak Washington team to start the season was followed by a game against the Air Force Falcons on September 11th. Then a game across the country in Tallahassee for Florida State. Finally last week against the now 25th ranked Nevada Wolf Pack.

Coming into the season I was high on Utah State, and figured this could be a trap game. The last 6 quarters of football by the Aggies are leaving that less likely. While not the foregone conclusion of years past, this trip to Logan for the Cougars could be just what they need. A victory could help the Cougars, not just in the standing, but from a mental position. The Cougars are a young team. A Team that hasn't felt the success of past years. Losing can have a negative effect.

This will be a good game, unlike the past few years. The Aggies are very much improved. For the first time in years, they won't be completely outmatched by the Cougars. But they are also in the middle of a slide. This will come down to whichever coach can play the mental game better. This game can be a turning point for whoever wins it. Whoever loses it though faces a tough game the following week, and the down momentum could turn into a landslide.

Sending Out My Thanks

Even though CSU finally won for the first time in 12 games, and UNLV got it's first victory this season over New Mexico, I would like to really thank UNLV, Colorado State, and New Mexico for being 3 of the worst teams in the nation, and proving why the MWC was never going to get an Automatic Qualifying spot. In doing so, they are proving why Utah absolutely had to take the invitation to the Pac-12 instead of gambling on the MWC.

Game of the Week

This week the Air Force Falcons matchup with the Navy Midshipmen. If you want to watch a pretty fun game, that will end rather quickly, this is the game to watch. The game will go quickly because both of these teams rely heavily on the run, and both are pretty disciplined. It'll be on Versus Saturday at 2 p.m., and I recommend it if you want to watch a good football game.

Programming Note

It has been announced that Utah's game against Iowa State on the 9th will be played at 5 p.m. MST. It will also be on TV on the Fox College Sports Channel. It may regionally be picked up by Fox Sports Utah. If not, check your local listings for Fox College Sports (617/623 on Direct TV).

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:43

Thursday, September 23, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Do you realize we are already a quarter of the way through the season. Ahh glorious football, why must you be so fleeting. At least that means we still have three quarters of the season to go. So what happened this week in the quarter pole game? Well the cougars showed up for a quarter, and the Utes spotted the Lobos a quarter before destorying them for the other three quarters. History repeated itself twice this week, once from last year, and once from just last week. Finally, the BYU QB situation has figured itself out, but after watching the games the last two weeks it really may not matter.

The Night the Lights Went Out

As the Utes and Lobos were in for the Halftime break, it started to get dark enough that lights were needed at the stadium. Only one problem, the lights wouldn't come on.

Before home games, New Mexico has a huge blow up Lobo that they put at the end of their tunnel to let their players run out of. Only before the game the Lobo wouldn't blow up, and instead just sat there deflated. The staff had to drag the dead deflated Lobo off the field.

The football gods are a humorous bunch who are into symbolism. The Lobos, the team this time, is a dead deflated group. The Utes absolutely destroyed them 56-14, despite a sloppy first quarter when the offense took a bit to get going. The Utes fumbled on their first possession, and tried fumbling again on their second possession, if not for Brad Clifford getting the ball.

There was no fight from the Lobos the rest of the night, until the Utes put in their second and third stringers. The Lobos have now been outscored 180-31, and rank at the bottom, or near the bottom of most statistical categories. For the third straight week, I wonder how it is that Mike Locksley was able to enter the season as Head Coach, let alone why he isn't let go immediately. It's sad to see the Lobos in such disarray.

The Utes Badly Need a Wynn

Last year, I was all for Redshirting Wynn, under the premise that Cain was effective enough as a QB to lead the team, despite the lack of flow the offense had with him in there. Then Wynn came in during the Wyoming game, and the Offense completely changed. It opened up.

In the last two games, Cain has been the starter in replace of an injured Wynn. Cain's numbers have been terrific. On the year he is 33 of 43, for 455 yards, 5 TD's and 0 INT's. Cain is proving to be a very efficient QB, and can manage the offense. The problem is, there is just no flow or rhythm to the offense when he's in there. In each of these last two games, the Offense has been nearly stagnant for the majority of the first half, before waking up in the second half.

Cain does look more comfortable as the QB than he did last year. It's nice to know that if he's needed, the Utes have a backup who won't lose them the game. I just don't think that in the important games (TCU, ND, BYU), that Cain would be able to go out and win the game. That's why, despite the efficient manner in which he has led the team the last two weeks, Wynn is this team's QB, no matter how much media try to generate a QB Controversy.

With the Iowa State game coming up in 3 weeks, and San Jose State being the last game before the Cyclones, look for the Return of Wynn, but don't look for a full game out of Wynn. I would expect Wynn to play about a half, to get the rust off. Then Cain can come in. Watch for it though, because with two more pass attempts, Cain becomes the national leader in passing efficiency.

Shaky, Rattle & Roll

History repeated itself for Shaky Smithson this week. After his 205 total yards last week, he topped himself in New Mexico. This week, though it was all special teams. Well all but 1 rushing yard. Two kickoff returns for 83 yards, and 4 punt returns for 140 yards, including a 73 yard TD, gave Shaky his second consecutive Mountain West Special Teams Player of the Week award.

Shaky now leads the nation in punt return yardage, by a margin of 69 yards. He's second in the nation in punt return

average. And he's tied for first in punt return TD's. Not too bad for a guy who wanted to burrow through the ground to find a place to hide after his fumble in week 1.

Since that week 1 debacle, the only real complaint one could make about Shaky, is that stutter step he has a tendency to make during returns, when he's trying to find a lane.

Scrimmage Season Continues

Again, not a whole lot to look forward to this week, as Shaky, Defensive Player of the Week Lamar Chapman, and the Rest of the Utes welcome San Jose State to Rice Eccles Stadium. Much like UNLV, and New Mexico, this shouldn't be much of a game. Although the Spartans did give the Terrance Cain led Utes a scare last year in California.

This is another chance for the Utes to tune up, with a possible Admiral Ackbar sighting in their near future. Hopefully the Utes can take care of business early. Give Wynn a chance to work off some rust, let Cain get his two passes in to become the most efficient QB in the nation, and get some more work for Robles, and the other young guys. Who knows, maybe we can get another Vakapuna TD for the Utes. No Fui! Much like last week, the main goal, is to work on some issues, and come out of this game healthy.

Week 3 Strikes Again

Last year in week 3 BYU Welcomed in Florida State. In a game that coach Bronco Mendenhall later admitted he didn't take as serious as he should, the Seminoles absolutely humiliated the Cougars at home, snapping their 18 game home winning streak with a 54-28 victory. This year week 3 once again saw BYU facing the Seminoles, this time in Tallahassee.

Although the score was closer, the domination was no less prevalent. Florida State moved the ball at will on the ground, while the Cougars could must almost no offense. Save for two drives at the end of the second quarter, the Cougars offense seemed to have missed the plane flight.

FSU meanwhile racked up 427 yards of total offense, including 278 on the ground. Seminole QB Christian Ponder continually caused problems for the Cougars with his ability to run the ball. Meanwhile Seminole RB Chris Thompson wishes he could always play BYU as he had a 13.7 yards per carry average, aided greatly by an 83 yard TD run.

Defensively the Cougars were an absolute mess. Many times they would meet the Seminole ball carrier with an opportunity to make a great stop. Instead, Cougar defender, after Cougar defender missed a tackle. It was not an uncommon site to see a Seminole break four, five, or six tackles on a single play.

Offensively BYU was able to actually get some movement on the ground. Di Luigi gained 93 yards with a 5.2 yards per carry average. Unfortunately for the Cougars, the Air game was non existant, and with the defense unable to make a tackle, they couldn't focus on the run as much as would have been needed to win.

Though some good news came out of the Week 3 curse. The football gods may have decided to save the Cougars from their head coach.

Indecision Decided

Through three weeks the two qb system has been an outright disaster for the Cougars. The two QB didn't cost them a win versus Washington, and while the Cougars would have lost anyways against Air Force and FSU, the two QB system was terrible. After the debacle against Air Force, Coach Bronco Mendenhall separated himself from any QB Decision while driving a bus over his assistants.

So after the 4th drive when Riley Nelson didn't see anymore playing time, and Heaps was the QB solely many had hoped that Bronco had finally come to the realization that anybody not in the Nelson family knew, Heaps was the QB to start.

Then came the weekly conference call with reporters during which Mendenhall stated that he was leaning towards playing both QB's again. This call was at 11 a.m. on Tuesday. It's interesting that Mendenhall was planning to be playing both QB's, about the same time that Riley Nelson was planning to have season ending surgery. An hour after the conference call, Riley Nelson announced that he had a torn labrum in his non throwing shoulder, and would have season ending surgery.

All jokes aside about Nelson's non throwing shoulder being both of them, and all questions aside about Bronco's disconnect with his team, Nelson's injury, as unfortunate as it is for him, may be a blessing in disguise for the Cougars. With Nelson benched, this becomes Heaps' team. His comments after the news came out are very telling. Heaps came to BYU to be the man, he didn't want to split time, he didn't want to be in a two QB system.

In the long run this is what's best for the Cougars. Even in the short run this is what's best for the Cougars. But just because Heaps is the QB doesn't mean this team will immediately get back to the winning ways of a few years ago. Heaps has a few issues. First he's a pocket QB, which means he's not much of a scrambler. With the Cougar OL this year, that may be a problem. One benefit about Heaps being the man, is that Playboy All-American Tackle Matt Reynolds can stop flip-flopping between the right and left side of the line, and instead take his spot as the protector of the blind side.

Heaps also has a tendency to lock onto his primary receiver, and not make check downs. This can lead to the Defense keying on the QB and getting interceptions. He also needs to learn to throw with some touch. He's a gunslinger, and he's can really rocket the passes in. In shorter passing situations touch is nice.

Finally he takes too long to make a decision. With a good OL this is a bad idea. With the Cougars OL this is a terrible idea. It helped lead to a bunch of sacks in the FSU game. It's also the biggest cause of Heaps fumbling in that game.

The good news is that all of these are typical for young QB's, and can be fixed over the next little while, as Heaps gets playing time. The bad news, judging by the WR's and RB's it may not matter who the QB is.

Here's an idea, Catch

BYU WR's and RB need to catch the freaking ball. WR O'Neill Chambers may be a lost cause, but the rest of the WR's and RB's have had a serious case of the drops so far this season. Drops kill drives. Drops kill QB Confidence. Drops kill QB and WR chemistry. Much like the BYU Defense has had a hard time holding on to opposing players, the Offense seems to have a hard time holding on to the Ball.

Some of the drops may have been caused by the fact that they had two completely different types of QB's throwing to them. It's hard to go from a Soft Touch, to a Rocket Pass. Whatever the reason, if the ball keeps hitting the turf, the offense will stay near the bottom of the Rankings.

