

Thursday, October 30, 2014

Red, Blue And Pigskin

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

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

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

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

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

I Really Don't Know What To Say Anymore

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

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

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

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

Time To Rise Up

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

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

Back And Forth They Go

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

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

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

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

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

A Game Of Inches

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Travis Takes Control

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

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

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

View From The Red Zone

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

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

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

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

It's Not All Good

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

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

Face The Heat

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Enough With The Replays

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

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

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

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

This goes for the Nfl too.

What's This? Two Games On Saturday

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monday, October 13. 2014

Podcast Movie Special: Stargate

Wow, okay, we really have fallen out of the habit of this podcast thing. Sorry everyone. But the good news is that we have finally published our movie podcast on Stargate the movie. Joey and I each brought a different spin to things, as usual. But it was fun to be back in the chairs recording, even if it did take months for our schedules to properly align. Anyway, enjoy! Duration: 2h 42m 35s

Various topics discussed in this podcast include:

Â Â Â Â We're back... eventually.

Â Â Â Â Adventures in Republican

Â Â Â Â Joey went to Comicon and loved it!!

Â Â Â Â Joey's Culture Corner: Brilliance (The Brilliance Saga Book 1) by Marcus Sakey

Â Â Â Â Facebook Find of the Week: Listener Fishhead - Birth of a new world: the Tolkien poem that marks the genesis of Middle-earth

Â Â Â Â Top 5 Favorite things you did this summer

Â Â Â Â University of Utah football team lost

Â Â Â Â Peter watched with the commentary and Joey watched it normally

Â Â Â Â The Stargate stays open at the speed of plot

Â Â Â Â When you meet an alien civilization for the first time, how are you going to communicate with them?

Â Â Â Â Nuclear explosions

Â Â Â Â Music Intro: The Future Soon by Jonathan Coulton

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Posted by Radar in Podcast at 04:00

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. After all, 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, it 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 Thompson 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 an 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 became 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 they 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