

Oct. 14th, 2006: California vs. Washington State Game Notes

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

- If a Bear strangles a Cougar in the Palouse, do fans in Memorial still make noise? Jeff Tedford and his boys will gladly take the 21-3 victory at Washington State, the first for Cal in Pullman since 1979, ugly or not.
- Actually, from a defensive standpoint, the game was a thing of beauty. Hats off for the second week in a row to Bob Gregory. Last week, Cal's oft-criticized Defensive Coordinator managed to contain the potent Oregon attack, keeping the Ducks' rhythm and misdirection-based short game at bay with an uncharacteristic 3-4 front while pressuring Dennis Dixon into several costly mistakes. This Saturday, the Bears were facing a much less daunting running game and an inconsistent quarterback. Accordingly, Gregory's squad parlayed their usual staple, the never popular bend-but-don't-break scheme into a dominating performance, holding the Cougars out of the end zone entirely.
- Due to the Pac-10's unfortunate contract with Fox Sports that limits the ability of alternate carriers (other than ABC, ESPN, and TBS) to pick up un-covered games at certain times, coupled with Washington State's refusal to move the time for what was their homecoming game, the contest between the Bears and the Cougars went un-televised. Scratch that, not un-televised, just un-broadcast. Thanks to the pinch hit efforts of Cal alum Jason Krikorian, co-founder of Sling Media, Inc., Slingbox allowed the closed circuit stadium Jumbotron feed from Pullman to be shown live on the (not so) Jumbotron at Memorial Stadium in Berkeley. The somewhat grainy video was paired with the Cal radio broadcast by Joe Starkey over the stadium's PA system. Over 3,000 fans gathered on the west side of the stadium to watch and cheer, and nearly everyone I spoke with agreed that the classic, but often infuriatingly vague or imprecise Starkey was much better when coupled with visuals rather than just audio.
- Someone said that the scene at Memorial was reminiscent of the crowds at the end of Cal games coached by Tom Holmoe. In fact, it may have been exact same people in the stands as back in those days. Including me, of course. With one remaining match-up on the 2006 schedule that is not yet set for TV coverage (at Tucson against the Arizona Wildcats (Slingbox may have to dive into the breach yet again. That is, if weather permits and if the networks continue to have their heads up their collective asses when they should be covering a great Cal team.
- Marshawn Lynch turned in a standout performance, though from the great back, 25 carries for 152 yards and 2 touchdowns hardly raises eyebrows any more. Lynch had a big run called back by a holding call on reserve tight end Eric Beegun and still seemed slowed by his ailing ankle. But he powered through the normally solid Washington State defensive line for medium-sized gains all day long. For the season, Lynch leads the Pac-10 with 757 yards on 111 carries (6.8 ypc, far more than his immediate competition) and is second to teammate Desean

- Jackson with 9 touchdowns (6 rushing, 3 receiving). The Bears' offensive line is still a work in progress when it comes to run-blocking after losing so much talent to the NFL, and there were relatively few holes at the line of scrimmage against the Washington State front seven, but Lynch would not be denied.
- Speaking of the Cougar defensive front, it provided the toughest test for Cal's potent offense since the orange and white nightmare at Neyland. Washington State, led by All-Pac-10 defensive end Mkristo Bruce, had collected 27 sacks in 6 games coming into the game, but only managed 1 on Saturday against the customary stalwart pass-blocking by the Bear OL. Nevertheless, Longshore was frequently pressured and never quite looked comfortable, fumbling several snaps, throwing 2 interceptions, and appearing out of synch with his receivers on multiple occasions. Nevertheless, Longshore, on a day when he was reportedly suffering from the flu, managed the Cal offense with decent results against a good defense – just not the spectacular results that the Bear faithful have become accustomed to over the last 6 games.
 - While the Cal offense seemed sluggish and mistake-prone against the tough Cougars, the Washington State's offense was anemic in comparison to the big-play nightmare experienced by the Bears last season in Memorial, when Ayoob led Cal back for a 42-38 win. In the game last year, WSU wide receiver Jason Hill scored three long touchdowns and gained 240 yards on 6 catches, but this Saturday, Hill was limited to 2 catches for 23 yards and was a non-factor for the most part. The Cougars often moved the ball between the 20s, but were 0 for 11 on third down conversions and 2 for 6 on fourth downs thanks to some clutch play by the Cal D, and some "Cougin' it" by Alex Brink. For a definition of the phrase "Cougin' it", you can check out a common definition at <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cougin+it>, but Alex Brink provided some prime illustrations of the term with some seriously off-target throws in key situations.
 - But it wasn't all Washington State mistakes that led to the victory. Cal almost completely shut down Wazzu's weak running game. On 18 of their 19 rushes, Cougar runners gained 18 yards, with the outlier being a 70 yard scamper by WSU scatback and track star Darrell Hutsona.
 - Speaking of that long gain, it was one half of the usual yin-yang that has characterized Cal cornerback Syd'Quan Thompson's play this season. Thompson gave up the Cougars' next longest play, a 55 yard bomb from Brink to wide-out Brandon Gibson early in the game. But later, with the aforementioned Hutsona speeding down the sideline for what looked like a sure touchdown run, "Squid" slanted across from the other end of the field to chase him down at the Bear 5-yard line in an incredibly athletic play. Cal held the Cougars out of the end zone on the ensuing series, aided by a correctly over-ridden touchdown call on a third down pass by Brink to Dwight Tardy. Replays showed Tardy's knee was down well before the WSU fullback had extended the ball over the goal-line, and Brink's attempted sneak from 1 yard out was stuffed by the Bears on the fourth down play that followed.

