
UCONN FOOTBALL JOINS THE BIG TIME

Contributed by Bob Phillips
Tuesday, 23 October 2007

Larry Taylor's punt return will become part of UConn folklore, as THE event that thrust the Huskies into the national recognition. Now comes the hard part.

Photo courtesy of Bob Stowell/UConn Athletic Communications

Most teams that have "arrived" can point to that seminal moment when time came to a standstill, and the nation watched on, mesmerized as a key player or players stepped up to the plate and delivered the goods -- with an exclamation point.

For Jim Calhoun's UConn Huskies, that moment came when, down by one point to Clemson in the 1990 NCAA Sweet 16 to Clemson at the Continental Arena in East Rutherford, N.J., Scott Burrell, the former All-American pitcher from Hamden High, threw a perfect full-court pass to Tate George who hit a buzzer-beater, sending the Huskies to an Elite 8 date with Duke (where they lost in overtime on a last-second shot by Christian Laettner).

Just say "The Pass" or "The Shot" to a UConn fan, and they'll instantly know exactly what you're talking about.

For the Boston College football program, it was on Thanksgiving Day in 1984 when Doug Flutie threw up that last minute prayer that somehow landed in the hands of Gerard Phelan in the end zone to beat powerful Miami at the gun, propelling the Eagles to the Cotton Bowl for a New Year's Day date with the University of Houston.

Ask any football fan about the "Hail Mary" pass, and they'll know.

For Derek Jeter and the New York Yankees it was the bottom of the seventh in game three of the 2001 AL Division Series. The city of New York is barely functioning, still wallowing in the aftershock of 9/11. But the city rallies behind the Yankees, who have fallen behind the Oakland A's two games to zero.

With Mike Mussina pitching a gem, the Yanks are up 1-0 in the bottom of the seventh. Jeremy Giambi, the slowest player in the park, bangs a two-out single, then tries to reach home on a double to right field by Terrence Long. Jim Spencer fields the ball, and throws to the cut-off man, second baseman Alfonso Soriano. Only problem -- Spencer overthrows the cutoff by at least 20 feet. The relay throw is coming in somewhere between first base and the pitcher's mound when, suddenly, as if directed by inner radar, Jeter appears from his shortstop position, catches the errant throw and flips it over his back toward catcher Jorge Posada. The ball beats Giambi to the plate, Posada holds onto the ball, the Yankees go on to win the game and the league championship, only to lose to the Arizona Diamondbacks in seven games on a broken-bat single off of Mario Rivera. Still, that miraculous play by Jeter, more than any other single event, will one day gain both D.J. and Joe Torre the keys to Cooperstown.

And For Tom Brady, Bill Belichick and the New England Patriots, it was the fumble that wasn't -- the key play in January

2002, when, during crunch time in a driving snow storm in Foxboro, an apparent fumble by Brady vs. the Oakland Raiders was ruled an incomplete pass by a team of referees who studied the tape for what seemed like hours to decide -- miraculously for Patriots fans -- that Brady had, indeed, started a forward passing motion, citing something called the "tack rule." The Pats retained possession, Adam Vinatieri nailed the winning field goal, the Pats went on to the Super Bowl to face the Rams, and the dynasty was on.

For the UConn football program, that seminal moment may have happened during last week's Louisville game. And like Brady and the Pats, it might have been more a function of the officials interpreting (or misinterpreting) the rules that stands out above all else. But the bottom line is that on Saturday, the UConn Huskies defeated the Louisville Cardinals 21-17 -- a win that propelled UConn into the Top 25 BCS standings at No. 23 for the first time in program history.

In reality, the exclamation point was probably delivered by Andre Dixon, a redshirt sophomore, who powered himself through a wall of Louisville defenders for a five-yard touchdown run with 1:32 left in the game to help UConn overcome a 10-point deficit and defeat the Cardinals. Or maybe it was senior co-captain, linebacker Danny Lananah, who intercepted a last-second desperation pass by Louisville Heisman candidate, quarterback Brian Brohm, to seal the victory.

But for most of the rain-soaked, wind-beaten sellout crowd of 40,000 at Rentschler Field and national TV audience on ESPN, the thing that will always be remembered is "the play."

Waiting for a Whistle

Just two minutes into the second half, and trailing by 7-0, Louisville punted the ball down to the Connecticut 26 where UConn's star return artist, Larry Taylor, threw up his right arm, clearly signaling for a fair catch.

What happened in the subsequent moments is still unclear, but no doubt helped launch the UConn football program into the national limelight.

After catching the ball, an alert Taylor, realizing that no whistle had been blown, started to take off downfield, passed a dazed and confused Louisville defense, who surely had never seen anything like this, fully expecting the play to be whistled dead and for the ball to be brought back to the UConn 26.

But the whistle never came.

And Taylor ran and ran through a Louisville defense that seemed to be reacting in slow motion. Seventy-four yards later, Taylor was in the end zone, and UConn was a PAT away from knotting the score. While it's commonly accepted that no one play can decide the outcome of a football game, this one certainly turned the momentum in UConn's favor -- and not many people this side of the UConn locker room will argue that the Huskies would have won the game without "the call."