BYU gets to play Admiral Ackbar

This week Nevada comes to BYU. The Wolf Pack are favored by 4 points. They also feature an outstanding triple option "pistol" offense. QB Colin Kaepernick may be the most difficult of the 4 running QB's that BYU has faced this season. Rushing wise Nevada is 5th in the with 302 yards per game. Passing wise they aren't so bad, ranked 29th with 258.7 yards per game. Their 50.7 points per game is 4th.

Considering Nevada's strength is BYU's weakness (rush offense vs. rush defense), this game could easily be another loss for the Cougars, which is why many are predicting it as such. I say beware. As terrible of a job as Mendenhall has done so far this season, he's still a decent coach. He's also a proud coach, and being embarrassed two weeks in a row can't leave him feeling all that well.

If BYU falls into the same issues they've had the last two weeks it could be a 3rd straight loss. However, if BYU can show some pride, hold their assignments, and make a few tackles, they could be the one springing the trap.

Boise's Road to Glendale

Boise State got back on track this week, after their week 2 loss without playing. Although beating up on Wyoming won't help much in the long run, they at least beat the Cowboys on the Road, by more than Texas beat the Cowboys at home.

This week though comes the last of the non cupcake teams on Boise's schedule. The Oregon State Beavers travel to the Smurf Turf. Oregon State is 1-1 after an opening week loss to TCU, and a victory last week against Louisville. The Beavers are a team that gets better as the season wears on.

Should Boise State make it out of this game with a victory, their schedule may not be as simple as initially thought. While still not tough enough to get them into the NC Game, Nevada, Fresno State, and Utah State have all seemed very improved this year, and may give the Bronco's a scare.

Blog Export: Annals of the Homestarmy, <http://www.thehomestarmy.com/s9y/>

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:31

Tuesday, September 14, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Week 2 typically will tell you more about a team than a week 1 result will. Sometimes week 2 will re-affirm what was learned in week 1, while sometimes week 2 will give a completely different result, that will make you wonder if anything from week 1 can be trusted. Then again, the nice thing about football is that nothing is consistent, so teams will always be re-evaluating the lessons learned. So what was learned in week 2? We learned that two is not greater than one. We learned that swinging gates are better left closed. We learned that you can lose without even playing. We learned that redemption is possible.

And finally we learned that white face paint protects you from sunburns better than red face paint. Cain's Able With Wynn On Sideline

The big story going into the game, was that starting QB Jordan Wynn had sprained his thumb in the first half of last week's game. There was some question as to whether Wynn would be cleared to play this week. With UNLV and New Mexico on the schedule coming up, and neither appearing to be much of a threat to knock off the Utes, they decided to rest Wynn. The move allowed for Terrance Cain to return as the starting QB.

Cain was 7-1 as a starter last year before being replaced by Wynn. However, the offense when Cain played last year never really felt as if it had much of a flow. After Wynn started, the offense opened up, and Wynn secured the starting spot for 2010.

It was time to see if Cain had grown more comfortable in the offense. In the end, there was some improvement. Mainly in the fact that the offense actually threw downfield with Cain, instead of relying on bubble screen's, and slant routes that Cain utilized so much in 2009. Cain also looked much more confident in the pocket, and when throwing, than he did last season. Overall, Cain was very efficient going 13 of 20 for 207 yards and 2 TD's, as he led the Utes to a 38-10 victory.

However, a couple of issues that affected him in 2009 were still very prevalent in 2010. The first issue is Cain's reliance on a single WR. Of Cain's 13 completions 4 were to Brooks, 2 were to Wide. Everyone else had a single reception. This is very similar to last year, when Cain relied heavily upon David Reed.

Secondly, and the bigger issue, was Cain's running of the zone read running play. The Utes running game heavily relies on what's called a zone read. Basically 1 or two RB's line up next to the QB in the shotgun formation. When the ball is snapped, the QB starts to hand the ball to one of the RB's. As he is doing this, it is the QB's job to read the DE's position. If the DE is staying at home he is to let the RB take the ball. If, however, the DE is keying on the RB, the QB is supposed to take the ball back out and run with it himself. The play becomes less effective, if the QB shows that he is unwilling to take the ball out and run it himself, as the DE stops worrying about the QB as a threat.

In 2009, despite being a very athletic QB with some running ability, Cain rarely kept the ball on this play. It was my hope that this was more due to being uncomfortable in the offense, and it would change on Saturday. Instead, time after time, Cain gave the ball to the running back. Even as the DE stopped worrying about Cain, and the yardage gained started dropping to the 2 yards per carry territory, Cain would fail to read. Only once, all game, did Cain actually keep the ball on the zone read. He ended up gaining 4 yards on a 2nd and 5 play. This was also the last time they ran the play all day.

Chances are Cain will play this Saturday against the Lobos so that Wynn can continue to rest. Cain needs to read this play correctly, and show a willingness to keep the ball. He needs to do so early in the game so that the defense will respect his threat. Otherwise, they may as well call it the Illiterate Zone Read.

Redemption

Cain wasn't the only Ute making a return to the field trying to prove something this week. After a disastrous week 1 in which Shaky Smithson fumbled a pass, and then muffed a punt he had no business trying to field, coach Whittingham removed him from return duties, and Shaky saw his receiver duties also limited.

Shaky was given a second chance this week. Presumably this would also be a last chance. If here were to have another game like the one against Pittsburgh, chances are, the only thing Shaky would be catching, would be a case of

the slivers after spending a good chunk of the season on the bench.

Instead, Shaky wasted no time repaying Whittingham's faith in him. After the Utes forced a punt on the first UNLV drive of the game, Shaky fielded the 38 yard kick and promptly returned it for 30 yards, setting up the Utes with 1st and 10 on the UNLV 35.

As the Utes came out of Halftime they held a precarious 17-3 lead. After softening up the Rebel defense with two quick screen passes, Cain saw Shaky get behind the UNLV secondary, and hooked up with him on a 55 yard pass. On the ensuing possession, the Rebels were once again forced to punt. What came next was Shaky putting his full package of skills on display.

Upon fielding the punt, Shaky hesitated a moment as he scanned the field and set up his plan. It helped that this pause lulled the Rebels into thinking a whistle had been blown. Next, Shaky started going to his right, baiting the defenders to follow him. A quick change of direction to his left, and towards the sideline, helped set up teammate Greg Bird, who levelled the Rebels with a brutal, helmet removing, de-cleater of a block. Shaky continued running down the sideline, then quickly made a back step, which took him out of the path of a diving rebel, who instead caught the air as he went out of bounds. Nothing else stood between Shaky and the end zone.

In week 1, Shaky heard his name from the Rice-Eccles crowd. In week 2, he also heard his name from the Rice-Eccles crowd. I'm sure the week 2 version is more of what he wanted. His 77 yard punt return helped give him 205 total yards and two TD's on the day. I'm sure it was much easier to go to Coach Whittingham after his week 2 performance, which earned him MWC Special Teams Player of the Week.

Close the Swinging Gate

Of course not everything went great for the Utes, especially on the Special Teams where a good day was ruined by another blocked punt. As Whittingham has said two punts being blocked in three years is terrible, let alone two in two games. Part of the problem that has led to a rash of punts being blocked for not only the Utes, but many teams in College Football, is the prevalence of the swinging gate punt formation.

In a pro style punt formation all of the linemen are up at the line of scrimmage, or directly behind the initial group of blockers. This requires that those who are going to run down to try and tackle the return man must wait initially to block any potential rushers trying to block the kick. The delay can give athletic returners a few extra seconds to set up a return. Sometimes a few extra seconds are all that's needed.

The swinging gate formation takes three blockers off of the line of scrimmage and sets them about 5-7 yards behind the ball. These three blockers line up side by side, with the middle blocker perpendicular to the other two, so that the snap can go through. After the snap, this middle blocker "closes the gate" and faces the oncoming blockers.

By putting this extra line of defense further back, it allows the players to immediately get into their lines and head after the returner, without waiting to stay back and block. This puts extra pressure on the three back linemen, as those rushing the punt aren't held up at the initial point of attack. Add into the equation the extra delay of the swing man and the rushers are already at an advantage, as the three blockers have to pick up the attack and make sure to block them out of the kickers path.

This formation is a gimmick, and as more and more teams have figured out that splitting up the rushers, causes the three blockers to open up their lanes, blocked punts are becoming more and more frequent. It's time to close the swinging gate, and lock it down for good.

11 ah ah ah, 12 oh no

In Coach Whit's mind an administrative penalty is one that happens outside of the action of the play. These are mainly mental penalties, or penalties that come from a lack of concentration, such as false starts, delay of game, and 12 men in the formation.. These are also the kind of penalties that kept a thoroughly dominated Pitt team in the game in week 1. Through the first quarter and a half of play, it looked like these same penalties were going to keep an overmatched UNLV team in the game.

Utah suffered from an almost delay of game, that required an early timeout. On 3rd and 5, the defense was called for a 12 men in the formation that extended a drive. The hoped for improvement from week 1 to week 2 did not appear to be. To the Utes credit though, they cleared up the mistakes, and played pretty well throughout the 2nd half.

The Utes have a couple more scrimmage games over the next two weeks that they can use to fix these administrative penalties before the heart of the schedule starts.

The View from the Redzone

Two things stood out this weekend while at the game. Firstly I noticed during warmups that UNLV's coaching staff is fiery. They were loud, and very animated during warmups with their team. Coach Houck is known as a disciplinarian. If he can get the Rebels to cut down on mistakes, and get the Rebels to take on the same fiery personas as some of his assistant coaches, UNLV might just win some games.

Secondly, the crowd does not trust Terrance Cain. There was a constant feeling of uneasiness during the game. When Jereme Brooks dropped a sure TD pass on the first drive, and the Utes had to settle for a figgie, there were a few "here we go again" rumblings. When Eddie Wide rambled in for the first TD of the game, the reaction was a bit delayed. As Mad Giggler said, "it was almost as if no one expected them to get it." When Cain connected with Shaky on a deep pass there was shock, before the excitement. It was as if the crowd was expecting the other shoe to drop at any moment.

Trapped

Last week I mentioned that the Air Force Falcons presented a trap game for the BYU Cougars. The Falcons sprung the trap in Colorado. The young Cougar defense was woefully outmatched as the Falcons triple optioned their way to 400+ yards of rushing. Air Force had 6 different rushers who each had at least one run of 10 yards or more. As the running game kept racking up yards, the Cougar secondary had to come up to help in the run, which allowed Air Force QB to find holes in the secondary. When it was all said and done the Falcons had notched a 35-14 victory, and stated their case for inclusion in the MWC "Big Three".

Typically BYU is able to score early on the Falcons, forcing them out of their run game. The Falcons aren't a team that can come from big deficits down. They rely on time of possession, and turnovers to wear down their opponents. However, the Cougars vaunted QB System proved the old adage that when you have two qb's, you have none.