- Another young defensive back, blueshirt Sophomore free safety Bernard Hicks, chipped in with his second interception in as many career starts. Hicks took the place of blueshirt Junior Thomas Decoud who was injured in the Oregon State game. Though a bit smaller than the rangy Decoud, Hicks has looked good in deep pass coverage and has thrown in some big hits for good measure. Though he still appears to need some work on short zone coverages, the future is promising with Hicks, Decoud, and steady blueshirt Junior rover Brandon Hampton all returning next season. Of course, cornerback Daymeion ‘Donte’ Hughes will not be back, but he continued his stellar Senior campaign with another pick of Brink, bringing his season total to 6 interceptions.
- Still, Cal did give up 262 yards passing and ranks 9th out the 10 teams in the league in passing yardage defense, yielding 241 yards a game through the air, ahead of only next week’s opponent, the Washington Huskies. The Bears look slightly better in this department when you consider that they have had big leads early in most games, forcing adversaries to throw the ball extensively. Moreover, Cal is a bit better, rating a mediocre 6th in the league, in pass efficiency defense, indicating once again that familiar bend-but-don’t-break style that gives up more yardage than it does actual scores. Obviously, though, the Bears need to shore up the aerial defense if they hope to beat the best.
- Of course, a huge part of a good pass defense is a dominant pass rush, something we have seen in glimpses from Cal’s front seven, but far from consistently. Cal did pick up 2 sacks against the Cougars, thanks to the usual suspects, the hard-hitting Zach Follett (1 sack), athletic Mickey Pimentel (half a sack), and relentless defensive end Nu’u Tafisi (half a sack), but for the most part, Brink and his brief replacement, Gary Rogers, had time to throw even though they did not always execute. If the pass rush comes around and Cal’s young defensive backs continue to mature (ideal scenario), this could evolve into a truly stingy defense.
- It seemed that the turf at Martin Stadium was slippery, especially for Bear ball-carriers and receivers who were clearly unfamiliar with it. For example, there were screen passes on which Lavelle Hawkins, Robert Jordan, and Justin Forsett seemed to slip as they took their first step after catching the ball, greatly reducing the effectiveness of the play in all cases. On other occasions, Longshore seemed to anticipate that Cal wide-outs would be quicker than they actually were, a difference possibly caused by bad footing as well. Or, of course, this could just be me being an apologist grasping at straws.
- On a completely unrelated note, it appears that Cal’s final opponent of the season, the lowly Stanford Cardinal, has taken to censoring Associated Press articles as a means of improving the miserable outlook for their team. For example, after the boys from the Farm gained a grand total of 53 offensive yards (not a typo) in their 20-7 loss to lowly Arizona, the Stanford website printed the following:

“Despite injuries to quarterbacks Willie Tuitama and Adam Austin, Arizona escaped the conference cellar and snapped a three-game losing streak.”

Instead of the content of the actual AP article below:

“Despite injuries to quarterbacks Willie Tuitama and Adam Austin, Arizona escaped the conference cellar and snapped a three-game losing streak by flattening the Cardinal (0-7, 0-4), who are off to their worst start since 1960.”

Meanwhile, the following passage was edited entirely out of the release on Stanfurd site:

“Stanford, which has lost nine straight games since last season, couldn't even come close to the previous worst offensive game in school history, when the Cardinal had 116 yards against Tulane in 1979.”

Not to mention that that neither version of the story spells “Stanfurd” correctly.

- This coming weekend, Cal has a chance to go 5-0 against the Pacific Northwest for the first time, as far as I can remember. After blowout victories against the Portland State Vikings, Oregon Ducks, Oregon State Beavers, and Washington State Cougars, only the Dawgs of U-dub stand between the Bears and a clean sweep. Washington’s best player, multi-talented Senior quarterback Isaiah Stanback injured his foot in a 27-17 home loss to OSU and will miss this game and probably the rest of the season. Still, former Cal nemesis Ty Willingham has the Huskies playing tougher than expected and it was not so long ago that Washington would be the 3 touchdown favorite and not the other way around.
- Wide receiver Sonny Shackelford and running backs Kenny James and Louis Rankin are the Dawgs’ most notable remaining offensive weapons, but who will get them the ball in Stanback’s absence? Odds are on Junior signal-caller Carl Bonnell, but Willingham could always burn highly-touted true Freshman Jake Locker’s blueshirt (purple-shirt?) year and hope for big things. On the other hand, barring a giant let-down (please no), Cal should win this game, and playing Locker could be a little like Gilby burning Pat Barnes’ blueshirt during a runaway loss. So look for Bonnell to start, backed up by Junior Johnny DuRocher.
- Nate Longshore still leads the Pac-10 in passing yardage (1,586) and touchdowns (17), but the ailing quarterback needs to bounce back from a tough outing in Pullman. Coming into this season, we knew about Lynch and mostly about Desean, but Nate has been the difference-maker for the Bears in 2006. It remains to be seen if the affable quarterback can resume his big play barrage or whether Pac-10 defensive coordinators are beginning to figure out how to defend the deep middle, where Longshore loves to throw after stepping up in the pocket. Perhaps the trio of Jackson, Hawkins, and Jordan can tip the balance.
- This is not the time to get complacent, folks. Cal fans came through *big-time* in the thunderous sell-out win against the high-flying Ducks at Memorial. **GET OUT TO BERKELEY AND CHEER ON YOUR BEARS AGAINST THE HUSKIES.** There are 5 huge games left during this regular season, 3 at home, and maybe, just maybe, a rosy future.

Go Bears!!!