Written by Pat Clifton
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Air Force traveled to Salt Lake City knowing they had to win Saturday to further their playoff bid. They also knew that in order to beat the Utes at home, they'd need to use an aggressive style of play. One-offs on the side of a ruck weren't going to do it. They needed to keep Utah on their heels with constant offloads and forward ball.

For much of the game, they did just that. "They were offloading a lot, and we weren't used to it, so it was giving us a little trouble," said Utah coach Blake Burdette. "That, combined with missed tackles, was really hurting us."

Despite Air Force's probing style, Utah led 15-5 at halftime. When the Utes did string together some phases, they were too strong for the Zoomies.

The second half, even more so than the first, Air Force was impressive in attack. They immediately scored eight points, with a Carson Cleveland penalty and Kenneth Kinderwater try, to pull within two of the Utes at 15-13.

Utah responded swiftly, as Don Pati, playing outside center for the second game in a row, burst into and through contact, igniting a strong Utah push. Lock Mike Kimball followed up with a willful run of his own, which ended with a touch down and five points. Tonata Lauti made the conversion, keeping Air Force two scores ahead.

The Zoomies strung together several offloads and some impressive maneuvers in counterattack on their next possession, but attempted one offload too many and lost the ball in contact. Air Force turned Utah over and went on the offensive again, and this time Ryan Russomanno squirted into pay dirt, pulling Air Force within two once more.

Utah, feeling the heat, responded with another quick, powerful try. Each time Air Force pulled close to Utah, the Utes exploded with a sense of scoring urgency to re-extend their lead, seemingly at will, which brings up the question, why didn't they score more with their backs not against the wall?

"I think it's a lack of intensity and a lack of focus," Burdette said.

"It's that and team chemistry. Obviously, if one guy lets down, it's going to affect the other guy," added Pati. "But we‘ve got a lot of good athletes, and a lot of guys who make the plays by themselves, so it‘s good to have them on the team."

Utah's next score was a perfect example of an individual effort equating to points, as wing AJ Tuineau stepped around and through Air Force's defense before racing over 50 meters for what could have been the try that broke the visitors' back, putting Utah up 34-20.

The Zoomies weren't done, though, as they retaliated with team try, during the development of which, the ball touched several sets of hands before being touched down by Reed Ragsdale. With time waning, Air Force secured possession and started working toward Utah's goal line,

but a forward pass at full time ended the comeback effort.

Air Force controlled possession and the pace of the game almost the entire second half, but several turnovers in the tackle made room for quick-strike Utah scores that kept the hosts in front.

“Our ball retention in the second half wasn’t very good, but we played well in the second half other than that,” said Air Force coach Joe Muehlbauer. “If we controlled the ball in contact better, because we were just bringing it to them, always on the front foot, one or two knocks, that’s the difference in the game. They played good defense, and one or two missed opportunities there for us.”

With the win, Utah all but sews up the West’s second seed to the postseason. Now, just matches between winless Colorado State and Wyoming stand between the Utes and the playoffs (assuming BYU holds serve against Arizona State).