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ECONOMY AND HITTING BOTH IN A SLOWDOWN THIS SPRING

You don't have to be a Harvard-educated economist to figure out that the nation's economy is slumping.

You don't have to be Lou Holtz or John Madden to figure out that during this spring practice at BYU, contact has contracted.

After two weeks of drills, hitting is missing. There just hasn't been a lot of full contact this spring.

BYU held their first full-pads scrimmage last Friday. It wasn't anything spectacular.

Nobody really stood out on offense because the best running backs stood on the sideline.

It wasn't one of the offense's finest moments of the spring.

It doesn't matter. The offense is why there has been limited hitting this spring.

They don't need to prove themselves. The starting eleven is basically a done deal and has been since the Las Vegas Bowl.

Here is what you need to know about the offense despite what you see and hear during the spring.

Hall Is Back

Max Hall is back. Harvey Unga is back. So is Austin Collie and the two top tight ends. The offensive line is a veteran unit. The only real battle for playing time on offense this spring is the competition between Tom Sorensen and R.J. Willing at center.

They are both vying to replace Sete Aulai. Sorenson has been getting most of the reps with the first unit and Willing is versatile enough that he can play at both center and guard.

One reason hitting has been halted, except for limited occasions, is because the depth on the o-line this spring is thin because of injuries. Travis Bright is not practicing this spring and trying to get ready and healed from a broken leg suffered in the Las Vegas Bowl.

He is hoping to be cleared to play for the fall. Garrett Reden is also out of action until the fall.

Here is what BYU is working with this spring: Ray Feinga, Dallas Reynolds, David Oswald, R.J. Willing and Tom Sorensen. Those are the guys that have actually seen playing time in a real game before.

Others

Others participating this spring include, Matt Reynolds, Levi Mack, Manaaki Vaitai, Jason Speredon and Nick Alletto.

Hall has looked good, even taking into account the less than spectacular performance during the first full scrimmage.

The offense sputtered because of penalties and lack of rhythm. Hall, in limited work, was 5-7 for 107 yards. Waye Latu led all rushers with 30 yards on four carries.

Defensively is where we have been the most surprised. It looks what Bronco Mendenhall has been preaching for the last three years is finally coming to fruition.

He has said that he wants a program where BYU is never rebuilding, just introducing new players.

That appears to be the case on defense. Despite losing some key defensive personnel, Mendenhall has enough inventory of invested and indoctrinated players that the transition from inexperience to impressive is quite smooth this spring.

Timing

The timing of Vic So'oto's switch from tight end to outside linebacker is amazing. The timing is impeccable. This guy is an athlete that will make plays.

While most pundits are extremely high on the revamped secondary, we want to wait until at least two or three games during the regular season before we anoint them as good.

There are some athletes in this group, but they are still green.

We have seen enough of spring drills to know what the signs are for a team that will be good in the fall.

Those signs appear to be in place after the first two weeks of practice.

The only thing that could wreck the signs of success that we see would be injuries to key people

Did we mention that the hitting has been curtailed this spring? Maybe this Mendenhall guy really does know what he is doing.

FOOTBALL FLUFF AND STUFF

According to Bronco Mendenhall, it will take one more year of recruiting before he will have his missionary recruiting efforts balanced.

He has said that during the last three years BYU has been signing the maximum number of recruits per year allowed by the NCAA. That number is 25.

This coming season, Mendenhall expects the number of signees to be about one half that number. The reason for a more selective signing year is because there will be 13 missionaries returning that were signed two years ago.

After this coming recruiting campaign, the numbers returning should begin to mirror those leaving from the latest recruiting class and BYU can once again return to signing a full allotment of prospects.

