

Oct. 18th, 2008: Arizona vs. California Game Notes

Arizona 42

California 27

Some thoughts on the game, in no particular order:

- *“The Bears are who we thought they were!”*
-- *Dennis Green*
- Well I predicted in [T's Cal Football Preview 2008](#) that Cal would be 4-2 at the halfway point of the season with road losses on a grass surface to Maryland and Arizona. Somehow, though, guessing the winner of all six Cal games doesn't make me feel a whole lot better.
- So here we are. Cal is a flawed team with two shaky quarterbacks, a Jekyll and Hyde defense, often predictable play-calling, and an apparent lack of killer instinct. Yet the Bears have talent and are not an easy win – both Maryland and Arizona played very good games to get their victories, though no one will confuse the Terps and Cats with the Nittany Lions or Crimson Tide.
- With Nate Longshore starting, the news focus is naturally on the quarterback play, but frankly, Cal's defense was as much the culprit. The normally pass-happy Arizona spread offense found an opening on the ground, repeatedly running to the offense's right and defense's left, away from right outside linebacker Zack Follett. After starting RB Nic Grigsby fumbled on his first carry and was benched, little-known freshman backup Keola Antolin ran over and through the Bears for 149 yards and 3 touchdowns on 21 carries. Despite a couple big hits by Worrell Williams, for the most part, Cal's defenders could not seem to tackle and wrap up the 5'8" 180 pound former wrestler.
- The entire defense was responsible for the failure, but I'm going to be a dick and single out one guy. It's even more dick-ish considering this kid went to Berkeley High and has been a nice story along with his brother Sean: Eddie Young who starts at left outside backer opposite Follett. Young repeatedly missed tackles and did not play with leverage. In my opinion, without knowing all the details I'm sure the coaches know, I think backup Mike Mohamed is a surer tackler and should get a shot at the starting OLB spot, with Young subbing in mostly to pass rush, which he *is* quite good at. While his nickname “The Prophet” may not be too creative, Mohamed has played quite a bit at both inside and outside linebacker off the bench this year and last.
- While almost nobody outside Tucson had heard of Antolin until Saturday, the Wildcats' big names on offense all had banner days too. Quarterback Willie Tuitama made some great throws on the way to 225 yards, 2 touchdowns, and 1 early pick. First-team All Pac-10 receiver Mike Thomas was all over the field with 104 yards receiving and a touchdown, 14 rush yards, and 40 punt return yards to boot, figuring prominently in all of Arizona's first 4 touchdown drives. And stud tight end Rob Gronkowski, whose brother Dan also caught a touchdown against Cal for Maryland, had 6 receptions for 91 yards, a score, and several

- crushing blocks. Despite a few positive plays here and there, the Bears could not contain any of them for long.
- Ironically, contrary to popular complaints that Cal doesn't blitz enough, the Bears blitzed quite a bit against Arizona, and did manage to sack Tuitama 4 times. But Tuitama made them pay in a big way on several other occasions, burning single coverage on long passes to Thomas and Gronkowski.
 - Syd'Quan Thompson, who has become a strong cornerback, was the one victimized in single coverage on a post pattern for Thomas' touchdown, and did not have his best game, though he did turn in a couple pretty good punt returns.
 - Cal is now 0-8 since 2005 in true road games played on grass surfaces.
 - 2006: losses @ Tennessee, @ Arizona, @ USC
 - 2007: losses @ UCLA, @ Arizona State, @ Stanford
 - 2008: losses @ Maryland, @ Arizona
 - I don't think it's a coincidence that back in 2005 when Cal went 2-1 on grass including a Big Game win, Cal had a power back in Marshawn Lynch and a power offensive line with O'Callahan, Phillip, and Merz, and a power quarterback in Booya ... oh wait. But the main point is that having a power running game and having a defense that practices against a power back may be more critical on grass, where quickness is less important than on turf.
 - Cal's next and only remaining regular-season game on grass? At the Coliseum against USC.
 - So let me avoid the quarterback issue for as long as possible by talking next about the two best *positive* offensive surprises in this game:
 - JC transfer wide Receiver Verran Tucker only had 2 career catches in spot duty coming into the contest, including the last touchdown in the failed comeback at Maryland. Against Arizona, Tucker had a breakout game with 4 catches for 68 yards, a touchdown, and multiple other plays where Tucker got open deep but the quarterback missed him. Unfortunately, Tucker also had one very bad play, described later.
 - Italian-born freshman walk-on Giorgio Tavecchio performed remarkably well as both a place-kicker and kickoff man in lieu of the injured David Seawright. Tavecchio consistently kicked off fairly deep (only exception was a short kickoff to open the game), and just barely missed a 50 yard field goal wide right before splitting the uprights on 42 and 40 yarders. By the way, while the 50 yard near-miss was actually promising, most would say it was a tactical mistake by Tedford to kick rather than go for it on 4th and 3 from the 33 (given that it was the first quarter and not the end of the game with Cal needing 3 points). In any case, with Seawright out and Jordan Kay apparently relegated to the bench, look for Tavecchio to handle both kickoffs and field goals against UCLA.

