

Sept. 23rd, 2006: Arizona State vs. California Game Notes

Some thoughts on the Arizona State game, in no particular order:

- On Saturday, I was lucky enough to be at Memorial Stadium for perhaps the most entertaining stretch of Cal football I have seen in a long, long time. Against a top 25 team in Arizona State, Cal was absolutely on fire for most of the first half, after spotting the Sun Devils a touchdown to start the contest. The Bears dominated in all three phases of the game, scoring 35 unanswered points in less than 12 minutes, with big plays galore. I am fired up just thinking about it. After a spectacular interception return for touchdown by Daymeion 'Donte' Hughes to close the half, Cal had put a 42-14 half-time hammerlock on the game. So beautiful.
- Marshawn Lynch had 124 yards on 17 carries and 2 receptions for 33 yards and a graceful touchdown catch on a deep wheel route to make it 28-7. Ho hum. For once, the great back was one of the less noticeable Bears on the field.
- Desean Jackson *was* very noticeable, with an electrifying 80 yard punt return touchdown to make it 21-7, a smooth 52 yard catch on a deep post, and an easy corner pattern touchdown catch from Longshore to make it 35-7. The latter play was after ASU corner Justin Tryon put an extremely dirty hit on Jackson before the ball arrived on a punt return. Tryon had a clear sight line to see that Jackson had not yet caught the ball, which ended up glancing off Tryon's back, and still delivered a full-speed, helmet-first hit in a way that clearly suggested frustration and retribution for Jackson making the Sun Devils look bad on his earlier big plays. DJ lay on the turf for a long minute while Cal fans held their breath before eventually bouncing up and sauntering to the sidelines (and later catching the aforementioned second touchdown).
- Perhaps the most beautiful play by a wide receiver (there were so many to choose from) was by Lavelle Hawkins on a go route down the left sideline against, yes, Justin Tryon. On the play, Tryon played bump-and-run and had good coverage but still got schooled as "Hawk" got his outside leg just inside the end zone as he made the catch. It was Cal's first play after linebacker Zach Follett sacked Carpenter and forced a fumble which was recovered by fellow linebacker Desmond Bishop. I like the fact that Tedford/Dunbar went for the throat immediately following a turnover.
- Speaking of that sack by Follett, he barely missed ASU quarterback Rudy Carpenter on the previous play as he blitzed but leaped to early and flew by a ducking Carpenter who then scrambled for a short gain. Follett spoke after the game about how the coaches had the confidence in him to blitz him again on the next snap and allow him to create the big play.
- Another of Carpenter's tormentors was corner Daymeion 'Donte' Hughes who picked off two Carpenter passes and nearly a third as well, knocking it away instead. Hughes is starting to get recognition for the special player he is, with

great instincts and a head for the game and for the end zone, to go with good (not great) speed. His second interception return, mentioned above, included a hurdle over the diving Carpenter as he made his moves towards the end zone. Hughes also had numerous tackles on run support, and on receivers short of the first down. Fellow corner Syd'Quan Thompson chipped in with a tough, one-handed interception near the sideline in the fourth quarter, but looks to see a ton of throws headed his way in the future with the fear that Hughes is beginning to generate in the hearts of opposing offensive coordinators.

- Carpenter had an amazingly low 2 interceptions (and 17 touchdowns) all last season, and had 2 interceptions in his first 3 games this season. He doubled that combined total with 4 more interceptions against Cal on Saturday, to go along with the fumble on Follett's sack. After ASU's first possession, on which the Sun Devils marched easily down the field for a score, Cal defensive coordinator Bob Gregory went to a series of blitz packages to pressure Carpenter, and the Sophomore gunslinger lost his nerve, completing less than half his passes to go along with the 5 turnovers.
- Best chant from the boisterous Cal crowd as Carpenter's day fell apart: "Kel-ler's Better! Clap-Clap clap-clap-clap. Kel-ler's Bet-ter! Clap-Clap clap-clap-clap." As many know, accomplished Senior Sam Keller won the starting quarterback job this fall for ASU, then transferred to Nebraska when head coach Dirk Koetter caved to political pressure from a contingent of players and named Carpenter the starter a couple days later.
- Speaking of quarterbacks, I won't say much about Nate Longshore beyond his stats, which pretty much tell the story: 18 for 26, 270 yards, 4 touchdowns, 1 interception. Great game.
- Thanks to Longshore and his teammates on offense, defense, *and* special teams, the Memorial Stadium crowd was nice and loud on defense throughout the Cal scoring run through the first and second quarters. Nice work, everyone.
- And speaking of the crowd, my Tivo review revealed some nice official screen time for the "Tepper Time" girls of Alpha Omicron Pi, Mike Tepper's girlfriend's sorority. These are the young women sporting the yellow shirts with "Tepp that Ass" on the back. Oski bless them.
- Speaking of blueshirt Sophomore Mike Tepper, who filled in for injured Andrew Cameron at left tackle, and Junior Mike Gibson, filling in for injured Scott Smith at right tackle, they both had solid games: arguably better games than Cameron and Smith had prior to injury this year. The Sun Devils led the NCAA coming into this contest with 18 sacks in 3 games, and were held to 1 sack on Saturday. Cal's future looks bright with such a young but gradually gelling line, that includes Tepper, Gibson, skilled blueshirt Sophomore center Alex Mack, and blueshirt Sophomore right guard Norris Malele. The lone Senior in the bunch is the tattooed one, left guard Erik Robertson. So far, very good on pass protection, decent on run-blocking with some room for improvement, but as time goes on, look out!

