

HB Arnett's ***COUGAR SPORTSLINE***

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GET OUT YOUR DICTIONARY, THIS COULD BE A DEFINING SEASON FOR BYU

BYU really is an elitist institution.

If there was a college football dictionary, the definition of a disappointing 2008 football season would list examples of teams like San Diego State, UCLA, Michigan, Tennessee and others who didn't win many games and fired coaches.

The dictionary used by Cougar football fans must be much more esoteric and elite. How else do you explain the definition of disappointing season for BYU as a 10-3 record, bowl appearance and a final top 25 national ranking?

Any way you want to dice your dictionary, most BYU football fans and most BYU football players and coaches, consider last year's 10-3 performance a disappointment.

They all talk about a bad taste in their mouths and refocusing and rebounding for the coming season.

Bronco Mendenhall has talked for years about having not just a good team, but a good program. If a 10-3 record is a serious disappointment, maybe the Cougars under Mendenhall have actually now defined themselves as a good program.

We don't need a dictionary to define irony. It is that the perceived disappointment from last season can turn into such excitement for the coming year when the roster is still populated by the same players and coaches.

Summer Syndrome

We attribute it to what we call the "Summer Syndrome".

We love summer and apparently so do BYU football fans.

It has been a great off season for BYU football...on paper.

All reports have the Cougars becoming stronger, quicker, speedier, more focused and determined.

If the Cougars actually didn't have to play a game for a few more months, they could be national champs by November, at least in the eyes of Cougar nation.

That excitement and estimation of BYU football also carries over to the national media. BYU still has enough juice with the media types to earn a top 25 preseason ranking. The Cougars came in at No. 24 last week in the USA Coaches Poll...on paper.

The last seven months have been full of excitement and enthusiasm with the promise of future expectations.

On paper and in the press, BYU seems to have found a way to improve its dismal defense of last season. In the last few months, BYU has won the "Star Wars" recruiting game with a boatload of highly touted (on paper) new recruits already in the bag for next year.

Never has a team looked so good. Never has so much progress been made on paper and in the press. When you don't actually have to play, it is all good and sure to get better the longer BYU doesn't have to actually take the field against another team.

Shred the Paper

Come September, it will be time to shred the paper and actually see if BYU is really as good as Cougar fans think they will be.

In our opinion, if Bronco Mendenhall and his troops can duplicate the 10-3 record of last season, they really will be good, not only on paper, but on the field.

A 10-3 mark this year would mean much more than the 10-3 result of a year ago.

That is because the Cougars will spot the national and MWC field one full lap in the race for national recognition and respect.

Count on BYU getting whipped by Oklahoma when the two teams kickoff their seasons on Sept. 5 in Dallas.

The loss won't be good, but the timing of the loss couldn't be better.

Assuming that BYU doesn't get toasted by 40 or more points by the Sooners and assuming they can win the rest of their games until they face TCU and Utah later in the year, that opening loss to Oklahoma will be a non-factor in BYU's quest for a legitimate national ranking.

When it comes to national rankings, losing does have an impact, but not as big of an impact as when you lose.

Losing early is always more palatable than losing late in the season.

Speaking of losing, during the last 11 years, that is what BYU has done every time they have faced a non-conference foe that has been ranked.

The Cougars will have two chances to break that streak this season. Actually, it will be just one chance. Oklahoma is ranked No. 3, and as we mentioned earlier, the Cougars have no chance for a win in this game.

They will have to pin their hopes on defeating Florida State later in September in Provo. The Seminoles are ranked No. 19 in the preseason.

The first three weeks of the season should be interesting.

Intoxication

The Sooners will sober up all the preseason intoxication of BYU followers. A week later, Tulane will reignite the enthusiasm and expectations. The Green Wave is not a good football team.

The real litmus test for BYU will be the next week in Provo against Florida State.

That will let us know just what kind of team the Cougars really have.

Most of the optimism about BYU football for the coming season is based on statements from coaches and players about how they are refocused and humbled from the bad taste and bad finish of last season. The quotes from players and coaches have been plentiful about how hard they have worked over the summer and how this is a team that can be trusted.

On paper, that sounds absolutely thrilling and exciting. Who wouldn't anxiously await watching this BYU team play?

As good as it sounds on paper, however, football is played on the field and is a game that is determined by playmakers.

Even Bronco Mendenhall, the master modeler of BYU, acknowledges that BYU didn't make enough

plays last year.

More than words, slogans, jargon and jutting out one's chest, it has always been, is now, and always will be, about having playmakers on your team.