Riley Nelson started the game and drove the Cougars to the opening TD. They did this mainly on the ground, with Nelson relying more on himself, and his legs, than he did his WR's. Of course when one of those WR's is O'Neill Chambers, one could hardly blame him. Chambers had another bad game, with a few drops. On many of the plays as the game went on, it looked as if Chambers wasn't giving max effort.

On the second offensive possession the Cougars were moving the ball through the air with Heaps, before J.J. Di Luigi fumble turned the ball over. On this fumble was another example of Chambers terrible play, as he was in position to save the ball for the Cougars, but failed to even try. After Nelson scored another TD on an option drive, the Falcon defense started to clamp down.

On the last drive of the half for the Cougars Heaps made his freshman mistake and threw an interception. What happened next was a massive blunder by Bronco and the Cougar coaching staff. Heaps never saw the field again, as Nelson was the QB for the entire second half. The second half was filled with three and outs, and many examples of Nelson showing that he would rather run it himself than throw the ball.

The yanking of Heaps was a terrible move. Heaps is a freshman, he's going to make mistakes. To bench him after the interception and not put him back in, could give him confidence issues. How is he supposed to trust that he won't get the same reaction the next mistake he makes.

Hey Bus Driver

Bronco, in his weekly press conference, said he was not involved in the decision to yank Heaps. He implied that all decisions involving the QB's were left up to QB Coach Brandon Doman, and Offensive Coordination Robert Anai. According to Bronco, not only was the decision to pull Heaps and play Riley their decision, but the main decision to go with two QB's was initially left up to them also.

Bronco was also asked about the gameplan defensively. In years past, Bronco, as well as other players have come out and said that in Air Force Week, Bronco has extra involvement with the defense, and is a major part of the defensive gameplan. According to Bronco, he wasn't involved this weekend, and although he overlooked the gameplans and approved them, they were setup by his coordinators.

It's not uncommon for Coordinators, and Assistants to have more involvement in the gameplans. It's also not uncommon for them to be involved in QB play. But for Bronco to basically separate himself from the decisions made this weekend, is unacceptable as a Head Coach. He is the leader of the team. It all comes down to him. Sure all coaches delegate assignments, and deficiencies in their department are dealt with internally. However, final say always rests with the Head Coach.

If Bronco disagreed with the two QB system, and thought Heaps was better, than he should have said so before it got to game 2. Instead, Bronco says he now has a better idea of what's going on with the QB's. According to Bronco the experiment is over. For Cougar fans, it should be. Riley Nelson is a fine option QB, but BYU is not an option system. Nelson doesn't work. Heaps always was the smarter choice.

My personal belief is the two QB system was a way for the Cougars to get through the first four weeks. I don't think Bronco ever expected a loss to Air Force. The only thing worse than the beating the team took on the field, was the beating the assistants took from Bronco off the field. I hope they enjoy their new location under the bus.

The Week's Biggest Loss

Despite the embarrassing performance, the Cougars did not suffer the biggest loss of the weekend. That would have been suffered by a team that didn't even play. Boise State's postseason destination is out of it's hands. They have to hope that the two decent teams they have on their schedule don't completely fall apart. So when Virginia Tech was upset by James Madison University, it was the Broncos who suffered most.

Lost was a marquee win for the Broncos. Lost were 7 first place AP Votes. Lost were 26 points in the coaches poll. Lost were rankings in the computers. 4 of the BCS Computers put out rankings throughout the season. The Broncos dropped in all 4 polls, including a double digit drop in one of them.

Of course the fact that Ohio State and Alabama looked so well didn't help, but if the Broncos go undefeated and are left outside looking in at the National Championship game, when a 1 loss team is playing in it, the Broncos can look back to this weekend and thank Virginia Tech.

Week Three Curse

Next week the Cougars travel for their longest road game of the year. They go to Tallahassee to play the Florida State seminoles. Last year the Seminoles came into Provo, and absolutely crushed the Cougars, who were still on a high from a week one victory over Oklahoma. The big issue for the Cougars last year was how were they going to match up with running qb Christian Ponder. Ponder remains the big issue this year.

Last week the Seminoles got slaughtered by Oklahoma. Oklahoma QB Landry Jones had a field day with a secondary that looks even worse than the one they had last year. This means that if the Cougars have any hope, they will have to do it with Jake Heaps, who has the ability to throw down the field, and relegate Riley to at most 20% of the snaps.

The interesting stat of the week involves this game. Bronco Mendenhall is 1-4 in week 3 games, including last year's defeat versus the Seminoles. Though it really has no effect on the game it'll be interesting to see if that slump still continues. Things that will have an effect though are, will the Seminoles be angry after this week's performance? What will the QB situation be for the Cougars?

Bottom of the Barrell

In all honesty the only issue the Utes should have this week is themselves. New Mexico is in disarray. After being blown out by Texas Tech by the score of 52-17, they have been outscored 114-72. How coach Mike Locksley still has a job is a complete mystery. However, as early season lessons have shown, anybody can win at any time. Just ask Virginia Tech, Kansas, and Ole Miss, who each have lost to FCS teams Jacksonville State, North Dakota State, and James Madison.

Of course, all three of those teams are better than New Mexico. As long as the Utes focus on this week, a victory should be easy. More important than the score, will be the performance. Can the Utes finally fix some of their "administrative penalties"? Can they avoid turnovers? Can they go a game without a blocked punt? This game is a chance to rest some early season injuries (Wynn, Zane Beadles). A chance to fix some early season mistakes. With any luck the Utes can get up big, get the second and third stringers some playing time, and come home with a win, and without any major injuries.

Blog Export: Annals of the Homestarmy, <http://www.thehomestarmy.com/s9y/>

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:20

Tuesday, September 7, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Utah, BYU, TCU, and Boise State all kept rolling. Utah outdoes BYU's 2 QB system, by playing 4 QB's, including 2 of the 3 MWC players of the week. Two Heisman campaigns came into the state and died. A former Cougar came home to LaVell Edwards Stadium, and gave a horrific coaching performance. Gary Andersen takes the state's best QB into Norman, Oklahoma, and scares the crap out of the Sooners, probably making them never want to see a team from the state of Utah again. An exciting opening weekend has come and gone in College Football. Now it's time to make the big improvements from week 1 to week 2.

Also rumors of a football team in New Mexico were proven to be no more valid than sightings of Bigfoot. When Dominance Isn't

"You stupid dummy, why did you call a timeout." -- Kyle Whittingham

Coach Whit is just reiterating what everyone in Rice Eccles Stadium was wondering. Although some probably weren't as nice as just calling him dummy. With Utah ahead 24-21 and 3 seconds left in the game, Pitt lined up for a game winning field goal. The kick split the uprights, Panthers celebrated, the game was going to overtime. Except Whittingham had called timeout to ice the kicker.

So time to do it again. Kick is up and it's hooked. Missed to the left, stadium is going crazy. But Whit had called another timeout.

Third time was the charm as Pitt kicked a good field goal, and Whit had kept the final Timeout in his pocket. Fortunately for Whittingham, he can talk about 1-1 in icing attempts in a jovial manner because, true freshman Safety, intercepted Pitt QB Tino Sunseri on the first play of overtime. Utah then ran the ball with Asiata to the 2 yard line, before Joe Phillips booted the game winner, 27-24 Utah was victorious.

Of course, the game never should have been that close. Utah put on an absolutely dominating, beat down on the Panthers throughout the night, only to allow Pitt to hang in the game due to stupid mistakes. WR Shaky Smithson fumbled the ball on the first drive, and made a stupid decision, attempting to field a punt he should have just let go out. Instead he muffed it, and the Pitt got the first TD of the game.

Later in the goal line, QB Jordan Wynn floated a pass which was intercepted in the end zone, leaving 7 points on the field. Utah also had a punt blocked deep in their own territory, and committed 11 penalties for 99 yards, including two 12 men on the field penalties.

However, Utah's stupidity was the only chance Pitt had all night. The Utes outgained Pitt 405 yards to 266 yards. Defensively Utah was amazing. Pitt had two 6'5" WR's who were basically non-existent all game. CB Brandon Burton, on multiple occasions out-jumping Pitt Star WR Baldwin to break up passes.

Pitt came into the game with the leading Sack duo from 2009. Utah's offensive line, shut them down. Greg Romeus has been projected as a top 10 pick in next April's draft. Not once did he even sniff the QB.

Pitt Sophomore RB Dion Lewis was a Heisman Trophy Candidate. In 2009 he ran for 1799 yards, and 17 TD's. It looked like he was going to have a big game, running for 18 yards on the first play of the game. After that, though, he became good friends with Utah's interior Defensive Linemen. Utah's DL blew up the OL of Pitt all night, and held Dion Lewis to a career low 75 yards on 25 carries. Everywhere Lewis went, he was constantly getting bottled up by a fast and tenacious defense. As the game wore on, Lewis began to get more and more frustrating. His utter inefficiency left Wannstedt unable to trust his running game in Overtime, and instead tried to catch Utah off guard by throwing with Tino Sunseri. Unfortunately for the Panthers, Brian Blechen introduced himself to college football by stepping in front of the pass, and in doing so became the MWC defensive player of the week.

You're only playing 2 QB's?

A lot has been talked about BYU using 2 QB's this year. Not to be outdone, Utah strutted out 4 QB's, sort of. The previously talked about true freshman Brian Blechen, was a QB in college. When he got to Utah, the Utes continued a tradition of moving players around. Blechen wasn't the only former QB to make an impact in the game.

WR DeVonte Christopher, was one of the QB's last spring competing for the starting job. Instead, the Utes converted him to WR. He caught 8 passes for 155 yards, including a big play in the 4th quarter where he caught the ball and came down with a case of the runs. 61 yards later, he was in the end zone, and had wrapped up MWC Offensive player of the week honors.

Christopher, and Wynn weren't the only QB's competing for that starting position last spring. Chad Manis briefly was in that debate. Instead he red-shirted 2009, and learned his new position of LB. Making his first start, he helped a defense that completely handled Pitt Star RB Dion Lewis.

As for the Starting QB, Jordan Wynn threw for 283 yards and 3 touchdowns, to go with his goal line interception.

The View from the Red Zone

This season I have season tickets. Our seats our N25 Row 5. Deep in the heart of the North Red Zone. The MUSS was out in full force for the season opener. The crowd noise caused 5 false starts by the Pitt offense, a couple times as they were trying to go into score, which instead left Pitt attempting Field Goals, instead of TD's. Big credit to our end zone area, who took it as a slight when during the Overtime coin toss, Pitt chose to come our way, instead of to the South.

As you watch the games, when kicking through the North Uprights, keep an eye out for us.

Whit's Graveyard

Last year, Whit mentioned in an article for the Salt Lake Tribune, that he would like to build a Graveyard at Rice-Eccles, with tombstones for every AQ Team they have beaten. Utah gave him his graveyard, in a way. Early in the game, the video board at the Stadium showed a graveyard scene. As the video rolled through there were tombstones of Utah's Victims. After the game, one more was added.