- I maintain that on first and second downs, and in short yardage situations, Marcus O'Keith seems to my layperson's eyes to be the more suitable second string back (behind Marshawn Lynch). Justin Forsett, the current backup, is excellent on the perimeter and in space, but O'Keith is a far better downhill, between the tackles runner, and like Forsett and Lynch, also has excellent quickness and instincts. The current offensive line, though young and promising, is not opening the gaping holes habitually blasted out of the defense by departed road graders Ryan O'Callahan, Marvin Philip, and Aaron Merz for the last couple seasons. Forsett prospered on counter plays and quick bursts through these gaps for 999 yards in 2005. Now that things are more evenly matched in the trenches, O'Keith may be better (though still no Lynch) in the tight quarters on 1st down or short yardage runs. I still love Forsett on 3rd and long, and on swing passes in space, but your downhill second string downhill tailback should be Marcus O'Keith, behind Marshawn Lynch. In my humble opinion.
- Hawkins and Jackson got the receiving touchdowns, but silky smooth Junior Robert Jordan provided the consistent, chain-moving receptions along the sidelines that every team needs, and nearly broke one on a deep out, turning past the corner and just barely stepping out of bounds before streaking down the sideline for the would-be score. On another catch, he gave head-hunting ASU corner Justin Tryon a tough stiff-arm on the way past as a little message not to mess with Desean. 5 catches for 83 yards isn't shabby day, and Cal is truly blessed to have the "three amigos" as receivers blossoming along with Longshore this year: Jackson, Jordan, and Hawkins.
- It's taken me this long to get to the guy that may have been the key defensive star the Bears on Saturday. No, not Hughes or Follett, as great as those two played. Linebacker Mickey Pimentel was everywhere for the Bears on defense. Covering and mostly shutting down All Pac-10 tight end Zach Miller, continually pressuring Carpenter, making both tackles for loss and chasing down Sun Devil backs in the broken field, and finally tipping a pass from Carpenter to himself and running it into the end zone for the coup de gras to make it 49-21 in the fourth quarter. Pimentel can be a spectacular player, extremely quick and fast, a huge hitter, strong enough to stuff the run, deadly on the blitz. He is only now hitting his stride after struggling with the Cal defensive scheme last season as a JC transfer. Ironically he chose Cal at the last minute over ASU. The Bears will miss him as he looks to graduate and play on Sundays next year.
- Despite Pimentel and co., Dirk Koetter could have made the game much closer in the first half by sticking with something the Bears had a very hard time stopping on Saturday: the power running of tailback Ryan Torain. With starter Keegan Herring out, Torain ripped apart the Bear front seven for 191 yards on 24 carries and touchdown as well as a receiving touchdown to start the game. Nevertheless, Cal mostly kept Torain's yardage "between the twenties" and Koetter was too enamored with the pass to allow it to take full effect. The result: 5 turnovers on pass plays, 16 for 36 passing for Carpenter for only 177 yards, and numerous aborted drives resulting in quick scores for the hard charging Bears. A steadier diet of Torain runs may have slowed down the avalanche and eaten up more

clock, keeping the Cal offense on the sideline and the game within reach for the Sun Devils. Tedford and Gregory will have to shore up the run defense for Yvenson Bernard of Oregon State (194 yards last year at Memorial) this coming Saturday and super-Soph Jonathan Stewart of Oregon the week after that. Both of those opponents also have veteran offensive lines, just as Arizona State does.

- On the other hand, it *was* good to see the Bears apply pass pressure from both the defensive line (Nu'u Tafisi 2 sacks) and the linebacking corps (Follett 2 sacks, Bishop 1 sack). Cal was not content to stay with vanilla, containment defense in this game, in particular after ASU proved they could march down the field methodically against such a defense on their first drive. This flexibility is ... encouraging.
- While the Cal crowd was noisy during the Bears' big run, there could have been a few more of us. 58,024 would have been a great number in 2003, but a match-up of two top 25 teams in the Pac-10 should be a near sell-out. It's time to get out to Strawberry Canyon and appreciate this exciting Bear squad. Next chance: October 7th against the (also top 25) Oregon Ducks, two weeks from now.
- In the meantime, Cal faces a tough underdog in Corvallis this coming Saturday, in a game that may not be on television. The Oregon State Beavers have beaten Tedford's crew 3 out of 4 times in close games, losing in 2004 at home in a blowout. Which will it be this time? This is a classic trap game before the big match-up against the Ducks the following week. Let's hope the Bears can come through in a big way in a hostile environment after three straight home games.
- Cal's performance against Arizona State did some good towards counter-acting the lasting stigma of the blowout loss at Knoxville to the Tennessee Volunteers, who have since lost a heartbreaker to fellow SEC power Florida. It will take several more wins this season to regain status as an elite team, and Cal may or may not have the consistency as a football squad to avoid letdowns against inferior opponents, or to beat great teams such as Oregon and even USC. But we know now that this group is determined, talented, and incredibly exciting to watch when at their best. Reason to hope, and certainly reason to watch!

Go Bears!!!