Like Missouri?

Our assessment of BYU last year and this coming season is that they are a lot like Missouri was last season. The Tigers had plenty of playmakers on offense and were good enough to win plenty of games and garner national recognition.

They didn't have a defense good enough and with enough playmakers, however, to stand up to the big boys of the nation or even their own conference.

Mizzou finished with a 10-4 record. They won their first five games averaging 50 plus points per game.

When it came to facing defenses with speed and quickness, however, they folded flat, losing big to Texas and Oklahoma.

A prolific offense is great, but without at least a decent defense to go along with it, you are doomed to disappointing defeats.

Like Missouri last season, BYU had playmakers. Unfortunately, in our opinion, they were all on offense last year and few and far between, on the defensive side of the ball. Summer excitement and enthusiasm aside, that is also our assessment of BYU football for the coming year.

PRESEASON PLAYMAKER LOOK AT BYU FOR 2009

Defense

Linebackers...There aren't any. At least, there are none that are playmakers, which is what you need at this position to be a good defense.

When the Cougars were above average a few years back in the early going for Bronco Mendenhall, he had playmakers like Brady Poppinga and Bryan Kehl.

He had a very good over-achieving middle linebacker in Cameron Jensen.

Those days are gone.

There are no playmaking linebackers that we can see, or at least haven't seen yet. There are plenty of guys returning with playing experience, but no real playmakers. Seven months of summer won't make it better, in our opinion.

The middle backer spots will be in the lower half of the talent level of the MWC. For that to improve, it won't come from the old guard of linebackers from last year. The best chances for a much-needed infusion of linebackers that are playmakers will have to come from new faces like Brandon Ogletree at middle linebacker. Outside linebackers are in the same predicament. No playmakers, at least that we have seen as yet. There is some good news and bad news at this spot, however. The bad news is that BYU has pinned its hopes for improvements at the outside backer positions by shuffling players from other positions.

Jordan Pendleton has never played a down at outside linebacker, and after seven months, and on paper, he is the great hope for BYU fans.

The fact that Cougar coaches have moved Richard Wilson, a new incoming freshman, from tight end/wide receiver to outside linebacker, tells us just how desperate the search is to find playmakers at the linebacker spot.

That is the bad news. The good news is that both Pendleton and Wilson are big-time athletes, who have been playmakers wherever they played in high school.

That at least should give a little hope for the future.

Defensive Line...This group is serviceable, but not spectacular. There are no NFL prospects in this group and haven't been any NFL caliber defensive linemen for several years. From our vantage point, there won't be any in the next few seasons either.

It is what it is. For whatever reasons, BYU has been unable to sign the big time LDS Polynesian defensive tackle. Until that trend turns around, serviceable, but not spectacular, seems to be the appropriate description of this component of the BYU defense.

BYU has nobody up front that is as disruptive as TCU's Jerry Hughes will be and as Paul Kruger of Utah was last season.

There is nobody on the BYU defensive line that will demand a double team.

Russell Tialavea has postponed his LDS mission call until late December. That means the Cougars will return all three defensive line starters from last season (Tialavea, Jan Jorgensen and Brett Denney), but if they weren't playmakers last year, the chances of them becoming playmakers this year seems slim.

The only new bodies on this unit are those who have been shuffled up from linebackers. That would include Vic So'oto and Jadon Wagner.

Defensive Back...This is the only place defensively for the Cougars where there is sure to be improvement this coming season. It couldn't be worse, could it?

The Cougars were undermanned at safety last season and it showed.

Scott Johnson and Andrew Rich should be better.

BYU had no corners last year. They are hoping that the pasta approach to recruiting corners will work.

Bronco Mendenhall finally figured out what LaVell Edwards knew for years. You always need to recruit 2 or 3 juco corners and then throw them on the wall and hope one sticks.

Brandon Howard, last year's starter at field corner, is not coming back for his senior season because of personal reasons.

BYU has brought in three juco corners to try and find one that can cover. They are Lee Aguirre, Corby Eason and Brian Logan. Throw in redshirt freshman Garrett Nicholson and returned missionary Robbie Buckner and maybe one can be a playmaker.

Bottom Line...If you weren't a playmaker as a sophomore or junior, it is highly unlikely that you will be one as a senior.

There were no consistent playmakers on the BYU defense last year. Those same non-playmaking players are not likely to suddenly become such.

If BYU is going to be improved defensively, they will have to find playmakers from personnel that for whatever reason, never saw the field last season.

