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MUSIC, MILEY, and MENDENHALL

Music isn't my forte. I figure that I have heard hundreds of musical renditions performed in church, in concert and in my car via the radio and CD player. They all sound the same to me.

My wife was appalled that I couldn't distinguish between noise and music. Now, whenever there is a musical rendition offered in church or concert, I just lean over and ask her, "Was that any good?". She always gives a nod of approval.

That probably has more to do with her penchant for people and finding the positive in them.

It took me a while to learn the nuances of her nod, but I soon discovered not all nods are equal and neither is music.

I have also learned that just because a singer sells and is immensely popular, they aren't necessarily musically gifted, but greatly marketed.

That brings us to Miley Cyrus, aka Hannah Montana, and a local phenomenon we witnessed last week.

Cyrus sold out a Fourth of July show in Provo in minutes when tickets were released to the public.

Mullet

I don't know if that is the result of her music, marketing or the mullet made famous by her father, Billy Ray Cyrus.

I have yet to give my musical nod of approval to Miley-Cyrus-Hannah-Montana-Bofana-Hosanna, but that probably has more to do with my extra long and heavy mullet that makes my nodding both difficult and more discerning.

Despite my lack of musical mastery, I am smart enough to realize that occasionally, a performer will come along whose music matches their marketing.

If you are wondering what this has to do with BYU sports, did I mention that the Hannah hoe down will be held in LaVell Edwards Stadium?

That was also where I was sitting this past Saturday watching the annual Blue-White exhibition of BYU football, which, incidentally, is definitely now more about marketing than making tackles.

That didn't matter to the thousands of fans that were surrounding me in the stadium.

There was certainly nothing nod worthy about the light scrimmage and the fan commentary in the stands. In my opinion, most casual BYU fans know as much about football as I know about music.

Rock Star

What we both agree on, however, is that we can spot a "Rock Star" when we see one.

The gush from fans sitting around me was all about getting glimpses of Bronco Mendenhall.

"Uncle Bob" who was seated 20 rows behind me, but vocal enough to be in easy eavesdrop range, spent his time pointing out to his extended family the whereabouts of Mendenhall during the entire affair. "He's standing at the 30-yard line. Now he's at the twenty. Look, he's now at the 15-yard line and has a whistle in his mouth." For a while I was sure Bronco was going in for the game-winning touchdown.

As we said before, occasionally there is a performer whose music actually matches their marketing. That looks like it has also happened in BYU football.

Based on the past two years, Bronco Mendenhall really is on the verge of "Rock Star" status.

While the BYU fan paparazzi didn't get but a small glimpse of this team during the spring, an encore performance of another 11-2 or better season is very doable.

Using the nod system made famous by my wife, here is how we rate BYU after this latest spring performance.

QUARTERBACK...5 Nods... You can see it from at least from 5 rows back...Max Hall is an apprentice "Rock Star". Barring injuries, he will carry the Cougar offense. He has some very talented weapons surrounding him, but he is still the guy that pulls the trigger. Expect a big year from Hall during his upcoming junior season. For BYU, Hall is not the question, but coaches are still trying to find an answer as to who will be his back up.

Brenden Gaskins and Kurt McEuen are the two most probable choices coming out of spring. Regardless of who wins the job in the fall, the amount of playing time they will receive will not be determined by their performances in practice but by the performance of the BYU defense in actual games during the 2008 season.

BYU wanted to give Max Hall maximum time on the field last season because he had no actual game experience before the season started. Because BYU really had no "blowout" games where the outcome was decidedly determined before halftime last year, playing time for a backup qb was extremely scarce.

We expect the offense to have no trouble putting up big points early and often this coming year, but if the BYU defense can't stop opponents from also scoring, it will mean that Hall will have to stay on the field and the backup quarterback remain on the sideline.

RUNNING BACK...3 1/2 Nods...BYU doesn't have any backs that wow with great speed and explosiveness, but they have three that can definitely wear down defenses. Lack of break away speed is the only thing keeping this group from a 4-Nod rating.

BYU lists Harvey Unga at 240-plus pounds and it appears the added weight hasn't detracted from his running abilities he so aptly displayed last season when he was named Freshman of the Year in the Mountain West Conference.

MWC opponents got a steady dose of BYU's power running game last season. That dosage will be increased with the added strength and experience of Unga and the return of a healthy Fui Vakapuna. Expect BYU's power running game to wear opposing defenses down.

Throw in the experience and pass blocking of Manase Tonga and not only will the BYU running game be better, but so will the BYU receiving numbers. Cougar wideouts will benefit from the Cougar running game forcing opposing defenses to cheat with their safeties by moving them closer to the line of scrimmage. That will make the middle of the field more wide open for BYU's receivers.

Highly touted redshirt freshman J.J. DiLuigi is just like the BYU backup quarterbacks. He won't see much time on the field unless the game is a blowout.

WIDE RECEIVER...3 Nods...Austin Collie is the marquee player of this group. He alone merits 3 nods,

but behind him, we don't think it is as bright as most do. There is some definite talent in freshmen Spencer Hafoka and Luke Ashworth and Michael Reed has proven to be a journeyman receiver, but until the freshmen get some playing time and prove themselves, we don't see it. That may change by mid season, but we think the lack of quality depth will hurt the Cougars in the early going of the 2008 season.

TIGHT END...4 Nods...This group is better than the wide receivers. Maybe it is because Dennis Pitta and Andrew George are basically quality receivers in a bigger body.

They both can run and catch and cause defensive coordinators nightmares.