- Ok let's get it over with. Nate Longshore had what Cal fans have sadly come to think of as a prototypical Nate game. Some good throws and play-calls, particularly in the first half, followed by a second half meltdown featuring a horrific pick-six and a ludicrous butterfingers fumble that was thankfully recovered by left tackle Mitchell Schwartz. The "prototypical Nate" description is a bit unfair since Longshore actually played much better during the first half of 2006 and was injured for the second half of 2007, but unfortunately, the fifth year senior does not seem to react well to pressure, whether from pass rushers hitting him or due to the overall game situation, especially late.
- The interception return for a touchdown by Arizona cornerback Devin Ross was a mirror image of star corner Antoine Cason's pick six of Longshore in the same stadium two years ago. Back then it came when the Cats had just come back from a two score halftime deficit to tie the game and it put them up by 7. This time it happened when Arizona had just come back from a two score halftime deficit to take a 1 point lead and it put them up by 8. In 2006, it was a right-sideline pattern to the fullback, while this time it was a left-sideline out to Verran Tucker (the aforementioned bad play by the rookie receiver) as Longshore stared him down, pumped, hesitated, and then went ahead with the throw anyway, to the *inside* instead of the outside where it should have been. Actually, it should have been several yards outside, thrown away out of bounds, or thrown to the other side of the field where Nyan Boateng was open on a similar out pattern. Tucker did not make a strong play for the ball, and Ross, who had plenty of time to move over due to Nate's telegraph, wrestled the ball away, got a block, and scampered down the sideline to the raucous cheers of the red-clad Arizona faithful.
- Kevin Riley entered the game in the fourth quarter with the Bears down by 42-27, which ended up being the final score. There was never a real threat of a comeback like at Maryland – Riley made a few nice completions, got very unlucky on a tipped interception, eluded the pass rush to roll out and hit Sean Young on a beautiful play, but later didn't see wide open receivers and ultimately tried to do too much with long throws when he had some patterns open underneath. The game ended when Riley held on to the ball for way too long and took a sack on fourth down.
- At this point, let's be honest: Cal has two unreliable quarterbacks. Along with thousands of other would-be head coaches among the Bear fan-base, I think Riley should start based on upside. It's the same thought I had to start the season, though I no longer have the illusion that he is anywhere close to being a great quarterback right now. This Cal team is very unlikely to go to the Rose Bowl, and while Riley may not give the Bears much of a relative advantage, I don't think Nate does either. Let's get the youngster as many reps as possible with the first team offense, both in practice and in the game. You could even make an argument to give Brock Mansion second string reps in practice, since at this juncture Longshore is arguably a known quantity, sad to say.
- To those that think Longshore doesn't do anything right, I disagree. Longshore made some great play-calls in the first half, and he did throw two nice touchdowns

passes. He also missed on some would-be long gains by overthrowing Tucker deep on a couple occasions, and throwing behind a post route by Boateng on a would-be touchdown to end the half before the Bears settled for a Tavecchio field goal (Boateng nearly made an amazing, leaping, twisting catch, which was ruled incomplete on review). One overthrow to Tucker came on a tremendous play-action post pattern where Tucker got 4 yards behind single coverage – on the first play after an Anthony Felder interception gave the Cal the ball back.