As best we can decipher, the 13 missionaries returning to the program for the 2009 season are as follows:

Mike Hague, DB/RB, Knoxville, Tennessee

Romney Fuga, DL, Antananarivo, Madagascar

Mckay Jacobson, WR, Sapporo, Japan

Rhen Brown, DB, Salta, Argentina

Terence Brown, OL, Maceio, Brazil

Aveni Leung-Wai, LB, Rochester, New York

Mike Muehlman, DL, San Antonio, Texas

Brandon Ogletree, LB, Concepcion, Chile

Robbie Buckner, DB, Maputo, Mozambique
Marcus Matthews, WR, Stockholm, Sweden
Braden Hansen, OL, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Jordan Richardson, DL, Belo Horizonte, Brazil
Riley Stephensen, K/P, Auckland, New Zealand

Here's another missionary:

Riley Nelson, QB, Barcelona, Spain

We list him here because there have been numerous rumors that the former Utah State qb will be transferring to BYU upon his return from his mission.

We dismissed those rumors until recently. There were plenty of stories filtering out of the recent BYU coaching clinic that Nelson may indeed, be returning to BYU instead of USU.

His grandfather is Rod Tueller, the former Aggie Basketball coach and Athletic Director.

Despite those strong USU ties, there are those who tell us he is coming to BYU. Nobody will confirm that of course, but we learned a long time ago where there are multiple smoke signals, there is usually a pretty warm fire.

Nelson won't be back until the summer of 2009 and if he does indeed matriculate at Provo, he would redshirt a year and then be a redshirt sophomore in 2010, the year BYU will be looking to replace Max Hall.

From our vantage point, the fact that BYU did not heavily recruit a quarterback this past season and did not sign one, gives even more credence to the Nelson stories.

With Max Hall firmly entrenched for another two seasons, when he finally graduates, BYU will have Stephen Covey and Nelson to choose from as a replacement for Hall. Nelson will have had one redshirt year under his belt and Covey will have had two full seasons as a qb in the program.

This also lines up nicely for the BYU quarterback timeline for the future.

Hall has two more years. In 2010, he will likely be replaced by either Covey or Nelson. Covey will have two years left to play and Nelson would have three.

In February of 2010, BYU is also hoping that they can sign Jake Heaps to a letter of intent. He is the highly touted LDS quarterback out of Skyline HS in Seattle.

He likely would redshirt a year in the fall of 2010 and then leave for an LDS mission.

That means that when either Covey or Nelson are finished with their stint at quarterback, Heaps would be back from a mission and then be ready to play.

The quarterback picture is already charted on the board from Hall this coming fall until 2012-2013 with the projection of Heaps if the Cougars can land him.

If you are wondering why there would be so much excitement about Nelson, it is because he can see it coming. He has the ability to see what defenses are going to do and then exploit them. He was a phenom in high school and finished his freshman year as the starting qb for Utah State. In limited playing time, he threw for 945 yards and 6 touchdowns for the Aggies.

With a limited number of scholarships to award this coming season, it looks like the numbers will be around 12-13 new recruits for next year.

Some of those 13 spots are already taken.

Tui Crichton, a 6-3, 290 pound offensive lineman from Timpview HS is the latest to give BYU a verbal commitment for the 2009 recruiting class.

He joins Timpview teammate Craig Bills, a 6-2, 200 pound safety as the second player from the reigning Utah 4A state champions.

Others who have given commitments include Adam Timo, a running back from Snow Canyon HS in St. George, Terry Alletto, an offensive lineman from Colorado and Jray Galeai, a safety from Kahuku HS in Hawaii.

Speaking of recruits, BYU signed Tolu Moala, a 6-1, 230 pound linebacker from El Camino College this past February. He was supposed to show up in the fall. It looks like he will now be showing up in Stillwater, Oklahoma when August rolls around. The Cougars and Moala have mutually parted ways.

AT LEAST ONE BYU BASKETBALL PLAYER WILL DECLARE FOR THE NBA DRAFT

Trent Plaisted may very well declare for an early entry into the upcoming NBA draft this year.

Even if he doesn't, at least one other Cougar basketball player will more than likely declare for an early entry and we aren't talking about Lee Cummond.

Because of NBA and NCAA rules, Plaisted really has nothing to lose with an early entry, unless he signs with an agent.

Here is how it works. The NBA now requires all high school players to play at least one year of college basketball or sit out a year after high school before they are eligible to be drafted.

