

Sept. 2nd, 2006: California vs. Tennessee Game Notes

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

- Cal is not a national championship caliber team, and Tennessee may be a very good team. That much was proven on Saturday. But I honestly don't think Cal is quite as bad as they looked for three quarters in Knoxville. Remember, this is still a pretty talented team that certainly should win Big Game, and is likely to win several other games besides that and make a bowl. If the Bears had played Sacramento State (much worse than Portland State even) in the opener like last season, we would be coming off a somewhat disappointing 3 touchdown victory instead of an SEC beat-down. Keep your heads up Bear faithful.
- The Volunteers have some amazing football tradition going for them. The entire city is orange-crazy, and from the tail-gates to the local bars and restaurants, to the huge Vol navy that ties up on the river by the stadium on game day, it was clear. We watched the band come down through a massive (think 30,000, not 3,000) throng of supporters into the stadium and play songs in tribute - very impressive to most of us, and some of the girls in the group said that they nearly started crying because of the overall feeling and sentiment and nostalgia surrounding the whole event.
- Who is Cal's quarterback for the Minnesota game? I honestly don't know. Longshore again because once he settles down he gives us the best chance? Ayoob due to experience and suitability to the spread, despite his erratic throws? Levy due to, well, an ability to win? Tedford says Longshore, and it feels like the right call to me. Starting someone other than Longshore means you are essentially giving up on him, and keep in mind, he is the only one of the three that is not a Senior.
- Tennessee had a HUGE chip on their shoulder going into this game, and the Bears may have been reading too many of the press clippings hyping Cal and dissing the Vols.
- Neyland Stadium is a tough place for a first-year corner (i.e. Syd'quan Thompson) to play in his first game, and his split-second misses on interception attempts turned 6 yard hitch patterns into long and easy touchdowns for Robert Meachem, Tennessee's best receiver. Now injured Tim Mixon may have taken the more conservative approach and just made the tackle after an 8 yard gain.
- Ribs are very, very good. But my digestive system hates me now.
- Cal seriously misses Ryan O'Callahan, Marvin Philip, Aaron Merz. Those three, now playing in the NFL, were great players. Heck, O'Callahan is starting as a rookie for the freakin' New England Patriots. Cal fans got used to backs running through the huge holes opened on the right side of the line, and that is no longer happening this year.

- Jeff Tedford and his staff may have gotten out-coached in this game. Both Tedford and his team looked tight, whereas the Vols' Phil Fulmer looked relaxed and loose.
- That being said, I am not sure what Tedford and Dunbar could have done to neutralize the impressive lateral speed of Tennessee's young linebackers and even linemen. The Vols' front seven consistently got to the ball-carrier and made a 'no doubt about it' tackle with seeming ease. Even Lynch was slowed down and gang-tackled repeatedly.
- Even with all of that, Lynch did gain over six yards per carry and probably had too few touches. Against a great defense such as Tennessee's, the difference between a great back like Lynch and a good back like Forsett, who was completely stuffed, was clear as day.
- Taking the big, neon, 'Calhouns' sign on the nearby, famous bar/grill/rib establishment, and darkening the 'Cal' portion of the name, leaving only 'houns'. Not bad for a bunch of hillbillies...
- Hey special teams actually played quite well, though. New punter Andrew Larson looked very very good with a 41+-yard average on high, booming punts that allowed almost no return yardage for Tennessee. Schneider did hit a mid-range field goal as well on his only attempt. Unfortunately, the Vols' special teams played very well too, pinning the Bears back deep in their territory on multiple occasions.
- Cal's new starter at rover, Brandon Hampton looked like he was toasted on a deep post from Erik Ainge to Jason Swain for the Vols' fourth touchdown. In fact, the play may have been the other safety's fault as Tennessee put a man in motion towards Hampton's man and nobody went with him. Hampton cheated off his man, Swain, to try to cover 1-on-2, i.e. a complete defensive breakdown by the rest of Cal's defense, not necessarily Hampton himself. Of course, Hampton was the one trailing 5 yards behind Swain into the end zone and was captured on camera as another 'goat' for Cal, but he actually had a decent game, with a nifty tip-drill interception and good run-back to boot.
- Speaking of the other safety, starting free safety Thomas Decoud had a decent game in run-support and made both touchdown-saving ankle tackles in the open field as well as some stops near the line of scrimmage. However, he may have been the safety that failed to fill for his partner Hampton on the Ainge to Swain post pattern TD described above.
- 3rd string back Marcus O'Keith looked good, especially on some long catch-and-run plays from Ayoob. There is part of me that thinks he should be the second string back behind Lynch instead of Forsett, but it's hard to draw conclusions from garbage time.
- The most embarrassing play for the Cal defense was not any of the long touchdown passes, but rather the touchdown run in which linebacker Zach Follett held up big second-string Tennessee back Montario Hardesty near the line of

scrimmage for a seeming eternity, only to get zero support from all of his nearby teammates, and promptly lost hardesty who went down the sideline for another long score. That was one of the few plays were it has ever looked to me like a Tedford Team quit. A little disturbing.

- Then again, Cal showed some resilience, in the fourth quarter. Yes it was garbage time against second-stringers. But Cal had some of its own backups in their, including of course Ayoob, and the Vols were definitely looking to add to their total, with passes and a couple mis-direction plays. The Bears held up and actually outplayed the Vols for a short time. This does not change the fact that Tennessee absolutely crushed Cal in this game, but it gives some additional credence to my contention that all is far from lost with this Bear team.

So get your ass to the Minnesota game. It is now a HUGE.swing game for Cal.

PS

Did anyone else notice that D1-AA Portland State beat D1-A New Mexico 17-6 in Albuquerque, NM? Cal plays the Portland St. Vikings at Memorial on Sept. 16th, in the game following the one this weekend against Minnesota.