

Friday, September 11, 2015

Red, Blue And Pigskin

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Sports Gods Also Taketh

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

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

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

Bronco Must Bust The Broncos

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

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

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

Who-Baugh?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Battle Of The Brothers

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

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

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

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

View From The Redzone

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

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

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

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

What To Watch And When

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

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

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

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