Once in college, a player can declare for entry into the NBA draft two times before he loses his college eligibility. Those are the rules set by the NBA. Unfortunately, the rules set by the NCAA are different. According to them, a player can only declare once for an early entry and as long as he has not signed with an agent, he can return to college and have eligibility remaining.

Declares Twice

If a player declares twice, the NCAA takes away all remaining eligibility.

The deadline for declaring for the draft as an early entry this year is April 27. Assuming a player has not signed with an agent, he has until 10 days before the NBA draft in June to take his name off the early entry list and return to college. That date is June 16.

As an early entrant, a player is eligible to participate in the NBA Pre-Draft camp, if invited. There is another camp, the Portsmouth Invitational Tournament, but that is for college seniors only. Early entrants can also work out for individual NBA teams.

Those who consider themselves locks for the early first round of the draft usually don't participate in any of these camps. They show up in Orlando for the NBA camp only to take a physical and get their height and weight measured.

No Brainer

In our opinion, it's a no brainer for Plaisted. He is already a junior and hasn't used his one-year NCAA exemption.

He might as well go and workout with other NBA hopefuls. If he has spectacular workouts and a team wants to take a chance on him and pay him real money, he should run, not walk to the NBA.

If teams don't feel he is good enough to be drafted or sign a free agent contract, he has had a better summer of workouts with better players than he would have had remaining in Provo playing pickup games.

Declaring early seems like a smart move for Plaisted, as long as he doesn't sign with an agent.

It also seems like a smart move for Jonathan Tavernari to declare early for the NBA.

It wouldn't surprise us to see his name on the early entry list sometime before April 27.

Another No Brainer

It is also a no brainer for him. Tavernari will be a junior next season. He probably doesn't expect to

play in the NBA after finishing his BYU career.

Where he will play is internationally. He will be in demand overseas or even back home in Brazil.

Now is the time for Tavernari to get his name out before international scouts and teams.

That is what an early entry into the NBA draft will let him do. He can declare, not sign with an agent and get two months to showcase himself in individual workouts for NBA teams.

International scouts are always attending these pre-draft camps and workouts to see what is left over from the NBA. The word we get is that Tavernari already has three workouts set up with NBA teams. We have been told one of the team is the New York Knicks.

Nice Career Move

This is what Tavernari was telling some people last week.

It is a brilliant career move. It is like interning with a prestigious law firm before getting your degree.

The way it works out is also a no-brainer. He still comes back to BYU next year and has given himself more exposure to overseas teams.

What it also means is that if he declares again after next season, he is gone for good. In our opinion, that would seem to indicate that he doesn't plan on playing in Provo more than one more year before trying to play for pay internationally.

BASKETBALL BRIEFS

This past year BYU participated in a December two-game tournament in Las Vegas. The Cougars ended up defeating Louisville and losing to North Carolina.

BYU will be on the road again this December to participate in a similar outing.

This time the setting will be in Phoenix and it is only a one-game match up with Arizona State.

It will be part of a basketball doubleheader with the other contest pitting Louisville against Minnesota.

The games will be played at University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale.

It was the site of this year's Super Bowl and the home of the Arizona Cardinals of the NFL. An actual date and time will be announced later.

After watching two weeks of the NCAA tournament, BYU's early exit after losing to Texas A&M now seems even more disappointing.

BYU is really not that far away, in our opinion, of being able to compete against many of the tourney teams.

Until the Cougars can find a way to get beyond a first-round game, we will never know if that theory holds any water.

The Davidson Wildcats' deep run in the tournament gave us some hope and proved our point of last week that it is all about guard play.

We don't expect the Cougars to have a scoring guard the caliber of Stephen Curry, but BYU certainly has all of the other ingredients that Davidson showed, except for a dominant scoring guard.

We expect Jimmer Fredette to be the closest thing to a scoring guard for the Cougars next season. If Dave Rose can somehow land Tyler Haws this coming fall, then he looks set to have a good scoring guard for the next few years.

They may not be good enough to take the Cougars to a final eight appearance, but they should be good enough to finally get the Cougars out of the first round of an NCAA tournament.