They have to decide if they are going to use linebackers or safeties to cover them. Most opponents, especially in the MWC, don't have the athletes to give coordinators that option.

OFFENSIVE LINE...3 Nods...This is a good and experienced unit, but we didn't see anything this spring that would lead us to believe that BYU has found a way to protect Max Hall from the blind side by a defensive speed rusher. BYU is big and strong, but they still could use a little more quickness and lateral movement to be able to at least touch that speed rusher as he goes by.

If injuries heal by the fall, this will be a deep unit and has some NFL prospects. Bruce Davis of UCLA is gone, but it will be the Bruins again that will let us know if we are right or wrong about BYU's abilities to protect the back side of Hall.

DEFENSIVE LINE...2 1/2 going on 4 Nods...On paper, this unit doesn't look like it is anything special. That holds true for this spring also.

On paper and even on the field, Jan Jorgensen doesn't look impressive. All he does is make plays.

For the last two years, we have thought this group would be a liability for the team. For the last two years they have surprised and been very dependable and productive. We aren't betting against the same thing happening one more time. Based on the spring we give them 2 1/2 nods, but based on how they perform when the lights turn on, we are going with 4 Nods.

LINEBACKERS...2 Nods...We know that Bronco Mendenhall says that the program is to the level where players just step in and play when their time comes. Hopefully he is right when it comes to the linebacking corp.

Losing Bryan Kehl and Kelly Poppinga to graduation and the NFL is a big deal, in our opinion. Losing Terrance Hooks to an injury is also a big deal.

David Nixon is the only linebacker on the roster that is a proven commodity. Vic So'oto is a good athlete and had a good spring after moving from tight end to outside linebacker, but he has never played a down yet at that position against another Division I opponent. At least in the early going, we don't see how this group can be as good as they were last year.

DEFENSIVE BACKS...1 1/2 to 3 1/2 Nods...Athletically, this is at least a 3 1/2 Nod group. When it comes to experience they are just a 1 1/2, in our opinion. Jaime Hill, the current defensive coordinator and defensive back coach, has made lemonade out of lemons the past two seasons. This year he has a less acidic and more athletic group to work with. That includes Brandon Howard, Scott Johnson, G Pittman and Brandon Bradley at the corners and Kellen Fowler, David Tafuna, Andrew Rich and Jordan Pendleton at the safeties spots.

If the results match Hill's resume of the last two years, this could be a 3 1/2 Nod group before the season is over.

KICKING...1 Shake of the head...That is because nobody knows what to expect. What is known is that the BYU kicking game was inconsistent and, at times, non existent. Mitch Payne returns and so does C.J. Santiago as kicker and punter.

Justin Sorensen shows up this fall. The fact that BYU recruited a kicker/punter when it already had both on the current roster, pretty well sums up our rating of 1 shake of the head. Who knows?

BASKETBALL BRIEFS

As was expected, Trent Plaisted, the 6-11 junior post player for BYU, submitted his name for an early entry into the upcoming NBA draft in June.

He will not hire an agent and that means he will be able to work out for teams and also in the NBA draft camp if invited. Plaisted has until June 16 to decide if he will keep his name in the draft.

The start of the spring signing period in basketball began last Wednesday and runs through the middle of May. BYU did not sign any new recruits.

They had one scholarship to give and that was awarded to a current member of the team. Gavin MacGregor, a 6-10 post player who was hurt and missed the entire season.

BYU is trying to get a medical hardship for him and if they are successful, he would get his junior season restored.

One of Dave Rose's next priorities, if not the top one, is to do all he can to land Tyler Haws this coming fall. Haws, who will be a senior next season at Lone Peak HS and who was named Mr. Basketball in Utah as a junior, has said that he intends to sign early in November of this year.

One of the schools that had offered Haws and was making a big push for him, and in our opinion, BYU's biggest competitor for his services, was Stanford.

It will be interesting to see how the hiring of a new coach at Stanford will affect their recruiting of Haws. Trent Johnson, the coach of the Cardinal for the last four years, left Palo Alto last week to take the opening as the head basketball coach at LSU. As yet, Stanford has not announced a replacement for Johnson.

SPRING SPORTS

Volleyball...The No. 2 men's volleyball team secured a share of the Mountain Pacific Sports Federation regular-season title this past weekend with two three-set sweeps over No. 10 USC. The matches were played in Provo.

Despite the tie for the championship, BYU will enter the MPSF post season tournament as the No. 2 seed. BYU will host a quarterfinal match of the tourney in Provo, but the semis and finals will be held at Long Beach State. The 49ers are the No. seed and held the tie-breaker against the Cougars thanks to their wins over BYU earlier in the season.

BYU finished the regular season with a 23-4 overall record and a 18-4 mark in league play.

The Cougars will face the winner of a play-in match between the Nos. 7 and 8 seeds. That match will be held Wednesday and the Cougars will host the winner on Saturday, April 19.

The semis are set for Long Beach on Thursday, April 24 and if the Cougars advance to the finals. That will be played Saturday, April 26.

Baseball...BYU snapped a three game winning streak last Saturday against the Washington Huskies with an 11-7 win.

The victory was aided significantly by Kasey Ko's grand slam in the six-run eighth inning.

UW had taken the first two games of the three-game series.

BYU is now 15-20 on the year and returns to MWC action this week with a three-game series against TCU in Provo. The series kicks off on Thursday, April 19. BYU is 5-4 in league play. San Diego State leads the conference with a 9-3 record. TCU is tied with New Mexico for second place with an 8-4 record.