Any improvement won't come from players that saw action last year. The best hopes, in our opinion, will have to rest with newcomers, especially at linebacker and at corner.

Offense

Finding playmakers on this side of the ball is not hard to do.

Unlike the defensive side of the ball, BYU had plenty of playmakers on offense last season and almost all of them return for another year.

Quarterback...It starts with Max Hall, but it won't end with him. Last season, if Hall had gone down with injury, it was over for BYU. This year there is now a serious playmaking backup in Riley Nelson.

The quarterback situation never looked so good for the Cougars. There two good ones in hand and with Jake Heaps in the bush, things look rosy.

We know that Heaps plans on enrolling next January and competing against Nelson during next spring for the starting spot.

If he does win that job, it means he is the amalgamation of John Elway, Brett Favre and Joe Montana all rolled into one.

Nelson is very, very good. If Heaps beats him out, he must be very, very special.

Running Back...Harvey Unga has been making big plays for the past two seasons. We see no reason why that will stop now. The only question is if he can take the beating he had to suffer last season.

That will require some help from the rest of the running back corp.

There is still hope that Manase Tonga will be back from academic exile. That should be known later this week.

After Unga, BYU has a bevy of backups, but none that shows any promise of being the type of playmaker that Unga is.

That group includes guys like J.J. DiLuigi, Malosi Te'o and Mike Hague.

Receivers...BYU had two of the best playmakers last season at receiver. That would be Austin Collie and Dennis Pitta. Collie has gone to the Colts of the NFL, but Pitta is back and will be productive and consistent. He can make plays.

McKay Jacobson showed glimpse of his playmaking abilities as a true freshman and is now back from an LDS mission to Japan.

O'Neill Chambers may be the guy to prove us wrong about playmakers. He certainly wasn't one last year as a true freshman, but we do expect him to be one this season.

BYU also has a nice incoming crop of big freshmen receivers, They include Brett Thompson, Cody Hoffman and Mitch Mathews. We expect at least one to show he can make plays before this season concludes.

Offensive Line...You don't associate offensive linemen as being playmakers, but without them, it will be hard for Hall, Pitta, Unga et al to show their playmaking wares.

Matt Reynolds is the next NFL hope as an offensive lineman. He was good as a freshman, and should do nothing but get better.

The Cougars are replacing four starters from this group, but they have at least three players besides Reynolds who have starting experience at BYU.

That would be R.J. Willing, Ryan Freeman and Terence Brown. Both Brown and Freeman started games as true freshmen before leaving for LDS missions.

Coaches, Team Speed and Counting Wins...One change we will see in coaching this year is that Bronco Mendenhall has finally decided to relinquish his defensive play calling duties. We don't see that making any difference at all on the defensive side of the ball.

Where it should help is on the offensive side of things.

Mendenhall can now actually manage the game and not just his defense.

With him less engaged on defense, he can now see what is happening in the total flow of the game.

There are times when a head coach has to get on the headsets and ask his assistant coaches, "What the heck are you doing?"

Last year against Utah when BYU refused to run the ball would have been the perfect moment for Mendenhall to have been more engaged in managing the game instead of just his defense.

More involvement in game management by Mendenhall is a good move for the fifth-year coach.

This summer there has been lots of talk of BYU working on increasing their team speed.

We don't buy it. We don't doubt that there was plenty of emphasis and work on increasing speed, we just don't think it will actually show on the field.

On defense, with Brandon Howard, the fastest player on the team last year, leaving school, it isn't likely that the Cougars will be faster on that side of the ball.

All of BYU's losses last year came against teams that clearly had BYU outclassed in team speed. That would be TCU, Utah and Arizona.

Lack of team speed, in our opinion, will still be an issue this year. That should especially be evident in the opener against Oklahoma.

When it comes to speed, Provo and LaVell Edwards Stadium is the great equalizer. At home the speed factor seems to be neutralized.

That bodes well for the Cougars this season because, other than Oklahoma, the teams on the 2009 schedule with the clear advantage in team speed all have to come to Provo.

That would be Florida State, TCU and Utah.

We like the Cougars in all three contests.

We don't see the Cougars running the table in MWC action, however. They should lose somewhere on the road in league play.

Our assessment is that BYU has enough offensive firepower to get 9-10 wins this season. If some playmakers on defense magically appear, 10-11 wins is not an unreasonable hope.

Just like Missouri of last season, BYU needs to shore up its defense or even with a prolific offense, they won't have be able to stand up when it really counts against good teams with speed.