

Zoomies Flying Under The Radar No More

Written by Pat Clifton

Wednesday, 13 April 2011 01:00

This one was probably not circled on very many calendars. When the College Premier Division schedule was released, surely few singled out the April 16 match between Air Force and Utah as a possible watershed in the West playoff race. However, with Air Force stealthily reaching 3-1, that's exactly what it has become.



BYU, 6-0, has the West conference title all but sewn up, and Utah, with a win over second place and 4-1 Arizona State in the bag, has the inside track on the West's second playoff bid. The Zoomies, having only lost to BYU, are in the best position of anyone to catch the Utes.

Air Force has built its record by defeating the West's three weakest teams: Colorado, Colorado State and Wyoming. But they've done so by an average of 36 points per victory. Air Force's lone loss, though, was an embarrassing 93-8 beat down at the hands of the top-ranked Cougars, which, coupled with the preseason expectation that BYU and Utah would easily separate themselves from the pack, has Air Force traveling to Salt Lake City as the decided underdog.

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“We know how good BYU and Utah are,” said Air Force coach Joe Muehlbauer, “but it’s still all up in the air, and we’re going for it. We’re not licking our wounds from BYU. We got our tails handed to us, but that’s fine.”

Utah will have a size advantage Saturday, so the Zoomies will have to rely on overall mobility and quickness to counter a powerful Utes attack.

“I think our team speed is always what we count on. That’s something that we build into our game plan, something that’s worked well for us this year,” said Muehlbauer. “We’ve got good speed in our back row, so I think we can attack from inside out and try to find a weakness. I’m not sure there is one in Utah, but we’ll try and find one.”

One weakness Utah coach Blake Burdette will fess up to is his team’s inability to get out of the gates quickly. Utah has struggled to begin games with intensity, and just last week Colorado exploited that to score the game’s first try. Utah came back to win convincingly, but if the Zoomies are to pull off the upset, they’d do well to get a head start.

“The emotionally more up team can really take advantage of it, and that’s where we need to have our guys. We really need to jump on Utah quick if we’re going to have a chance. I think we can do that,” said Muehlbauer.

“We played them a couple of years ago and got ahead of them, and then slowly let them back in the game and they took over in the second, so that’s something that if we do jump ahead, we’ve got to keep a lid on it, so to speak.”

“We’ve got low-key type of guys that don’t get overexcited, but we’ve got to get them keyed up for a big match this weekend. They’re going to have to make something happen, as opposed to waiting for something to happen.”

If Air Force wins, then Utes will have to become fans of both Arizona and Arizona State, the Zoomies' final two opponents.