Although I would have loved for the Graveyard to be an actual physical graveyard, where an entire ritual could have been made of burying opponents after games, I'm glad that at least they built the graveyard in some fashion, even if only digitally.

BYU 2 QB System: 1, Heisman Candidate 0

The state of Utah became the place where Heisman Campaigns come to die. Utah shut down Dion Lewis on Thursday. On Saturday, Jake Locker went into Provo, and had a pretty miserable game. Locker constantly overthrew, or underthrew WR's. Twice late in the game, with his team trailing by 6, the Huskies had a 3rd and medium range play in BYU territory. Both times Locker was unable to convert, and his Huskies fell to the Cougars 23-17.

Locker looked rattled, and uncomfortable most of the time. His passing was very erratic. If that is what the Heisman Finalist looks like, than it's a down year for talent.

Of course, Locker's struggles might not be all his fault.

As for the two BYU QB's. Neither one of them looked spectacular. The good news is, neither one of them looked terrible either. Nelson had the highlight plays of the game thanks to his 2 TD's. Neither QB threw an interception, and interestingly enough both ended up with exactly 131 yards. There were times where the offense for the Cougars struggled to adjust from one QB to another. Fortunately the Cougars had a gameplan of steady mid range throws that didn't force either QB to have to win the game. Overall, neither QB did anything to separate one from the other.

The big noticeable difference between the two QB's, is that Nelson has a bit of a softer touch, while Heaps has a gun, sometimes to a detriment. Nelson also brings a running threat, which the Cougars used effectively with some option.

Had the Huskies scored on their last drive, it was Nelson's turn in the rotation. It would have been interesting to see if Bronco would have stayed with the rotation, or if he would have put Heaps in with his gun.

Are we sure he isn't still supporting BYU?

Washington Head Coach Steve Sarkisian, is of course, the former All-American QB for BYU. He was actually one of the 8 QB's BYU was honoring at halftime.

His QB performances in Provo were definitely better than his coaching performance. Sarkisian coached an absolutely terrible game. It started with how he hamstrung his QB.

Part of what made Locker the Heisman finalist coming into this game was his ability to run the ball, and to make as many plays with his legs, as with his arm.

BYU has had major problems with running QB's the last few years. In 2008, the very same Jake Locker gave BYU fits, as he led the Huskies to a 1 point loss. In a season where Washington would go winless, this was their best game of the year.

Instead Sarkisian, seemed intent keeping his QB hamstrung by forcing him to stay in the Pocket, and pass the ball. As the game went on, you could see there were many times, that Locker wanted to run the ball, but instead stayed in the pocket and was either sacked, or threw a bad pass. It was so obvious that Sark did not want Locker to run, that on the game clinching 4th down play, BYU rushed only 3, dared Locker to run, with wide open lanes as they went to defend the pass.

Sark failed, throughout the day to adjust to BYU's short passing plays, but the game still came down to a big call with 12 minutes to go.

Down 6 points, and having had his awful defense, in the middle of what would turn out to be 3 consecutive forced punts, the Huskies had the ball 4th and 2 at the BYU 23. Smart football says a Field goal here, and it's only a 3 point game. Earlier, Washington Kicker booted a 54 yard field goal, with leg to spare, so trust in his Kicker wasn't an issue. Instead, Sark elected to go for it. A good position to use Locker's athleticism. Instead the pass falls incompleting, BYU's ball.

The decision proved to be even worse, as with 2:00 to go in the game, Washington had the ball on 4th and 7 at the BYU 27. Instead of being able to go for the game tying Field goal, Washington went for the previously mentioned play, where BYU dared Locker to throw the ball. Instead the pass bounced off Ethan Manumaleuna's head, and fail to the ground.

The 3rd Player of the Week

A big part of the reason that the Cougars won the game, was because of their punter. Riley Stephenson helped BYU control field position. He forced the Huskies to start inside the 15 yard line on 3 of his 5 punts, and inside the 20 on 3 of his 5 kickoffs. Forcing Washington into long drives was a big part the Cougars beat the Huskies. It's enough to make one remember when BYU fans laughing and calling a kicker the best player on the Utes. If Stephenson continues to perform like this, the Cougars might just have found 2010's best player on their team.

Hell Week Approaches

BYU must travel to the Air Force Academy this week to take on the Falcons. Preparing for the Falcons is one of the toughest weeks of the year. Because of the offensive system that AFA plays, teams have to prepare differently than any other week of the year.

Due to the undersized Offensive Linemen of the Falcons, they practice cut blocking. This drives Defensive players crazy, as it can threaten careers. Teams must also play the most sound game of the year. Defending the Falcons require assignment football. One player out of position, and the runner can be 65 yards down field.

BYU has not lost to the Falcons since 2003. Part of the reason, is they typically play later in the year. The Service Academies usually wear down as the season goes on.

To quote Admiral Ackbar "It's a trap!" This game gets the very first Trap Game Alert. BYU is coming off a big victory against the Huskies. They have a road game against #17 Florida State coming up. Combine that with the recent domination of the Falcons, and this being the MWC opener, this could be a trap game for the Cougars.

Aggie Alert

Utah State Aggies, were oh so close to giving the Sooners their second season opening loss to a Utah based team in as many years. QB Diondre Borel threw for 341 yards, and 2 TD's. Unfortunately, Borel's 3rd interception of the day, came on the final drive, and allowed the Sooners to escape with a 31-24 victory.

Coach Gary Andersen has already started to turn around a program that was in disarray. Last year the Aggies won 4

games, after winning 6 combined games in the 3 previous years. This year, the Aggies are thinking Bowl game. More performances like the one in Norman, and they'll get there.

Adjustment Time

There is a cliché that the biggest improvement for a team comes between weeks 1 and weeks 2. The reason for this is because no matter how hard you practice, you can't recreate game experience. Utah, as mentioned above, had a lot of self-inflicted wounds.

One would assume that their week 2 opponent, should give the Utes, an easier chance to test out their adjustments, as they welcome UNLV to Rice-Eccles Stadium. Of course, as every Utah fan remembers, and every BYU fan is happy to remind Utah, in 2007 after an impressive dismantling of UCLA, UNLV embarrassed the Utes 27-0. This game was Whittingham's low point of his head coaching career.

It also served as a turning point. Since that point Utah has lost 4 games. Don't think for a moment that Whittingham will allow his team to get big heads and overlook the Rebels. Instead, expect Whittingham to remind the team, how they almost blew it against Pitt. Expect Whit to bring up that 2007 butt kicking. He might even play excerpts of former UNLV Coach Mike Sanford laughing at the Utes.

Keep on Rolling Along

Utah and BYU weren't the only teams to strike a victory for the Non-AQ Banner. TCU went to Jerry World, and defeated the Oregon State Beavers 30-21. On Monday, Virginia Tech made just about every possible special teams mistake as they Spotted Boise State a 17-0 first quarter lead. Virginia Tech's comeback attempt fell short when Kellen Moore hooked up with Austin Pettis 69 seconds from the end of the game to clinch a 33-30 Victory.

Possibly more important than the on-field win for the Broncos, was an Off-Field victory. The game scored an overnight rating of 6.8, making it the most watched Labor Day game since 1990. Since one of the arguments against Non-AQ's is that people won't watch them, this is a solid victory indeed.

And The Other Side of the Coin

Of course, While Utah, BYU, TCU, and Boise State were giving it the big boys, the University of New Mexico was trying to disprove the myth that they have a football team. New Mexico's 72-0 defeat to the Oregon was beyond embarrassing. Combine this defeat, with the tumultuous 2009 campaign, if I were a UNM alum, or fan, I would be storming the the AD's office, and demanding that the Mike Locksley era come to a swift and merciful end.

Of course the real question is, what is the more embarrassing defeat of the season. New Mexico's 72-0 defeat against Oregon, or Former Oregon QB, Jeremiah Masoli's new team, Ole Miss, blowing a 31-13 second half lead, and losing in double overtime to FCS Jacksonville State?

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 14:00

Wednesday, September 1, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

This is it. Game Week. Opening Kickoff is on it's way. All of the offseason nonsense is behind us. Utah's evacuation to the Pac-10 is moot until next year. BYU's Independence is set to be announced, and is also moot until next year. All that matters now is the next 3 months.

It's start with a great weekend of games. Pitt/Utah, TCU/Oregon State, Washington/BYU, Utah State/Oklahoma, and a Labor Day Evening nightcap of Boise State/Virginia Tech.

The games finally start Thursday, but before they do there still a little bit of business to be discussed. Among the business to be done, is the fact that BYU finally revealed the worst kept secret in all of football.

Independent at Last

A press conference at 12:00 p.m. MST today will officially announce BYU going independent, and moving the rest of their sports to the West Coast Conference, at least the sports that are played in the WCC.

I mentioned last week, my doubts about long term viability for BYU as an independent. This is a short term deal. The long term goal is the Big 12. This is basically BYU picking out their nicest dress, getting their hair done up all nice, and putting on make up, and trying to prove to the cute boy who is rumored to have some interest, that they are a good match.

As of right now, this is a good move. They were worse off in the revamped MWC than they will be as an Independent. Now they have control of their TV Rights. However if 3 to 4 years from now they are still independent and Big XII hasn't come knocking, this good move could turn bad.

Independence wasn't the only announcement made by BYU.

Too many cooks

Coach Mendenhall this week announced that BYU will be going with a two QB system. Riley Nelson will get the start and Saint Jake will split time with him. This is a bad move. Two QB Systems do not work. It's made even more difficult considering Nelson and Heaps are two different styles of QB. That means two separate styles of offense, two separate styles of play calling that has to be learned. Heck Nelson is a lefty, and Heaps is a righty, that means the Blind Side, and therefore the main attack point of the defense, and the point that needs to be protected the most, needs to change based on which QB this is.

There is one instance where this could be a good idea. BYU starts the season with a pretty tough schedule. Home vs. Washington, @ Air Force, @ Florida State, and then home for Nevada. That's a tough schedule for an experienced team. That's a really tough schedule for a team that could travel as many as 50 freshmen and sophomores. Moreso, that's a tough schedule for a true freshman Quarterback.

Add into the equation that the #2 team on Jake Heaps' list this past summer was hometown Washington. He was highly recruited by Steve Sarkisian. Sark knows Heaps, and what his tendencies will be.

By starting sacrificing Riley to the tough schedule at the start, this allow BYU to get Heaps some playing time to get acclimated to Division 1 football. For BYU 2010 isn't about 2010, it's about 2011 and beyond. With that mindset a couple losses early are okay, as long as it improves the team. After the first 4 games the schedule lightens up before the next test @TCU. Heaps can begin to get more and more plays. This will equal more confidence. After TCU is a 3 game stretch of Wyoming, UNLV and @CSU before the Holy War. Expect Heaps to get the start vs. Wyoming, giving him 3 games against fodder before the Rivalry game.

This will give Heaps plenty of experience before starting, and to give him a chance to finish the season with 3 wins, before playing Utah, and a probable Bowl game. He starts 2011 having been the starter for the last 5 games of 2010. If this happens, than it's acceptable move by Mendenhall to split QB's.