Louisville coach Steve Kragthorpe immediately called a time-out before the extra point in an effort to convince officials to review the play -- a decision that would ultimately come back to haunt him. The officials informed Kragthorpe that the play was not reviewable, and the Cardinals ran out of time on the final drive of the game, when they could have used that time-out out dearly.

"The explanation they gave me is that he didn't make a fair catch signal," said a bewildered Kragthorpe after the game. "The back judge told me he did not make a fair catch signal. I called timeout and I asked the head official if I can review that [play] and he said, 'I'm not sure.' Quote. Un-quote. He said, 'I'm not sure.' My personal opinion is that there was absolutely no question he called for a fair catch. The next time he called for a fair catch was not as good a signal as the time when they didn't allow it to be called a fair catch. But that's my personal opinion. That and 50 cents will get you a cup of coffee, if you're lucky."

Then, to make matters worse, on the ensuing kickoff, Louisville's Trent Guy sprinted upfield 80 yards before being stopped on the Connecticut 8-yard line. But that play was called back on a holding call at midfield.

Later in the period, Louisville was the beneficiary of another blown call, which hardly offset the controversial non-call on Taylor's fair catch-turned-touchdown. The Huskies appeared to recover a muffed punt return at the Louisville 1 yard line, but the referees ruled that the ball had touched UConn's Tyvon Branch, and awarded the ball to the Cardinals on their own 16.

The third quarter ended with the score tied, 7-7.

The very next day, the Big East admitted that the refs had blown the call on the Taylor play. While the league routinely reviews all controversial calls, on this one, the officials involved were reprimanded by the conference.

Defensive Effort

But let us not forget, there still was a game to be played. And for a while, the odds weren't in the Huskies' favor.

After Louisville place kicker Art Carmody nailed a 23-yard field goal on the Cardinals first possession of the fourth quarter, the Huskies' fortunes looked bleak when Louisville's Rod Council stripped the ball from Donald Brown at the UConn 34. Earl Heyman scooped up the loose ball and raced 32 yards for a Louisville touchdown to give the Cards what would appear to be a safe lead, 17-7, with only 11:35 remaining in the game.

It was here, however, that the Huskies proved what they were made of.

Larry Taylor returned the ensuing kickoff 29 yards, giving the Huskies the ball at midfield. Five plays later, Lorenzen found Bristol's D.J. Hernandez, last year's starting quarterback and this year's second-leading receiver, with a 7-yard touchdown, setting the stage for Dixon's heroics.

UConn linebacker Danny Lansanah picked off Brohm's pass at the UConn 20 to secure the win with 15 seconds left.

And make no mistake: It was the UConn defense that won this game. Scott Lutrus of Brookfield led the UConn defense with 18 tackles and an interception -- one of three Husky picks. The Cardinals, who had been averaging 560 yards of total offense coming into the contest, were held to just 321. Brohm and the Cardinals had been averaging 398 in the air. UConn held Brohm to 228 yards passing, and only 98 in the first half.

Meanwhile, the UConn offense struggled for most of the game. And while they kept knocking on the door, they didn't push the ball into the end zone until the waning minutes of the game.

After the smoke had settled, Husky head coach Randy Edsall was at a loss to explain his team's offensive performance.

"I don't know -- they're amazing at times," he said. "They hit stretches where they look like they're unstoppable, and then we have some stretches where it looks like we haven't practiced for a week. It's just a belief -- it's an attitude of never saying die and never believing the game is over until the last whistle blows, great leadership out there and just the guys willing not to lose. To go through what we did last week -- and I always say last week doesn't matter this week, but I think you have to bring up the fact what happened last week -- for the kids to come out and go through what they did today is just a tremendous statement of their character and their heart. I'm just so proud of them."

Edsall was referring to UConn's heartbreaking 17-16 loss at Virginia, No. 15 in this week's BCS rankings, a week earlier, when the Huskies were beaten on a late field goal.

With the Louisville win, the Huskies improve to 6-1 and become bowl-eligible for the first time since 2004 when they beat Toledo in the Motor City Bowl.

When asked how he would rate this win, Edsall responded, "It's just one of the six we have this year." And that's not just coach-speak. That's reality. Because now comes the hard part.

After making a splash by defeating a nationally renowned team, UConn closes out the season with successive games

against No. 10 South Florida (which had been ranked second in the BCS before losing to Rutgers on Thursday), Rutgers, Cincinnati, Syracuse and No. 7 West Virginia, who own a collective 25-12 record going into this weekend's play. The only softy among the group is Syracuse, who stand at 2-6. However, Syracuse's first win came in a shocking 38-35 upset at Louisville Sept. 22.

But the Huskies also know that in the topsy-turvy world of Division I college football, in which Boston College is now ranked No. 2 by the BCS -- meaning that if the season ended today, the Eagles would be playing the Ohio State Buckeyes for the National Championship -- an 8-4 record is realistic. And (should we even suggest this is possible?) if they run the table, or even go 2-1 vs. the "big three" schools still remaining on the schedule (Rutgers, South Florida, West Virginia), even a BSC Bowl is within reach.

"Like coach said, we are just putting deposits in the bank," said Lansanah. "We had the chance to play on national television even though a lot of people don't respect us. We don't care about what other people think, but they got a chance to see us today and we came out and beat a very good team."