

Oct. 21st, 2006: Washington vs. California Game Notes

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

- What a game. The Bears played their first close one of the season and it was certainly not what most Cal fans were hoping for. But maybe in the end, the gut-check 31-24 overtime victory over the feisty Dawgs is the perfect blue and gold tonic going into the bye week.
- Ultimately, when the Huskies were good and the Bears were bad, this is how several of the games went, only in the other direction. Sure, during that long streak of losses to the Dawgs dating back to the seventies, some were blowouts, but there were several heart-rending nail-biters in there too. Close wins like these are what differentiate very good teams (these days, Cal) from mediocre teams (Washington). Or maybe the Bears just got lucky. We'll see.
- Marshawn Lynch. 21 rushes for 150 yards and 2 touchdowns, and 4 catches for 53 more yards does not begin to cover how Lynch willed Cal to victory on Saturday. Playing on two sore ankles, Lynch turned his last two touches into go-ahead touchdowns, 17 yards off tackle right with a couple minutes left, and gap left for the final 22 yard score in overtime.
- The prolific back did it all. A 30 yard burst on his first touch, a spin move after a quick hitch pattern to scamper down the sideline for a long reception, a broken halfback pass right where Lynch reversed field for a long gain and nearly scored, a tremendous blitz pick up on 3rd and 5 with Cal down 17-13 giving Longshore time to hit Robert Jordan for the first down, the aforementioned 2 pivotal touchdowns, and finally his motor-assisted post-game celebrations.
- To quote from the AP news story, "Lynch added to the festivities when he commandeered the cart used to carry injured players. The junior tailback drove it onto the field, jubilantly leaving turn tracks on Cal's artificial turf while the student section went crazy." To be fair, Lynch originally got on the cart to go pick up Desmond Bishop who had collapsed on the field after running back his game-ending interception on Washington's overtime possession.
- Speaking of Bishop, the team leader lived up to his pre-season billing as one of the nation's best linebackers today. Bishop was somewhat unfortunate not to share Pac-10 Defensive Player of the Week honors with WSU safety Eric Frampton after 16 tackles, an eye-popping 3.5 tackles for loss, a forced fumble (recovered by the Huskies), and of course, the game-clinching pick of Washington QB Carl Bonnell.
- Bishop's performance was just the keynote in a mixed Cal defensive performance that specialized in stopping Husky tailback Louis Rankin on 3rd and short and intercepting Bonnell. The league-leader in that department, All-American corner Daymeion 'Donte' Hughes snagged his seventh of the season in Cal's end zone, and linebacker Worrell Williams, defensive back Robert Peele, linebacker Zach Follett, and finally Bishop all contributed to a 5 interception day for Washington's

new starting signal-caller. Follett and Williams' picks were both spectacular, and all but Bishop's were on deep balls. Unfortunately, the Bears' offense only parlayed those turnovers into 3 points on the ensuing possessions.

- Overall, Bonnell still had a remarkable day starting in place of Washington's best player, Senior quarterback Isaiah Stanback, who suffered an injury to his foot in the Dawg's disappointing loss to Oregon State the previous week. Bonnell took advantage of a sub-par Cal pass rush (0 sacks) to mix in several accurate throws and surprising scrambles and draws to go with his very visible mistakes described above.
- Of course, the one Bonnell pass that everyone will remember is his deep hail mary as time expired in regulation, with Washington trailing 24-17. The last gasp bomb, released by Bonnell just after blitzing Cal linebacker Mickey Pimentel reached him, was met by three leaping Bear defenders at the goal-line. But Bishop, Peele, and safety Thomas Decoud only managed to tip it back to surprised Husky receiver Marlon Wood, who then dove into the end zone while being tackled desperately by Hughes. The Cal players and crowd stood in stunned silence as the Dawgs barked and howled in anticipation of a previously improbable overtime victory.
- Speaking of that, there has been some chatter that Washington head coach Tyrone Willingham should have gone for the win immediately with a 2 point conversion at the end of the 4th quarter, on the road, against a favored opponent, with all the momentum on his side. Willingham seems to have brought the Huskies back to respectability, but he chose overtime on Saturday, and the Bears, led by Lynch and Bishop, made him pay.
- Of course, several concerns with the Bears' performance came to the fore amidst the unexpectedly close contest with Washington. A suspect pass rush, inconsistent run-blocking (which does not always matter with Lynch), overthrows by Longshore, drops by his receivers, and some big penalties put Cal in a difficult position throughout the game. What's more, despite the Bears' usually stalwart pass-blocking, the Huskies managed to apply decent pass pressure while rushing only 4-5 men (i.e. at most one blitzer) and dropping into deep zone coverage.
- On that note, it appears that teams are figuring out that defending the deep middle against Longshore and forcing Cal to drive methodically down the field is preferable to being burned repeatedly on big plays by Desean Jackson, Robert Jordan, and Lavelle Hawkins. Of course, when the safeties drop back, it's time for Lynch and his cohorts to snap up the medium-sized gains being offered.
- Longshore himself must become consistent in the short to mid-range passing game, and in the second half, he began to show signs that he is on that path, especially in the fourth quarter after the Bears trailed 17-13. Hawkins was Longshore's primary target throughout the game, but tight end Craig Stevens also chipped in with a couple fantastic grabs over the middle, Jordan contributed several key short first down conversions, and both Lynch and backup Justin

