

Oct. 25th, 2008: UCLA vs. California Game Notes

California 41

UCLA 20



Oracle: "But... you already know what I'm going to tell you."

Neo: "I'm not The One."

Oracle: "Sorry, kid. You got the gift, but it looks like you're waiting for something."

-- The Matrix

Ok so that's over the top, but I've just always wanted to use that quote. Some thoughts on the game, in no particular order:

- It was a beautiful day in Strawberry Canyon, and the late-arriving crowd of nearly 65,000 must have known that the Bears would save most of the fireworks for the fourth quarter. Cal scored 24 straight points in just over ten minutes in the final period to break open a tense defensive struggle, and just like that, the good times were back on.
- And yes, for some reason, this was a far more satisfying win, at least in person, than the Longshore-led 24-14 decision over Arizona State a couple weeks back. Perhaps because we won going away. Perhaps because we have more of a rivalry with UCLA. Perhaps because it actually looked like Cal's fitful offense was

merely suffering from some execution (catching the ball) issues, rather than from a systemically predictable play-calling rut. See below.

- Note to those sitting below me in section R: after Cal scores, please stop rolling up 200 pound dudes towards the general area where my friends and I sit. I know we've technically encroached into the student section, and we're willing to play along, but some of us old farts are far more feeble than you could possibly imagine. Roll up only petite and preferably hot women next time. Please.
- Some shameless self-congratulation: an unblemished 7-0 so far this season my preseason [T's 2008 Cal Football Preview](#) picking the outright winner of Cal games (though only 3-4 relative to the weekly spread). Hopefully that will sink to 7-1 and 3-5 after the Bears prove me wrong and maul the Ducks.
- While Cal's trips to play UCLA at the Rose Bowl in odd-numbered years under Tedford have been a recurring nightmare of excruciatingly close losses, it's good to see the Bears smacking down the Bruins at home in return. Per **aunursa**, a poster on the BearInsider.com discussion board: until now, when was the last time
 - Cal won 5 consecutive home games vs UCLA? **never**
 - Cal won each of 3 consecutive home games vs UCLA by a 14 point margin? **never**
 - Cal scored 28 points in each of 3 consecutive home games vs UCLA? **never**
- In a surprise to some, Kevin Riley started and played the entire game at quarterback for the Bears. Riley started slow and his receivers dropped multiple would-be big catches, but he never panicked or turned the ball over. This was in contrast with the Bruins' Kevin Craft, whom Cal defenders picked off 4 times, returning two to the house for scores. The Bear defense is now among the national leaders in interceptions per game with 15 picks in 7 contests. After throwing two fourth quarter touchdown strikes, one for Nyan Boateng's 3rd of the year and another for Cameron Morrah's team-leading 6th, Riley now has 14 touchdowns and 3 interceptions during his career, 9 and 2 for 2008. While he's still struggling a bit with his accuracy, timing, and decision-making, he is ironically the "safe" choice between Cal's two quarterbacks in terms of not providing a big play for the opposing defense.
- Another belief I have is that Riley is tremendous in his mechanics for the running game, pulling off great play fakes and sometimes generating uncertainty in the defense as to who has the ball even on basic runs. While I may be imagining things, Cal's running backs did come alive against the Bruins:
 - Jahvid Best: 17 carries for 115 yards, 1 touchdown, 1 catch for 4 yards
 - Shane Vereen: 14 carries for 99 yards, 1 catch for 12 yards
 - Tracy Slocum (garbage time but still against UCLA's first team defense): 5 carries for 34 yards

- Speaking of sowing uncertainty in an opposing defense, my observation was that Tedford and offensive coordinator Frank Cignetti did a much better job than in prior games mixing up play-calls out of given formations and keeping the Bruins off balance. Even out of the bread-and-butter pro-set Standard-I formation where the tailback and fullback are in a straight line behind the quarterback and there are 2 receivers and 1 tight end, Cal did not call the usual lead rushing play to the tailback every time (only 10 out of 13 where in 4 other games I have charted, it has been over 93%). There was a fake to the fullback and a counter pitch to the weak-side, then a fake of the aforementioned weak-side counter pitch and a fullback run, and finally a play-action rollout by Riley and a downfield pass to Morrah for a touchdown (Yes!).
- And of course the trick play everyone will remember is the flea flicker that broke the game open. After UCLA fell 1 yard short thanks to a desperate tackle by Chris Conte to end a 22 yard reception on a gutsy 4th and 23 fake punt, Cal went for the home run. Tedford, Cignetti, and Riley decided to try to take advantage of the tendency of the Bruin safeties, Rahim Moore and Bret Lockett to play up in a run-stuffing position in UCLA defensive coordinator DeWayne Walker's aggressive scheme.
- With double tight ends and two backs, Riley brought the lone receiver, Nyan Boateng in motion towards the tackles, then sent him on a deep skinny post as he handed the ball to Jahvid Best on an apparent run. Moore bit on the fake and when Best pitched the ball back to Riley, Boateng was breaking clear past the corner. But UCLA's great young defensive tackle Brian Price (more on him later) had beaten Cal right guard Norris Malele on an outside move and was barreling towards Riley's right side. Riley made a beautiful adjustment, sidestepping left and stepping up, then launched a bomb to the now wide open Boateng, who was five yards past Lockett who was coming over to help. Boateng caught the slightly underthrown ball and fell into the end zone to put Cal two scores up for good.
- Speaking of UCLA's DT Brian Price (1 sack, 3 tackles for loss), he was a huge bright spot for the Bruins, whose aggressive style caused problems for both of Cal's guards, Boskovich and Malele, and also for backup right tackle Matt Laird who had come in for an injured Teofilo. Actually, it seemed that Donovan Edwards, another backup that came in to play right tackle after Laird in turn got hurt, played quite well to end the game. Ironically, Edwards had just transferred to Cal this summer after one year of junior college, and almost ended up at UCLA before selecting the Bears.
- But Cal's defense had its own stars:
 - Linebacker Mike Mohamed was selected as Pac-10 defensive player of the week for his 9 solo tackles, 1 sack, 2 TFLs, and interception return for a touchdown. "The Prophet" does not even start for Cal, but always plays tons of snaps as he is the first LB off the bench for either Felder and Williams on the inside or Follett and Young on the outside. Mohamed actually almost had another interception two plays before his pick six as an errant Craft throw was tipped up by Cal corner Darian Hagan, but came