However if Heaps and Nelson are still at a 50/50 split by midseason, or Heaps is not starting by the end of the year, BYU is in trouble, and Heaps may not be the "Saint" that all are hoping for.

Why you do not want Boise in the National Championship

With Boise State starting the season ranked 5th in the Coaches poll, and to a lesser extent TCU being 7th, there has been a lot of talk about a Non-AQ Team finally making the national championship appearance. At first glance, this looks to be a good thing for the Non-AQ, and anti BCS faction. Truth is it's not. In fact, it would be a terrible thing for those who oppose the BCS.

Boise State or TCU, or any Non AQ, although all other AQ's start too far down the polls to have a chance, in the National Championship game, means the Bill Hancock, and the rest of the BCS can puff out their chests and proudly proclaim the system works. It doesn't exclude teams, because one of them made it to the game. Anybody can win the national championship. A non AQ playing and even winning a championship, may prove that some of the Teams outside of the big boy conferences are worthy of the opportunity, but at the same time it also will give the BCS Cartel the fuel it needs to argue the system works.

It won't be true, the BCS will still be a cartel, it will still be rigged against the small teams. The money disbursements will still be widely unfair, and putting non-AQ's at a disadvantage. There still won't be a true national champion until we get a playoff, but that won't matter, because Boise State will be the poster child for why the BCS works and college football doesn't need a playoff.

Fearless Predictions

With the season upon us finally, It's time to put out some predictions for the upcoming season. Some of these will come true, some of these won't, but these are my going out on a limb thoughts for this season.

Boise State will lose to either Virginia Tech or Oregon State.

This one may be related to the first one, but Oregon State will beat either Boise State or TCU.

Ohio State will lose to either Miami(FL) or Wisconsin, but still find itself getting blown out in the National Championship.

The National Champion will not come out of the SEC

Nebraska will leave the Big XII as Big XII Champion, and maybe even more.

Rich Rodriguez will be fired 2 days after the Ohio State/Michigan game.

Two non-AQ Teams will play in a BCS Bowl, with a 3rd Non-AQ in the Top 15.

Air Force wins the Commander-in-Chief trophy, and Army surprises Navy.

2 of the Highly Touted Pac-10 QB's will suffer major injuries.

During a late season game, Case Keenum's arm will come flying off his body during one of his 750 pass attempts this year.

Houston will then make Keenum learn to throw with the other arm.

Utah State makes, and wins a bowl game.

Utah State's bowl victory, will be the only MWC loss in bowl season.

Looking into a Mirror

The question has been asked, If the MWC were an AQ Conference, would it be higher ranked. The answer is coming into Rice-Eccles Stadium this weekend. Pitt, and Utah are near mirror images of one another. The only real difference is the Big East is an AQ Conference, so Pitt gets the benefit of the doubt.

Other than that though, the similarities exist. The Big East is the least respect AQ Conference, The respect the

conference gets as an AQ School, is about equal to the respect the MWC gets as a Non-AQ.

Both teams have younger QB's. Jordan Wynn started 5 games last year, Pitt's QB Will be starting his first game. Pitt will try to dominate the game with their star QB Dion Lewis, while Utah will use Maddie Wide-iata III to control the game. The core of both teams is their Defense, and more specifically the Defensive Line. Pitt has Greg Romeus, while Utah has one of the more dominant rotations that no one knows about.

Finally

All the talk is over tomorrow. Kickoff finally is here. We will begin to know for sure, how things will come out to be. The pads start colliding, the passes start flying, and I couldn't be happier. See you in Section N25.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 08:58

Monday, August 23, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

12 Years ago, Utah and BYU were tired of the over-bloated 16 team Western Athletic Conference. The two schools were instrumental in getting New Mexico, Wyoming, Air Force, UNLV, San Diego State, and Colorado State to join them as they formed a new 8 team Mountain West Conference. The WAC was left with UTEP, Hawaii, Fresno State, TCU, Rice, SMU, Tulsa, and San Jose State. TCU hadn't yet hired Gary Patterson to start their transition to a BCS Threat. The WAC was severely depleted, and on the verge of irrelevancy. By 2005 the WAC had seen Rice, Tulsa, SMU, and TCU also leave it's conference. Thanks mainly to the emergence of Boise State, the WAC was able to recover the destruction left behind when Utah and BYU left.

12 years later, BYU may very well have started the events that will finish the job. How the West Was Undone

So how is it that BYU went back to terrorize it's foe from 12 years ago? Well it all goes back to the earlier expansion movement this summer. After Utah was invited to join the Pac-10. BYU knowing that it's main rival, and a team it's long considered it's younger brother, was leaving for bigger and better things. Even with the invitation of Boise State to the conference, it was clear that the MWC was not going to become an Automatic Qualifying school.

BYU started looking out for other options. They started conversations with the Big 12, but the Big 12 probably won't expand for a couple years. At least not till after it appeals, and fails, to the NCAA to get a conference championship game with only 10 teams.

Pac-10 has already said no to BYU.

On Tuesday night, rumors started slipping out that BYU was going to go Independent starting with the 2011 season. BYU would take all of it's non Football sports and join the WAC, while remaining independent for football. It started with a tweet on tuesday from @CSUAthletics saying that BYU was leaving. CSU later denied the tweet saying that their account had been hacked, but the wheels were already in motion.

As sports outlets started to pick up and run with the story on Wednesday morning, Andy Katz of ESPN first reported that all BYU was waiting for was a Notre Dame like deal with the BCS for access. Notre Dame is a guaranteed BCS Participant if it finishes in the top 8 of the BCS Rankings. Later Katz reported that independence could happen regardless even without a BCS deal, and that the only thing keeping it from happening would be BYU changing their minds. By Wednesday afternoon both the Salt Lake Tribune and the Deseret News were calling it a done deal.

At the same time news started to filter out that BYU had reached an agreement in secrecy to join the WAC in all non football sports, and that as part of their independent scheduling, they would play a minimum of 4, and up to 6 WAC teams per year. To help solidify the agreement with BYU the 8 remaining WAC Schools agreed to a 5 million dollar penalty should any team leave. Wednesday night looked as though BYU was leaving the MWC.

This was a dire situation for the MWC. If BYU were to go Independent, it would mean the MWC had lost 2 of it's biggest schools. Chances are Boise State would then return back to the WAC, and TCU would also look to leave. The MWC was flatlining, and a priest had been called in for the Last Rites.

Craig Thompson, who has sat on his hands for years, instead of improving the conference, decided that with his conference dying it was time to throw one last Hail Mary. On Thursday morning, the pass was completed, as news came out that Fresno State, and Nevada were going to leave the WAC and join the MWC conference. Word also started to come out Thursday, that Utah State was the first school offered to join the MWC, but believing it had an agreement with the other 7 WAC teams and BYU, it declined, believing it was showing loyalty to an even stronger WAC, and that MWC was in danger.

Instead, the WAC that Utah State, Commissioner Karl Benson, and BYU went to bed dreaming on of Wednesday, was in shambles. Fresno State, and Nevada joining the MWC meant that it's top 3 Football schools were now going to be gone. The Conference was then down to 6 members, and it's deal with BYU was all but gone. Commissioner Karl Benson called the actions of Fresno and Nevada selfish.

So in a matter of 24 hours, the WAC went from a new high, with an agreement with BYU, to now being on the brink of

extinction. NCAA rules state a conference needs 8 members. The MWC went from flatlining to being 1 team short of a conference title game. And BYU is still out there trying to decide whether to go independent or not. The 9 Team conference they left, is now an 11 team conference. It's still locked into a terrible TV contract, which now needs to be spread out over two more teams. It's still stuck into terrible bowl agreements, and it still has no hope of becoming an Automatic Qualifying Conference.

MWC Predictions/Preview Continued

More on the BYU situation later, but first a continuation of my Predictions/Previews for the MWC in 2010. Last week I did spots 9 through 4. They went:

- 9 - New Mexico
- 8 - UNLV
- 7 - CSU
- 6 - Wyoming
- 5 - SDSU
- 4 - Air Force.

And now Coming In third is....

3. Brigham Young Cougars

2010 is a year of change for the Cougars. The senior leadership of 2009 has made way for a young team. A team that Coach Bronco Mendenhall has hinted could travel 50 Freshmen and Sophomores to their first road game. At the center of the change is the QB Position. Gone is Max Hall. Instead true freshman and very highly recruited "Saint" Jake Heaps is battling it out with Utah State transfer Junior Riley Nelson.

Heaps is more a traditional BYU quarterback, while Nelson is more of a scrambler who doesn't really have the accuracy of a traditional BYU QB. At stake for BYU isn't just who will start at the QB position. Heaps was heavily responsible for an excellent recruiting class, a class that could very well be the best class ever for BYU. If Nelson starts ahead of Heaps, it could be a worrisome sign. Of course Coach Mendenhall will not announce, nor should he, who will win the QB job, until the first offensive snap against Washington.

Another big change was the Running back position. All-Time leading rusher Harvey Unga, who withdrew from the school amid a possible Honor Code violation, is now on the Chicago Bears Injured Reserve list. Instead BYU will go with some younger guys at the Running Back position, with it looking like J.J. DeLuigi the current favorite to be the starter. The lack of a seasoned running back, is one thing that could help Mendenhall decide on Nelson.

Also gone are 2009 Sr. TE's Dennis Pitta, who is now in the NFL, and Andrew George, who is still running after catching the game winning pass in last year's Holy War.

Defensively, the line and the LB's saw some major changes as all 3 starting Linebackers, and DE Star Jan Jorgensen were seniors in 2009.

The Utes were in a similar position last year having major losses defensively and at the QB position, They ended up with a 10 win season. While BYU must replace more offensively, you can bet that they still don't want to be shown up in the Reloading department.

Worst Case - Neither Nelson or Heaps really emerge at the QB position throughout the year. The Offense struggles swapping between two different QB's in a two QB system. Air Force overtakes them as the 3rd best team in the Conference, and BYU stumbles to around 7 wins.

Best Case - Jake Heaps becomes the savior he was tagged as when recruited. The youth costs a couple games, but BYU still manages 10 wins and a return trip to Vegas

Outlook - Mendenhall will follow Whittingham's lead from last year, starting Nelson at the beginning of the year, and Heaps being the starter by the end of the year. A difficult Non Conference schedule with games against Washington, and At Florida State, will cause problems for the Youth of BYU, causing them to snap their 10 win streak. The nice thing for the Cougars, seeing how much Bronco hates the Vegas bowl, is they'll get their 8th win in probably San Diego, or Fort Worth. Also just like 2009 for Utah was really about 2010 and beyond. For BYU 2010 is also about the future.

What next for BYU

Now that the WAC option has been removed from BYU, what do the Cougars do next? As it stands right now they cannot return to the MWC. They are stuck in a terrible TV Contract. Only instead of getting 1.25 million per year, Fresno and Nevada are part of the pie so BYU will only get around 800,000 to 900,000 per year.