Forsett were instrumental in keeping the chains moving with multiple receptions and runs after catch.

- Cal's home run hitter in the passing game, Desean Jackson, also had a few big catches, including one where he slid by a much bigger man, Washington State corner Dashon Goldson with a great stiff arm for a few extra yards and a first down. For the most part, however, Goldson and company contained the Bears' speedy receiver with a good blend of physicality and deep safety help. Of course, this is where Longshore must show that he can march the Bears down the field with medium depth passing and a healthy dose of Lynch and Justin Forsett. Cal's receivers must do their part as well. On Saturday, there were far too many drops and mistimed patterns, almost enough to allow the Dawgs to parlay their defensive scheme into victory.
- On the topic of Forsett, who started the game since Lynch did not practice much last week, the Dawgs did a good job holding their own at the line of scrimmage to prevent the quick bursts that the smaller back from Texas specializes in. Nevertheless, Forsett did contribute Cal's first touchdown on the initial possession of the second half (a possession that was otherwise dominated by Lynch's rushing and receiving). Perhaps even more importantly, Forsett uncharacteristically bulled forward for a crucial 2-point conversion on a second effort up the middle from a spread formation to put the Bears up 24-17 with less than two minutes left.
- The bay area seemed to have its Indian Summer all at once over the weekend. The 12:30 start and hot sun seemed to sap the energy from the stadium a bit, but both the crowd and the team in blue rose to the occasion as the afternoon wore on.
- Tight end Craig Stevens is really coming on after some weeks of suffering the effects of the concussion he incurred on the first kickoff of the season against Tennessee. In addition to two fairly long first down catches against the Husky zone, Stevens provided his usual tough blocking on the edge, and a key fumble recovery and advancement after a Hawkins catch.
- For the purple and gold, it was a mixed day running the football for Rankin, who stepped in after a first half injury to starter Kenny James. Rankin has both size and speed, and it showed on a couple long runs, but on the vast majority of his carries, Cal's front seven was effective containing him. Surprisingly, it was much tougher to contain the rushing of unexpectedly nimble quarterback Carl Bonnell. The injured Stanback had always been a huge threat with his feet (350 rushing yards this season), but Bonnell defied his label as a pure drop-back passer with several first down scrambles and draws, including the Dawgs' final touchdown. Combine that with a knack for hitting receivers in stride, and it almost overcame the 5 interceptions.
- But the biggest story of this game will no doubt remain the answered prayer for the Huskies as time ran out, and the way the Bears (finally) responded like champions to late adversity, this time in overtime. As head coach Jeff Tedford put it, "I'm real proud of the team. I didn't notice anybody quitting or giving up or

anything like that. It was `Okay, we've got to go back and play some more.!'” It was far too close for comfort, and Cal must improve greatly to have any hope of fulfilling their goal of winning the Pac-10. But we fans can always hope that this thrilling game was less of an ominous sign of weakness and more a proverbial “character-builder” that will serve the Bears well on their run for the Roses.

- The crowd on Saturday was 58,534, a number that is a little disappointing these days with Cal’s recent success, though certainly still far greater than the Bears would see in the bad old days for anything other than a Big Game. Tedford’s boys will need every bit of our support in two weeks against a dangerous UCLA Bruin squad, just as we lifted them for the Oregon game. **THIS IS A GREAT CAL TEAM. GET OUT THERE AND SUPPORT THEM.** Blowout or thriller, these Bears have earned some serious love.
- Enjoy the bye week folks. It’s time to start making Cal football history, starting November 4th.

Go Bears!!!