



Oct. 20th, 2007: California @ UCLA Game Notes

Some thoughts on the UCLA game, in no particular order:

- This may have been one of the most painful games I have witnessed as a Cal fan. Painful not just because it was another close loss, but more so because I have never seen such an obviously talented team play so passively, and because it was a missed chance to make a statement and “break serve” against our closest competitor for the rich Los Angeles area recruiting pool (Cal and UCLA are next in line behind USC at this point).
- Under Tedford, Cal has always won at home and lost on the road against the Bruins. Of course, a couple of the home wins have been fairly convincing, while all of the road losses have been excruciatingly close. This one was no exception, though for once, I actually felt that UCLA deserved to win, which I did not feel during the 2003 and 2005 contests.
- Why the hell would I say UCLA deserved to win? Because they manned up and dominated the line of scrimmage – just like Cal did in 2003 and 2005. In those earlier games at the Rose Bowl, the Bears heavily out-gained the Bruins but lost due to special teams in those contests, 6 field goal attempts resulting in 6 points for Cal and 7 for UCLA in 2003 and 3 huge Mo Drew punt returns and a critical UCLA fake punt in 2005).
- This season, it was different. Cal gained 67 yards on 30 rushing attempts, with Justin Forsett carrying the ball 25 times for 76 yards – just over 3 yards per carry. UCLA gained 183 yards on 45 rushing attempts, with Kahlil Bell rushing 22 times for 142 yards – almost 6.5 yards per carry. Senior UCLA defensive linemen Kevin Brown and Bruce Davis asserted themselves at the line of scrimmage to shut down the Cal ground game, whereas Cal’s defensive line, which I have harped on as the weakness of the team starting with my 2007 preview, got run over. The Bears were missing a D-line starter to injury in Junior DE Rulon Davis, but then the Bruins were missing starting Senior DT Brigham Harwell, so that’s hardly an excuse.
- The UCLA dominance in the trenches actually made a potentially critical play call by much-maligned Bruin head coach Karl Dorrell even more baffling. Trailing 21-20 late in the third quarter, his offense faced a huge 4th and 1 at the Cal 38 yard line after a scramble by QB Pat Cowan for no gain. With the Bruins running the ball at will, everyone in the stadium assumed either a QB sneak or a run play for a likely first down was on the way. It was a bit out of field goal range for kicker Kai Forbath (would be 55 yard try), and a punt would be likely to net only 18 yards. Dorrell called timeout, presumably to sketch out the 4th down play, then had his team line up and let the play clock run down, apparently trying to draw Cal offside. The Bears did not budge, took the penalty, and UCLA punter Perez predictably booted one into the end zone. End result: Cal ball at the 20, to the sound of boos resounding through the Rose Bowl from the baby blue faithful. It’s

all the more galling for the *real* Blue and Gold Cal fans that the Bears still lost when faced with such ineptitude.

- UCLA's approach of stuffing the run and guarding the short to mid-range pass closely is a hallmark of aggressive defensive coordinator DeWayne Walker. Last year, Walker's approach backfired in Memorial as Longshore completed long passes over the top to help spot the Bears a multi-touchdown lead. This time, whether due to Nate's gimpy ankle, due to one of Cal's receiver trio being out (Robert Jordan) or due to game planning (which I don't understand) the longer pass plays were fewer and further between.
- Ironically, when the Bears did air it out, they met with success. Cal's first touchdown capped off a drive after an exchange of punts to start the game. After advancing the ball to the Bruin 21 via a series of short runs and passes, Longshore made a key read against a "Cover 2" defense by UCLA. In the Cover 2, corners play up tight and safeties guard the deep outside routes to take away the wide receivers. But as is their habit, the Bruins still committed to stuffing the line of scrimmage by bringing their linebackers up. Longshore as able to read the defensive alignment and correctly used the primary option in this situation, the tight end over the middle, completing a post pattern to a wide open Craig Stevens for a 21 yard touchdown pass.
- Cal's second touchdown also came on a long pass. After a good kickoff return by Lavelle Hawkins and a couple decent runs by Forsett, the Bears faced a 1st and 15 at the UCLA 39 following a false start penalty. Longshore took the snap and faked a dive to Montgomery, then faked to Hawkins on the end-around. He then stepped back and fired a bomb over the middle to Desean Jackson who was single covered on a post route. Jackson made an over-the-shoulder catch several yards past the defenders for a seemingly easy touchdown. Fantastic play call after several rushes and attempted end-around plays in the first half – all the more fantastic because it occurred on first down, not third and long when the defense would suspect a pass regardless of fakes.
- But these last two plays, the long touchdowns to Stevens and Jackson were the exceptions rather than the rule on Saturday. Cal's offense consisted primarily of Forsett running the ball, and bubble screens or quick hitches to outside receivers who were tightly covered by the Bruin press defense. Of course, the end result was a stagnant offense, punctuated by three key interceptions as UCLA defensive backs gained confidence and began making plays on the predictable passes they were seeing.
- On the other side of the ball, it was more of the same from the Oregon State game. Cal's defense applied virtually no pressure on the quarterback, with the only sack coming on an early-game blitz by Zack Follett. UCLA got what it needed on the ground, highlighted by a 64 yard burst up the middle by Kahlil Bell to the Cal 2 yard line. Senior Bear defensive tackle Matt Malele had no tackles or any other statistics, and no Cal defensive recorded a tackle for loss (linebackers Follett and Worrell Williams had 3 and 1 respectively). It will be very tough for Tedford's crew to ever reach a championship level without a good, and ideally