This does not sit well with BYU who already has their own TV station. Not only that, but they have a tremendous broadcasting facility and a state of the art Mobile HD Broadcasting Truck. Part of BYU's independence plan centers on them using BYU TV to work a broadcast deal. As a point of reference, the reason why Texas stayed with the Big 12, was because the conference agreed to let Texas develop it's own tv station, and work out tv contracts with it. BYU is at least 3 years farther along in the process than Texas is.

Rumors have it that ESPN is willing to offer 2 to 3 million to BYU to broadcast some of their games as an independent. So they are losing out and 1 to 2 million dollars that they wouldn't have to share.

Of course, any ESPN contract, and money is predicated on two things. Ability to Schedule good games, and Ability to stay competitive. Unfortunately those two things don't usually go together. Although BYU did just recent finalize a deal that they will play a 2 for 1 with Texas starting in 2011, the Big Teams don't like to schedule games against teams like BYU, because BYU could beat them, right Oklahoma.

To stay relevant as an Independent BYU would need roughly a top 20 schedule year in and year out. in 2010 BYU will play the 53rd toughest schedule. Not only does BYU need a tougher schedule, but it will have to continue winning 10+ games a year. Otherwise BYU Football will become irrelevant and become the next Army or Navy.

Long term, I do not believe BYU can remain viable as an Independent.

The Mountain West had been adamant that they weren't willing to work a Texas-like deal with BYU to negotiate their own TV Contract, and instead wanted to force them into the terrible terrible TV Contract with The Mtn. Friday though, word snuck out that Thompson was willing to discuss it.

If MWC is unwilling to renegotiate with BYU, BYU's best option for right now is to go independent. They wouldn't be any worse than they currently are in the MWC. Either in the MWC or as An Independent They aren't an AQ Conference. As an Independent they don't have a bowl agreement, but let's be honest, Bowl's will try for BYU because BYU fans travel, and are nationwide. In the MWC they are tied into a terrible TV contract, while as an Independent, they can work out a better Contract that they don't have to share the revenue with 11 teams.

Short Term independence is a valid option for BYU. But only with the end goal of getting into another conference. I believe that all of the Independence talk from BYU is looking for 1 of 2 possible outcomes. Ability to renegotiate the MWC TV Contract, or as a way to prove their National Viability, and the Assets of BYU TV for inclusion in the next Big 12 expansion in 3 to 4 years.

Texas-Sized Hangover

2. TCU Horned Frogs

In last year's Fiesta Bowl Gary Patterson continued a trend of his team choking in big spots. Throughout his career, big victories, and undefeated records have been undone by losses to teams TCU should beat. The question is will their be a hangover from the let down in the Fiesta Bowl?

TCU returns QB Andy Dalton, who is the best QB in conference. Dalton has grown into a true leader of the Horned Frogs. The Frogs also return speedster star Jeremy Kerhle.

Defense is where TCU has made it's name, and Patterson's philosophy of recruiting athletes, not players is why. Horned Frogs lose DB standout Prince, and All-Time MWC Sack Leader, Jerry Hughes. Linebacker Tank Carder will help the transition, as will the rest of the speedy athletes that TCU has.

Worst Case - The hangover starts against ranked Oregon State, removing all chances for BCS hopes. TCU stumbles against BYU and Utah, and ends up third.

Best Case - TCU finishes where they left off. Hell freezes over, and they actually get a chance to play for the National Title.

Outlook - Weather reports for hell do not have a Cold Front coming. They struggle a bit in the opener before squeaking out a 3 point victory over the Beavers. TCU's only conference loss comes on the road in Rice Eccles Stadium.

Lost in the Shuffle

I've said before, and I still maintain, that an Automatic Qualifying Mountain West Conference, consisting of Utah, BYU, TCU, Boise State, and Air Force, is better than the Pac-10. However, I also said that Utah made the right choice in accepting the Invitation to the Pac-10. Utah State proves why. If Utah had stayed, there is no guarantee that none of the other teams would have been targeted by the Pac-10, and probably would have bolted.

Utah State had just been part of a group that swore fealty to a new Western Athletic Conference that included BYU in non-football sports. To this end the teams agreed to a 5 million dollar penalty to leave the WAC. So when a desperate Craig Thompson game calling with an invite, Utah State turned it down, thinking they had safe reassurances that the WAC would be okay.

Instead, Utah State is now in a severely crippled conference, wondering what's next for them.

Fully Invited: The MWC Farewell Tour

1. Utah Utes

Before Utah can start living life as a Pac-10 member, it has business left with the Mountain West Conference. Utah reloaded in 2009 and hopes it found it's next QB in Sophomore Jordan Wynn.

However before it can say goodbye to the MWC, there are some replacements that have to be made. Utah sent 6 players to the NFL in the draft. Defensively they must replace 7 players, including all 3 starting linebackers, both safeties, and a cornerback. The most significant loss could be that of Robert Johnson. RoJo controlled that defensive backfield, and really took pressure off of the CB's who play man to man.

To help fill that void Justin Taplin-Ross, who got good playing time last year, will take over Joe Dale's spot at Strong Safety. Brandon Burton, who started playing really well in the second half of last season is back to man one of the Cornerback positions.

Upfront the defense will reload with talent. The line will help man what could be one of the best front 7's in not only the conference but the nation. A couple names to watch defensively this year are Brandon Blechen, Dave Kruger, VJ Fehoko, and True Freshman Joe Kruger.

Offensively was a year of ups and downs for the Utes. Jordan Wynn is the starter this year, with Terrance Cain to play spot duty, in the Single Wing formation. Where Utah will really excel is at the Running Back position. Matt Asiata was granted an extra year after hurting his knee last year. His replacement Eddie Wide III went for over 1000 yards. The Utes will have a tremendous Inside/Outside duo with Asiata and Wide. It doesn't end there though. Sausain Shaker is the fastest Ute on the team, but he has some injury problems. This could be a problem for him as Tauni Vakapuna (Fui's brother), and Lucky Radley have been turning heads in camp. The Utes could easily go 5 deep at running back, which is quite the change from having to move WR Shaky Smithson to RB, because everyone else was hurt last year.

Speaking of Shaky's natural position, Utah is once again looking for a leader at the WR position after David Reed's Sr. Season got him drafted. Jereme Brooks returns, but at 5'9" he's a little undersized to be the main threat at the position. Returning players Luke Matthews, and Shaky, along with Brooks, have solidified their positions as the top 3 WR's. To help with the WR position, the Utes, apparently emoldened by Kendrick Moeai's 2 TD performance in the Poinsettia Bowl, have revived the TE position. While coach Urban Meyer did not recruit TE's. The result left the position all but dead for many years at the U. This year, the Utes have a TE in Moeai who could threaten to be the Best TE in the conference. The Utes are looking to fully implement the TE position, to help the offense.

Worst Case - The team gets distracted by the Pac-10 lights, Jordan Wynn fails to continue to improve, leaving the Utes still with a question mark at the QB positions. Non Conference games against Pitt, and at Notre Dame combine with losses Against TCU and BYU makes the Utes limp out of the conference instead of leaving on a high note.

Best Case - Wynn continues his development he showed in the last 4 games of 2009. Whittingham uses the motivation that comes from having a Bullseye on their back due to this being their last year. Utah opens the season by making a national splash reliving the 2004 season against Pitt, and then sacks Touchdown Jesus and Notre Dame in November.

Those offseason games combined with victories over TCU and BYU gives Utah a triumphant farewell tour and a 3rd BCS invite.

Outlook - Wynn should continue his development behind the 1 - 2 punch of Wide and Asiata. Utah says farewell to the conference, with an undefeated conference record and a conference championship. Iowa State, and San Jose state shouldn't be much of an issue, so that means the Pitt Game and the ND game will be the difference between the MWC Champion playing in the Vegas Bowl for the first time since 2007, or the MWC sending a team to the BCS for the 3rd consecutive season, and for possibly their last time.

Stay Tuned

Starting next week the fun really begins. First up is September 1. This is the deadline for BYU to announce independence in order for it to take effect in the 2011 season. September 2nd is game day. Pittsburgh comes to Rice Eccles Stadium to play the Utes. Then on Saturday at 5 p.m. the Washington Huskies take on the new look Cougars in Provo. 45 minutes later the Oregon State Beavers travel to Jerry World (Dallas Cowboy Stadium) to play TCU. Just when you think that's a great weekend, we'll get a Monday finale of Boise State taking the flag of the little guys to Maryland, to play the Virginia Tech Hokies.

That means next week we will begin actually previewing Games. It's going to be a fun opening week. Heck we may even know more about BYU, the WAC and the MWC.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 12:32

Monday, August 16, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Camps are now two weeks old. Utah and BYU have both had their scrimmages. Positions are starting to be sorted out, even if Bronco won't admit it. Honestly though he shouldn't. We have our first official pre-season Top 25, with the usual big boys club hand shaking in tact. Everyone is still dreaming big. BCS Dreams, National Championship dreams are all still fully reachable.

The question is, will they be reached?

Did you really expect anything less?

So last week saw the release of the Coaches Top 25. Throughout the offseason the media has told us that Boise State would be in prime position for a National Championship run after last season's BCS Busting 14-0 season. We were told that they'd open at 2 or 3.

Anyone who believed it is beyond naive. The BCS will never let a Non-AQ into the Championship game. Boise State started the pre-season ranked 5th.

Alabama being ranked higher than Boise is acceptable, they are the defending BCS Championships, even if it is only via injury to Colt McCoy. 2nd was Ohio State. Every year Ohio State gets a lot of publicity. Every year Ohio State disappoints on the national scale. 2010 is no different. 3 is Florida. Florida will be good this year, but they do have to replace Tim Tebow, as well as a number of defensive players. I'm an Urban Meyer supporter, but Boise State is starting the season in a stronger position. Texas was 4th. Texas is losing Colt McCoy. His replacement was terrible in the National BCS Championship game. Texas also has no semblance of a running game.

So as was expected by anyone with a clue, 3 questionable teams, who are part of the Big Boys Club got put ahead of Boise State.

This should also make aware, that even if Boise State runs the table and goes undefeated again, they STILL won't play for it all. They'll be jumped, especially as they enter conference play.

By the way TCU starts the season ranked 7. If TCU also goes undefeated don't be surprised to see an exact replay of last season. TCU will jump BSU in the polls, and they'll both end up in the rematch of the Fiesta Segregation Bowl.

Best Case/Worst Case for the MWC

Truth is not all teams have the same ceiling. What one team would consider to be a Best Case for their season, would be worst case for another. Well unless you are New Mexico, where even your Best Case isn't even a possible worst case for everyone else.

So this year's MWC Preview of teams 9-4 will be in a Best Case/Worst Case breakdown. We'll get to the big 3 separately. Here are my projects for teams 9 through 4 in the MWC in 2010.