down right on Mohamed's helmet as he was looking for the ball. But two plays later, Mohamed had his first ever touchdown and the game was for all practical purposes, over. I'll pat myself on the back for suggesting that Mohamed play more in the game notes after last week. I'm sure Tedford is waiting expectantly for my next gem.

- Another equally deserving player of the week nominee was strong safety ("rover") Marcus Ezeff who has had a relatively quiet season thus far but broke out in a big way with two interceptions, including one returned 69 yards for Cal's second touchdown.
- Ironically, the Cal defender with the biggest "every-down" impact may have been yet another emerging Bear star, defensive lineman Tyson Alualu, who was in the Bruin backfield all day, finishing with 6 tackles and 2 sacks, and at least one blocked pass (stats show Alualu with 2 pass break-ups), along with several quarterback hurries on UCLA's Kevin Craft.
- An finally Syd'Quan Thompson continues his solid play at corner in both pass coverage and quick run support with 10 tackles, 0.5 for loss, and 2 pass breakups. Squid was beaten once when he was out-jumped by tall Bruin wide-out Taylor Embree who made a beautiful catch on a long fade, but overall, Thompson did his usual masterful job keeping UCLA contained.
- Back to Jahvid Best, who now has a mild ankle sprain to go with his elbow injury. Best ran well all game, but his end around from a spread formation for Cal's first touchdown was a thing of beauty. Especially so because fullback Will Ta'ufou, who was also lined up wide just inside Best, led across and delivered not one but two huge blocks: a pancake on star UCLA corner Alterraun Verner followed by a nice obstruction of Bret Lockett to spring Best for the 34 yard touchdown. The closest Jahvid got to being stopped on that play was running into his own lineman Matt Laird as he bounced it outside.
- Another young player worth mentioning for some key contributions to the game is Jeremy Ross who has been seeing more and more playing time since starting the season towards the bottom of the 6 receiver rotation. Ross had a mixed day returning kickoffs in place of Best, whom the Cal coaches are trying to protect. Nevertheless, he had some key catches from Kevin Riley for long gains, including a beautiful post corner that Kevin lofted to Ross just as the pass rush arrived. The most spectacular play from Ross, however, was one that was brought back by penalty. It came on an end around late in the game where Ross reversed field and hurdled high over the head of Bruin safety Rahim Moore who was bearing down for the tackle. Ironically, the play was brought back because of an illegal block by Kevin Riley.
- In fact, it's starting to look like the top wide receivers in the rotation might be shaping up to be Nyan Boateng, along with Verran Tucker and Ross, with LaReylle Cunningham and Sean Young next up. Freshman Marvin Jones is

- apparently recovered from his injury and is in the mix as well, but fellow frosh Michael Calvin is out for the season.
- Receivers certainly figure among the groups that must improve for the Bears in the brutal upcoming stretch against Oregon, USC, Oregon State, and Stanford.
 - There were numerous drops throughout the game. Usually not on perfect throws, but often on pretty good throws that have to be caught to sustain the offense.
 - Riley himself must improve. He was often either slightly off or threw too late during the first three quarters, but got better as the contest wore on. By the fourth quarter, he actually looked pretty sharp.
 - In some cases, Cal's secondary seemed too soft in its zone, giving the hapless Craft some unwarranted easy throws into wide seams in the defense. Of course, the same zone came up with four interceptions, two by Marcus Ezeff, one by backup safety Sean Cattouse, and one by Mohamed.
 - And finally, Cal's special teams blocking and coverage was very troubling. UCLA's only touchdown before garbage time came on a blocked punt, and Bruin return man Terrance Austin also busted long punt and kickoff returns to set up a field goal and a touchdown. Special Teams coach Pete Alamar should not get a free pass because he has some strong individual contributors, currently punter Bryan Anger and kicker Giorgio Tavecchio (previously Desean Jackson, Jahvid Best, etc.).
 - People are becoming familiar with Anger and his booming high punts, but Tavecchio had a breakout game as both the kickoff man and the place-kicker, in lieu of an injured David Seawright. It's possible Seawright may become Wally Pipp and never get his job back as Tavecchio nailed most of his kickoffs fairly deep and looked confident and flawless on 26 and 42 yard field goals, along with 5 extra points. The young walk-on soccer player with Italian heritage has an engaging personality in interviews, and seems to have the game to go with it.
 - So now the season gets to crunch time. A giant showdown looms this Saturday with Oregon, who like Cal (and USC and Oregon State) only has one loss in the Pac-10. After some early season struggles, the Ducks appear to have their swagger back, along with their second string quarterback Justin Roper who was injured in Oregon's third game, an overtime win at Purdue. With original starter Nathan Costa lost for the season during fall camp, third stringer Jeremiah Masoli, a great running threat who occasionally passes, has started becoming comfortable with the reins of Oregon's high-powered spread attack as well. The Ducks also boast some great individual players on defense, on the line, and at running back with the tandem of Jeremiah Johnson and the bruising LeGarrette Blount. They will be out for revenge after Cal stole one up at Autzen last season.
 - This is going to be a showdown. Go Bears!