- The unusual thing about this last play-action pass to Tucker was that it came out of the Pro-set Standard-I formation where the fullback and tailback line up directly in a line behind the quarterback and center, with 1 tight end and 2 wide receivers. Cal almost always runs out of this formation, and on the very few occasions that the Bears pass, it has been shorter passes which don't take advantage of the fact that defenses have started to crash the line of scrimmage against the formation, anticipating the run. Finally, Tedford, Cignetti, Longshore, whoever tried to take advantage by throwing a play-action bomb. A good throw would have resulted in a touchdown, and an underthrow probably still meant at least a long completion or a pass interference call. Instead we got nothing on the overthrow.
- Cal passes the ball much more often out of the Offset-I where the fullback is shifted over to one side behind the line, and is more mixed out of other formations (single back etc.), but reviewing the game, you can tell the aforementioned play-action bomb actually opened up Cal's standard lead running play for a while. In fact, the beautiful 67 yard Jahvid Best touchdown run happened out of the Standard-I when Longshore did a "fake audible", Arizona's defense dropped back a bit and played the pass allowing Cal's blockers to fire out. Best ended up taking it to the house thanks to a final crushing block by Boateng on the free safety. Unfortunately, Cal never again passed out of the Standard-I for the rest of the game, and in the third quarter, Arizona went back to packing 8 in the box and aggressively stuffing the Bear running attack out of this formation, knocking Best out of the game in the process (apparently Jahvid is ok for this Saturday).



- Best now shares Cal's touchdown lead with tight end Cameron Morrah: 5 touchdown runs and catches respectively. Morrah had some drops, took some hard hits, and his disastrous upward tip of a fourth quarter pass was responsible for Kevin Riley's 3rd career interception (versus 12 touchdowns). But Morrah also made a spectacular leaping touchdown grab on a lofted corner pattern from Longshore, splitting two defenders. Cameron finished with 3 catches for 60 yards.
- While the refs did not cost Cal the game, they apparently decided to stop calling pass interference altogether (on either team) in the second half. It started when Syd'Quan Thompson clearly interfered with Arizona receiver Delashaun Dean (2 catches, 21 yards) over the middle and got away with it to a huge chorus of boos. But the same Arizona crowd seemed less bothered by the several occasions after that when Cal receivers were victimized without a flag, which hurt disproportionately because Cal spent the entire fourth quarter trying to come back and passing nearly exclusively. Throws to Morrah, Boateng on a long bomb, and later again on a fourth down play to Morrah were clear cases of defensive pass interference, along with a handful of other borderline plays, but none were called. Morrah also got away with borderline offensive PI on a successful "fade-stop" sideline completion where he nudged the defender who was running stride-for-stride past him before making the catch.
- But even when not interfered with, Cal's young receiving corps had some ugly drops to go with some brilliant catches by Morrah, Boateng, and Tucker. Things may be a lot better next year, but for now I think what we see is what we get in the passing game with the uncertainty at quarterback and the inexperience of their targets.
- So if the Bears are who I thought they were, they will do as my preview predicts and go 8-4. While this may not be what most fans were hoping for, I think it is

probably realistic, and even 8-4 is going to be tough given the schedule if Cal does not win the HUGE upcoming game against UCLA.

- The Bruins are a talented and well-coached team that has been horribly depleted by numerous injuries at key positions. As such, Cal *should* beat them at home. By double digits. And send a message to recruits that the two programs may be competing for in the future.
- But will that happen? The Bruins love to jam the line of scrimmage and bring pressure. Can Cal pass over the top and make them pay? Can the defense regain its form playing on friendly home turf (literally and figuratively ... turf >>> grass for Cal these days). And who will start at quarterback?
- It's gut check time. Let's get out to Memorial and help Cal get back on track.
- Go Bears!