

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 thought 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

Sunday, September 21. 2014

Updates

A task LONG overdue, I upgraded a number of software packages on this machine (including the versions of the database software, the httpd, the PHP engine, and the S9Y blogging platform itself).

If anyone notices anything amiss, please let me know ASAP through the standard channels, and thanks for tuning into to Radio Homestarmy.

Posted by Ancient of Days in Ooops at 02:11

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 ployblackout game hasn't been announced. Mayhaps 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