9. New Mexico Lobos

Worst Case - Worst case for the Lobos, is that even more litigation comes against head coach Mike Locksley, The Lobos go winless, and New Mexico gets sick of it and fires him at the end of the year.

Best Case - No more new litigation, but New Mexico still only wins 2 games and the University tires of Locksley and fires him.

Outlook - Locksley's reign at New Mexico has been nothing but shameful for an institution that is used to competing in the MWC. Rocky Long didn't leave honorably to see the Lobos turned into this. Lobos are in for another rough season, but hopefully the right thing will be done and their coach, who shouldn't have been brought back this season, will be released ASAP.

8. UNLV Rebels

Worst Case - Former Montana Coach Bobby Hauck struggles in his transition from FCS to FBS. The Rebels beat only the Lobos, and the bottom of the MWC combines for 1 win the entire year.

Best Case - Hauck brings the mentality that made Montana a contender year in and year out to win the FCS Championship. A Championship that is decided by a playoff, by the way. Jr. Omar Clayton continues his progression from the last couple years, and the Rebels sit and wait to see if 6-6 gets them a bowl game.

Outlook - With a tough non conference schedule, where the only chances for wins looks to be either at much improved Idaho, or at Hawaii, wins will have to come in conference, which isn't likely. Rebels also have a new coaching staff, and a head coach making a jump from FCS to FBS football. 2010 isn't going to be a good year record wise, but the Rebels are hoping it will be a step forward.

7. Colorado State Rams

Worst Case - A Funk that caused the Rams to go winless in Conference play, including being the only win for New Mexico all year, continues. Rams win 3 or 4 games, and Steve Fairchild is let go.

Best Case - Fairchild turns it around and no hangover from last year is around. Rams return to improvement shown two years again and get 7 wins and into the Bowls.

Outlook - It won't be as bad as last year, but the Rams will miss a bowl game with a 5-7 record. However enough of an improvement is shown that the Rams give Fairchild one last year.

6. Wyoming Cowboys

Worst Case - The memories of winning a bowl game last year, fade fast as the Cowboys drop back to earth with a thud. Sophomore QB Austin Carta-Samuels doesn't improve from his solid Freshman campaign.

Best Case - Carta-Samuels continues to improve and turn heads. Cowboys return to a bowl game for a second consecutive year. A year that saw them uphold MWC Price and upset Boise State in Laramie.

Outlook - Cowboys give Boise State a game, for about a half, much like they did Texas last year. However Carta-Samuels turns into the Best QB nobody cares about because he plays in Laramie, and the Cowboys return to the bowl season.

5. San Diego State Aztecs

Worst Case - The Aztecs turn into the Aztecs. They muddle to another 4 win season that makes everyone wonder how a team in San Diego isn't any better.

Best Case - Ryan Lindley becomes the surprise best QB in the MWC, the Aztecs sneak into the top 4 because either Air Force, or BYU Struggles.

Outlook - A team from San Diego should always be competing for a bowl game. This year's version of the squad will finally make one. Lindley improves on his 3000 yards and 23 TD's of a year ago by encroaching on 3500 and 25 TD's.

4. Air Force Falcons

Worst Case - Undersized Air Force is wracked by injuries, and barely misses out on a bowl game. Troy Calhoun accepts another job elsewhere after impressing other schools the last 4 years.

Best Case - Air Force's tremendous Defense doesn't wear down at the end of the year, and the Falcons replace BYU in the Top 3 of the conference. Win double digit games and finally end Navy's 7 year run as winner of the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy winner. More importantly Troy Calhoun stays.

Outlook - Two amazing stats for you. First the top 6 runners from 2009 return for the falcons. SIX. S-I-X. Secondly, 100% of all offensive TD scorers from 2009 are returning. This in addition to a defense that was secretly one of the best last year. Falcons will once again make teams hate the week they play.

The Big 3

The big 3 will get a better break down next week. And since I wasn't able to get this done last week, by Next week I mean this week.

The Rivalry Game

Last week did bring some good news to both BYU and Utah. For the first time since Utah accepted the bid to the Pac-10(12), one of the AD's for either school talked in absolutes about continuing the rivalry. Tom Holmoe was asked during a golf tournament about the game and he said, that cooler heads have prevailed, and it will continue. He also went on to say that logistics still need to be worked out.

There have been a couple questions regarding the Rivalry game since the change happened. Some of the questions that have come up are.

What does Utah gain by still playing?
Why should BYU still bother?
Will it still be relevant?
When do you play it?

So here are my answers.

What does Utah gain by still playing? - The common thought is, Utah is going to play in an Automatic Qualifying conference, what do they gain by adding one of the best Non-AQ teams onto their schedule every year. If they win, they should have won, if they lose, they lost to a Non-AQ Team.

While that's all technically true, the fact that BYU is one of the better Non-AQ teams, and is respected as one of the best Non-AQ teams, will actually help Utah. It will count as a Quality Victory, especially if it comes down to comparing a victory against BYU to a victory against some technical college that some AQ Teams play. Same thing with a loss. A loss to BYU won't look any worse than a victory against some technical college.

Why should BYU still bother? - Other than being bitter because Utah was chosen and not them, there is absolutely no reason not to continue the game for BYU right now. Utah is now an AQ team. A victory in the rivalry game now means a victory against an AQ Team. A loss to AQ Utah, is better for BYU than a loss against Non-AQ Utah would be this year.

Will it still be relevant? - Absolutely. As long as both teams remain competitive, the rivalry should not lose anything. Rarely in history was the game actually for anything. Conference championships were locked up the week before. Now BYU will want to beat, and show AQ Utah who is better, while Utah won't want to be losing to Non-AQ BYU. This rivalry won't lose anything by them not being in the same conference. And when BYU joins the Big 12 in a couple years this will be a national game against 2 AQ Teams.

When do you play it? - Chances are that neither conference will allow this game to be played during rivalry week. So when should it be played? Worst case scenario would be sometime in the middle of the season. No this game should be moved to the first game of the year. Labor Day weekend. In fact, let's completely re-boot the Rivalry game.

The New Rivalry Game

It's time to make the Rivalry game a big time national game. So first thing, let's move it to Labor Day weekend, or make it the first game of the year. This will give fans all summer to get ready, and get pumped for it. Not only that, but Labor Day Weekend doesn't have a lot of compelling matchups for that first week. This game could easily get picked up for national tv.

Next Let's embrace the Holy War moniker. As much as it's a bit mis-representative of the rivalry, the rest of the world knows it as The Holy War. It's not any worse of a name for a Rivalry than The World's Largest Cocktail Party (Georgia/Florida), The Red River Rivalry (Texas/Oklahoma), Civil War (Oregon/Oregon State) or even Good Ole Fashioned Hate Georgia/Georgia Tech). Plus it's a lot better than the manufactured Desert First Duel.

For year one, since we're trying to reboot the Rivalry, let's do it by paying homage to the past. Both teams come out in throwback uniforms. The uniforms are then sold at auction with the money given away to charity.

The Holy War is one of the best, most intense rivalries in the nation. Sadly not many it's also very regional-ized. Utah is moving to the Pac-10(12) next year. BYU will be in an AQ Conference within 5 years. Let's take the Rivalry and build it up for that national scale.

What else could/should these two schools do, to make bring the rivalry to a national scale?

Blog Export: Annals of the Homestarmy, <http://www.thehomestarmy.com/s9y/>

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 09:54

Tuesday, August 3, 2010

Red, Blue And Pigskin

Do you feel that? The shift? A world that has been out of whack since early this year, is finally starting to right itself. Chaos, is starting to make way for order. A terrible wrong is being righted.

That's right, Football is almost back.

The NFL Players have already started their training camp, including the St. Louis Rams further cementing their doom by paying a rookie QB who couldn't stay healthy in college, and is coming off of two surgeries to his throwing shoulder, and was thoroughly befuddled before he got injured by BYU's defense in the opening game last year, 78 million dollars over 6 years, including 50 million guaranteed. Heck even Brett Favre is at it again.

But Alas, that's not what we're here to talk about, there is another space for that. We're here to talk about the pageantry, the beauty, and the frustrating lack of a championship that is College Football.

Fall camps are starting up. The Utes report Thursday, Cougars on Saturday. Heck even the Aggies of Utah State, who are preparing to shock the world in the WAC, report on Monday.

But before we can get to the future, we should take some time to relive a relatively quiet offseason for local teams and the MWC.

Football is back, and so is Red, Blue And Pigskin. When last we met.

So a quick recap to the end of last year. When last we met, BYU's outgoing QB, who probably hates this blog, disrespected his own teammates, by putting himself above the game, and overshadowing a thrilling victory by the Cougars in last year's Holy War, while at the same time giving all Utah fans a running joke. BYU went on to embarrass Oregon State in the Las Vegas Bowl. The very next night the Utes, led by freshman QB Jordan Wynn's 3 TD Passes torched the Cal Bears in the Poinsettia Bowl.

In the Bowl Season the MWC Conference added wins by Air Force and Wyoming, as they set a bowl record of 4-1, and became the only conference to win the Bowl Challenge Championship 3 times. The only blemish on the MWC record was the TCU Horned Frogs, and Coach Gary Patterson, laying a complete egg, and choking in the Fiesta Bowl against the Boise State Broncos.

Nationally, the season ended with Alabama, and sleazeball coach extraordinaire Nick Saban, holding the Crystal Ball by winning the Big Crappy System Championship game over Texas.

Changes in the Landscape

While the bowl season last year, was not College Football's most exciting for a while, the offseason, was. The Big Ten, which actually had 11 teams, announced that it was investigating expanding the conference to at least 12 teams. 12 is the magic number for college football conferences. NCAA rules state a conference must have at least 12 teams to hold a conference championship game. A game which by itself is worth millions of dollars to the teams of the conference. Also in the current state of college football, also means that your conference, and specifically your conference champion, is playing football as late as possible in the season, so that they can stay in the minds of voters who determine BCS Championship participants. More than once in the past few years the Big Ten, and Pac 10 champion has been forgotten, simply because they were at home while the SEC and Big 12 were playing.

At the same time that the Big Ten was investigating expansion, the Pac-10's new commissioner, grew tired of the status quo that had run the Pac-10 for the past few years and announced that they were looking into expansion.

The Pac-10 started things off by inviting Colorado to join the conference. Then the Pac-10 made a move that could have permanently changed the face of college football, completely destroy any semblance of tradition, and forever lock the non AQ teams out of the picture.

Before we continue, let me just put on my conspiracy hat for a moment. I believe, that one of the goals of the expansion

this past offseason, was to find a way for the BCS to rid themselves of the Non-AQ problem. The big boys do not want the interlopers of the MWC.

Colorado had already announced they were leaving the Big 12. The Pac-10's next move was to invite Texas, Oklahoma, Texas Tech, Texas A&M and Oklahoma State to join them and form the first Super Conference in the NCAA. At the same time, unable to lure the big overrated gorilla of college football in Notre Dame, the Big Ten, invited Nebraska to join their conference, which Nebraska later accepted.