- dominant (see LSU) defensive line. Right now, Cal's defensive line is the opposite of dominant. Probably the best of the bunch has been Sophomore Tyson Alualu (5 tackles and a fumble recovered), while Junior defensive end Rulon Davis has missed several weeks and will likely miss a few more.
- The linebackers did play a bit better. As has become his habit, Anthony Felder led the team in tackles with 10 along with Follett. Williams had 4 tackles along with a forced fumble. But none of these players were able to take the game over – a tall order when the defensive line in front of them was getting manhandled.
 - In the defensive backfield, starting corners Syd'Quan Thompson (9 tackles) and Brandon Hampton (5 tackles, 1 fumble recovered, 1 pass broken up) played decently. But third corner Chris Conte, who is playing as a true Freshman after choosing Cal over UCLA this past recruiting season, was abused on both pass and run plays. Free safety Thomas Decoud was a sure tackler as always, but his weakness in the passing game was exposed as he failed to turn around on a receiver option pass for UCLA's second touchdown.
 - After a tremendous game against Oregon State, Senior punter Larson had an off day with an under 35 yard average on 5 punts, including a shanked 18-yarder. Jordan Kay missed his only kick, a 44 yarder, to end the first half. Kay has now missed critical kicks in 2 straight close games, a disturbing trend with starter Tom Schneider out for the season.
 - Actually, the end of half sequence leading to Kay's missed field goal attempt was puzzling from a play-calling perspective as well. Cal began the drive inside the UCLA 40 yard line with 1:10 left on the clock before halftime, with several timeouts left. In this situation, it's typical to use your timeouts, since the favorable field position reduces the risk of giving the ball back due to the long field that would result for the opposition. But Tedford let the clock run, and finished with a 1st and 10 on UCLA's 27 yard line with 2 seconds left, being forced into the failed field goal attempt with timeouts still in hand and no further attempt to get the ball closer or score a touchdown. More grist for the mill for those who think Tedford's play-calling was too conservative on Saturday.
 - Strangely, Tedford even appeared to have wrong information on his run/pass ratio. When faced with a post-game suggestion regarding passing the ball more on first down, Tedford stated that he passed far more than he ran (17 to 10?) on first down when in fact it was 14 runs and 13 passes on first down, including the final desperate drive after Cal was down by 9. Even when Cal passed, sometimes it was too conservative for Bear fans' tastes, the key example being a predictable bubble screen to Jahvid Best, who was the only one split out to his side, stopped for a 3 yard gain on 3rd and 4.
 - All that being said, it is obvious to everyone, including UCLA fans, that Tedford is a very good coach (albeit possibly with some flaws) and Cal is very, very lucky to have him.
 - And speaking of the last desperate drive, it occurred after the first desperate drive ended with disastrous consequences. UCLA had taken the lead 23-21 with a long

drive and a field goal with 2:54 left in the fourth quarter. Freshman running back Jahvid Best returned the ensuing kickoff 54 yards, starting left and barely being forced out of bounds right, all the way to the UCLA 35 yard line. With kicker Kay struggling, Longshore needed to move his troops at least 10 more yards to have a decent shot at a field goal, so he would probably need a first down at the very least. But the Bears ran vanilla running plays on first and second downs, which the Bruin front seven stuffed for short gains as they had done all day. Facing 3rd and 5 at the 30 yard line, Longshore made a throw he had made all day. Desean Jackson from his wide left position motioned inside and then curled back out for a short hitch. UCLA corner Al Verner said later that he had seen the same pattern after the same motion so many times in film and again during the game that he knew exactly what was coming. He stepped in front of the pass for his second interception with no one in front of him and took it 76 yards the other way for a 30-21 Bruin lead and a hammerlock on the game. The Bears' final possession with seconds left resulted in 4 incomplete passes and a turnover on downs.

- Desean Jackson, despite being the target on the ill-fated Longshore third down pass described above, did have a very productive day with 9 catches for 136 yards and 2 touchdowns. Lavelle Hawkins had a key 3rd down grab but was held to 3 catches for 25 yards.
- So now, despite ugly non-conference losses to Utah and Notre Dame, UCLA leads the Pac-10 with an undefeated conference record along with the Bears' next opponent: the Arizona State Sun Devils. The Sun Devils are a completely rejuvenated team under head coach Dennis Erickson, who has succeeded on the field everywhere he has gone in college football (though not in the pros). Of course, this success at Miami and Oregon State has sometimes come at the expense of some bad sportsmanship and off-field problems, but the folks in Tempe will take the undefeated record and top 5 ranking for now!
- Things are looking down for the Blue and Gold right now after the giddy rush up the rankings and the huge win over Oregon. Still, college football is a funny game, and Cal is not out of the conference race yet, believe it or not. The Bears could still surprise some people before the season is over. So let's not be fair-weather fans. Get behind this team and let's turn these close losses into wins.

Go Bears!!!