

Nov. 11th, 2006: California vs. Arizona Game Notes

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

- The less said about this game the better. Cal shot itself in the foot, Arizona shot Cal in the foot, the referees shot Cal in the foot. Still, here goes.
- On the positive side, it was a spectacular performance by Desean Jackson – 6 catches for 131 yards and a touchdown do go along with a breathtaking 95 yard punt return TD. Had the lightning-fast receiver's final touchdown stood rather than being ruled out of bounds at the 41, DJax would surely have merited the performance of the day in college football. Instead his heroics became a side-story to the huge upset pulled-off by an aggressive Arizona squad.
- Another positive of course is that while this loss eliminated any glimmer of hope for a far-fetched scenario in which the Bears could go to the national championship game, it still left Cal's Rose Bowl hopes in their own hands: win this week against the Trojans and go to Pasadena on New Year's Day, or lose go to the Holiday Bowl again.
- To be completely accurate, had Cal won in the desert, they would also have gone to the Rose Bowl if they lost to USC but beat Stanford, and USC lost to UCLA subsequently. Anyway, that somewhat unlikely scenario is out the window now.
- Marshawn Lynch rushed for 102 yards on only 16 carries, but was not a factor in the second half as the Wildcats tightened their defense and the Bears went to the air. Lynch did have a spectacular broken-field touchdown overturned due to a block in the back downfield in the first half.
- Nate Longshore's had an off day and threw three interceptions, never quite seeming comfortable in the pocket in the face of some tenacious pressure, though two of the picks were on tipped balls, to be fair, and Arizona didn't get any actual sacks. But the pressure clearly affected the Bears' big young quarterback, and the fluidity of the passing game, other than Jackson's individual brilliance, appeared lost. Longshore *must* put this game behind him and re-gain his mid-season form because of what is to come this weekend.
- It's difficult not to mention the officials and the impact they had on the game. Almost all of the critical calls went against Cal in this game. Some were legitimate, such as the illegal block described above on Marshawn's would-be score. Another very close but correct call was that Jackson's toes edged the sideline chalk on his clear path to the end zone with less than a minute left. However, several were extremely debatable rulings that drastically impacted the momentum of the game:
 - A defensive pass interference call on cornerback Daymeion 'Donte' Hughes on a beautiful interception, with little contact, both receiver and corner going for the ball, and Hughes having position to make the pick. Arizona got the ball in the red zone and scored shortly thereafter to knot the game at 17.

- An exceedingly generous spot to give the Wildcats a first down on a quarterback sneak on fourth down during their comeback.
- A ticky-tack defensive holding call far from the play as Cal Bernard Hicks came up with an interception earlier in the same drive that Hughes appeared to have picked one off. Losing both interceptions due to flag-happy zebras was a hole that Cal's defense was not able to dig itself out of.
- Both Cal and Arizona had a play that should have been a breakaway touchdown that resulted in disappointment. During the Wildcat's comeback Wildcat tight end Brandon McCall got 10 yards open behind the Bear secondary on a play fake and blown coverage. Arizona quarterback Willie Tuitama hit McCall in stride for the apparently sure touchdown only to have McCall drop it. On the Bears' side, down 24-17, Longshore hit Lavelle Hawkins on a deep post after a play fake. Like McCall, Hawkins was far clear of any defensive backs, but stumbled as he caught the ball and tried to crab walk into the end zone before he fell. He was ruled down at the 1, and Cal's subsequent conservative offensive play-calling assisted a goal-line stand by Arizona. The result: a Schneider field goal, keeping the Wildcats ahead 24-20, which would be the final score.
- Cal's defense played fairly well, but still failed to deliver the dominating performance that should be expected against such a seemingly mediocre offense. However, only 2 sacks (Bishop, Mebane) and weak support on the edges that also led to a few long Arizona runs are not going to get it done against tougher competition. Some of the recent heroes of the Bear defense seemed remarkably invisible on the day, for example linebacker Zack Follett did not show up on the statistics sheet at all, which is a major anomaly given the Sophomore linebacker's ongoing rampage through the Pac-10. Still, the defense played well enough to win.
- The story of the day was the Arizona defense: star corner Antoine Cason (interception return for the go-ahead touchdown) and aggressive linebacker Ronnie Palmer (1.5 tackles for loss, the game-sealing interception) led the charge. Cal's inability to run-block against the Wildcats ultimately spelled the Bears' doom. Arizona has been tough on D in almost every game they have played (except for their blow-out at LSU), and with their starting quarterback Tuitama back after a long absence due to injury, they are dangerous against any team.
- Nevertheless, there is no way Cal should have lost to this Wildcat squad.
- As I watched a sea of Arizona students storm the field to celebrate their biggest victory of the season, a strange thought occurred to me: Cal has arrived.
- This weekend against USC is for all the marbles. California has a chance to go to the Rose Bowl by winning one game, against a formidable foe that appears to be hitting its stride. It does not get any better than this.

Go Bears!!!