Other than being a really, really terrible idea, the Pac-10 super conference, would have had ripples throughout College Football. The Big 12, would be dead, they would have lost 6 of their 12 members, The SEC, Big Ten, and ACC would have responded themselves by scooping up the remnants of the Big 12, while pillaging the Big East, to also get to 16 members each. This would have essentially created 4 Super Conferences, and widened the gap between the AQ's and Non-AQ's to a point that they never would have broken in. Of Course it would have all fallen apart in 4-6 years, as conferences realized that 16 teams spread out too far is just to cost inefficient.

Initially the MWC and Craig Thompson announced they had decided against expansion for now, and were not inviting Boise State to join. A week later, as everyone waited on the decision of the Big 12 five, they reversed course and made Boise State the 10th member of the MWC.

As the death of the Big 12 seemed imminent, Commissioner Dan Beebe made a last ditch appeal to Texas. The key for Texas was the use of their own private TV Network, The Pac-10 wouldn't allow it, so when Beebe gave Texas the go ahead, Texas decided to stay in the Big 12. Texas decision to remain caused the other 4 to remain and save the Big 12, which now had 10 teams.

Though a swing for the fences and a miss by the Pac-10, they went to work on plan B. A little over a week later they invited Utah to become the 12th member of the Pac-10, which Utah accepted.

What does this mean

Starting in 2011 Utah will leave the MWC and join the Pac-10. The MWC Will replace Utah with Boise State. 2011 is important because it is the 3rd year of a 4 year cycle to determine Automatic Qualifier status for the MWC. Since Boise State will be playing in the MWC for 2011, their accomplishments for 2008, 2009, and 2010 will count for the MWC. However since the Utes will be in the Pac-10, the MWC will lose all of the Utes accomplishments.

This also means that BYU, and Utah will no longer be in the same conference. The Rivalry game will have to change in order for it to continue. I have thoughts on that later.

Was this the best course of action for the Utes?

Uhh. Duh. Absolutely it was. There is no way the Utes could have passed up this opportunity. While an Automatic Qualifying MWC with Utah, TCU, Boise State, and BYU, would have been, in my opinion, a better conference than the Pac-12 will be, there were too many question marks for the Utes to turn down an invite. First question is will the MWC become an AQ. This past offseason the standards for becoming an AQ were released. It is clear they were rigged against the MWC, and as such the MWC qualifies in 2 of the 3 categories. However all 3 need to pass in order to become an AQ.

Secondly if Utah had turned down the Pac-10, they would have had to have a guarantee that TCU, Boise State, and BYU Would not accept an offer to another conference. Those teams would be stupid to turn down an offer, and without all 4 teams the MWC will always struggle and be on the outside looking in.

Being a member of the Pac-10 means way more money to the University. It also means better recruits. Every year there are highly sought players, especially local players, who keep Utah and/or BYU on their list of schools, before eventually deciding to join a AQ School, typically in the Pac-10. This way, recruits can still be local, and play for an AQ Team.

What does this mean for BYU? What about the MWC?

Since the MWC added Boise State, this basically means they are exactly where they were before all the expansion talk started. They didn't get any better, they didn't get any worse, at least for the time being. While Boise State will be strong this year, I do believe that the improved competition will give the Broncos a couple more losses than normal. They'll still be in the 9-10 win range, but they won't be an annual threat to go undefeated. However, if the MWC does

not get the AQ status after this 4 year cycle, they could see themselves on the extinction list.

BYU has already started making friends with other conferences. The Big 12 (10) is petitioning for a Conference Championship game with only 10 teams. When that gets turned down they'll have to make a decision, stay at 10 and lose the conference championship, and the money and recognition that comes with it, or expand back to 12. Money will win out, and they'll make an expansion.

Natural targets would be, TCU, Boise State, BYU, and/or Houston. There are many questions whether Boise State can compete week in and week out without the weak schedule of the WAC. Baylor does not want another Texas Based Religious school in the Conference, and overall teams aren't sure about another Texas team, so that leaves TCU and Houston out. BYU, and actually Air Force seem like the two popular candidates.

There has also been talk about BYU leveraging BYU-TV and going independent. This is a terrible option and should only be a last ditch option. BYU would not be able to stay relevant as an independent team. As it is now, there is only 1 independent team that is still relevant, and that's more based on history than on the field production.

If the Big 12 doesn't expand, and the MWC doesn't get the AQ, another option could be a merger with Conference USA to further strengthen the teams in the conference from top to bottom.

What about the Rivalry

The rivalry will change. However, I think it will get stronger. Especially while BYU remains a non-AQ. BYU will be out to beat an AQ team, while Utah doesn't want to lose to a non-AQ. The question though is when will the rivalry game happen.

The Pac-10 will not be keen on allowing Utah to play a non Pac-10 Rival during Rivalry week. The Pac-10 wants to try and renew an old rivalry between Utah and Colorado that's been dormant since 1962. BYU will probably get the Boise State game during that week.

The easy solution, move it to Labor Day. Rather than being the end of the year bash, make it the beginning of the year kickoff. Tensions will build all offseason in preparation for the game. Truth is that rarely did the rivalry game mean anything in the big picture. Conference championships were usually clinched before the game. Really it only mattered big pictures in 1984 when Utah could have ruined BYU's perfect season. The Utes could have hurt BYU's appearance in the Cotton bowl in 1996. BYU Could have ruined BCS dreams in 2004, and 2008. Other than those 4 times, the Rivalry has always been about local pride.

There is precedent for two teams from separate conferences though. Florida and Florida State still play every year. The Good Old Fashioned Hate between Georgia and Georgia Tech is another. Being in separate conferences won't hurt the Rivalry, as long as both teams remain competitive against each other. And, especially after BYU joins the Big 12 in a couple years, if national stakes are on the line for either team, even better.

Can Utah compete in the Pac-10?

We already know that Utah can beat teams in the Pac-10. They've done it almost every year in the Bowl games. Utah also sports the most wins against AQ teams by a non-AQ Team, many of which have come against Pac-10 teams. The real question, is can Utah do it week in and week out. Utah, as well as BYU, TCU, and Boise State, have number 1 players that can match up with any team in the country. The difference starts to appear when it comes down to number 2's, and number 3's.

Playing better teams week in and week out will cause some depth issues for the Utes, at least at first. But as Utah has built up a competitive team at a severe disadvantage, when they start getting BCS Recruits, BCS Money, they'll start to get that depth.

They're already better than Colorado, Arizona, Arizona State, Washington State, UCLA and Cal. Washington and Stanford have made great strides the past couple years, but the jury is out on whether they've actually made a leap. Oregon, Oregon State, and USC are the cream of the Pac-10, but USC will begin to feel the pain of NCAA sanctions.

Don't be surprised if Utah sits around the 4th, 5th, or 6th spot for the first couple years, as they make that transition. But if Utah builds their team the way they currently do, continue to work Texas, California, as well as their polynesian pipeline for recruiting, the way they currently do, and then remove the disadvantages they've been working under since the formation of the BCS, it won't take long before they join that top tier in the Pac-10.

Farewell Tour

Before any of that can happen though, Utah has it's swan song in the MWC. They will be the target of everyone this season, especially BYU and TCU. It's the last time many of these teams will ever play Utah. Hopefully that includes the hell week that comes with Air Force. While the Utes won't miss Craig Thompson, or the crappy Mtn TV network, they will want to leave on a high note.

Starting next week we'll preview that swan song, as well as the upcoming season for BYU and the MWC, and determine just what kind of farewell tour the Utes will get.

Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 10:18

Thursday, December 3, 2009

Red, Blue, And Pigskin

Ahh the Holy War. It was a bit of a sloppy game, with tempers flaring on both sides. It had hard hits, personal fouls, big plays, a post game interview low on class, and despite a memorable final play, the game itself wasn't all that memorable, won't be remembered that much in the annals of the Rivalry history, except for a certain set of comments.Regarding Hall

I've thought for a while regarding my thoughts and what I wanted to say regarding Max Hall's diatribe after the game. I even rewrote this paragraph twice. In the end I've decided to show the players on the field more class and more respect than Hall showed them. I'm not going to take away from the game that happened on the field. In fact the only thing I'll remark upon from his post game diatribe is...

Hall was right about one thing

BYU deserved to win that game. Utah was sloppy throughout the game. They would continually put themselves in the position to make the same mistake over and over (Brandon Burton). On the deep balls they were constantly getting behind the BYU Defense, but they were just a bit off. Sometimes because the pass was too long, or sometimes because the WR thought it wasn't coming so he slowed up his route (David Reed).

Utah wasn't the only ones who were sloppy. BYU suffered some major brain farts as well, mostly coming from their QB who was too worried about the pass rush and did not have a good game.

But mainly the biggest sloppiness came from the offensive playcallers for both sides. When BYU got up by 14 points the BYU Offense packed it in, and went to one of the most conservative game plans that wasn't from Ohio State. Utah constantly killed it's momentum with the unnecessary single wing formation.

That said, the BYU defensive game plan did just enough in the 2nd and 3rd quarters to keep Utah from making a move early in the game. When Wynn got out of a rhythm, the BYU Defensive Coordinator dialed up a nice amount of blitzing with their front 7 to keep Wynn off balance just enough. By the time Wynn got back into a groove it was almost too late.

Time to euthanize the wildcat

This game was the perfect example of why, unless you are willing to dedicate your offense to it, the Single Wing/Wildcat formation is more of a hinderance than it helps. The novelty has worn off, so it no longer surprises a defense when they see the lineup. BYU's first two plays were single wing plays. After not using it all year long they try to bring it out. Utah stopped them.

For Utah it's troubles were much much worse. Utah had the ball up 3-0 driving in the redzone for a TD. They brought in their Single Wing formation and got stopped. The big problem is it seemed to take Wynn out of the flow of the offense. A flow it took him 2.5 quarters to get back into. It seemed that every time the Utes would start to get some momentum they'd go into the Single Wing and it would just break the flow. Even worse they would use the Single Wing formation for plays that were just normal plays. Plays better executed by the starting QB. Such as the 5 attempted WR Screens, of which Shaky was 1-4, including bouncing two off of the turf in front of a WR who had blockers in front of him.

There is a reason that the Miami Dolphins are really the only successful Single Wing team. They are the only ones who have committed to it as an offensive system. Rather than use the Single Wing, just come up with some normal trick plays.

Upcoming RB&P

So now that the regular season is over, Just thought I'd detail a few upcoming posts. As we get ready for the Bowl there will obviously be lots of talk about that game. Plus, future posts will recap both BYU, and Utah's season, Talk about the future for both of these teams and where they go. Also, expect detailing about Post season awards. And finally I plan to bring back Sideshow's Playoff Proposal, as well as BCS Lie Detector post.

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Posted by Sideshow in Red, Blue And Pigskin at 11:17