

Boivin: Common goals bond together all Sun Devils



Paola Boivin, azcentral sports columnist 10:34 a.m. MST November 2, 2014



(Photo: Rob Schumacher/azcentral sports)

It was loud. Crazy loud.

Hysteria swept through Sun Devil Stadium Saturday night when it became clear a successful field goal in overtime would secure an Arizona State victory over Utah.

And kicker Zane Gonzalez? He treated the moment like he just woke up from a nap. He stretched his neck. He looked toward the field.

Safety Damarious Randall walked over and told him, "You're the best kicker in the nation. Just do what you do."

BOX SCORE: [ASU 19, Utah 16 \(OT\) \(http://www.sportsnetwork.com/merge/tsnform.aspx?c=azcentral&page=cfoot/scores/final/boxscore.aspx?GAMEID=43114\)](http://www.sportsnetwork.com/merge/tsnform.aspx?c=azcentral&page=cfoot/scores/final/boxscore.aspx?GAMEID=43114)

Gonzalez nodded and did exactly that. He kicked a 36-yard field goal to put the Sun Devils in control of the Pac-12 South and kept their College Football Playoff hopes alive.

Kickers are a funny breed. They are accepted by teammates but not always fully embraced. That's not the case here. The sophomore stabilized a position in desperate need of help and did it with unwavering poise.

"I was not worried about Zane," ASU coach Todd Graham said. "He just has one of those personalities that gives you a lot of confidence in him."

Forgive the awful corporate word but there is a definite synergy happening with this team. You could see in the postgame press conference in the way a kicker (Gonzalez), a quarterback (Taylor Kelly), and two safeties (Randall and Jordan Simone) interacted.

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They nodded their heads as others spoke. They added to another's thought.

A common goal has led the players to a 7-1 overall record with a big game against Notre Dame on deck.

"We got guys that believe in each other," Simone said. "We believe in the scheme and we believe in our coaches. When you've got a defense like that, that's a national championship type of defense."

That defense looks nothing like the confused inconsistent group that started the season. Turns out that unit was simply young and trying to grasp a sophisticated system.

Saturday, it dominated the line of scrimmage.

"We were not getting a lot of push," Utah running back Devontae Booker said. "They blitzed every down."

ASU's game-to-game improvement is what is most head-turning.

"I am very proud of the players and how fast they have improved," Graham said. "Their growth the last few weeks is amazing. They have a lot of heart and believe in our system."

This coaching staff has done it with a mix of young talent, season veterans and yes, junior-college transfers.

It's an overlooked strength of this team. When ASU took the field Saturday night, eight of the 22 starters were JC transfers, including the season's top receiver and top tackler.

If you have an issue with that, keep your thoughts to yourself around Graham.

"I think there is a stigma, and I think it's wrong," he said.

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On the way to reviving the ASU football program, Graham proudly took a collection of JC players along for the ride. He has signed 25 in his three recruiting classes, a choice that went fairly unnoticed until two Mississippi defensive players that were expected to make big impacts this season – Pearl River Community College's Darrius Caldwell and Dalvon Stuckey – failed to qualify academically over the summer.

Their missteps overshadow a recruiting tactic that has been quite fruitful for the Sun Devils in the Graham era. One need only look at the defense, where many of the players who made the biggest stops in overtime were JC transfers.

And then there is the star of the offense, wide receiver Jaelen Strong, who is playing his way into the NFL.

Strong grew up in Philadelphia and lost his dad, a former Drexel basketball standout, to cancer when he was 9. He excelled in sports in high school but didn't pay enough attention to academics, which limited his college options. A friend suggested Strong join him at Pierce College in Southern California.

Strong did and after ASU offensive coordinator Mike Norvell received a tip about him, the two cultivated a relationship that resulted in Strong committing to Tempe. It has been an ideal marriage.

ASU provided the academic support – Strong had to pass 11 classes during the spring and two summer sessions to have eligibility for three seasons – and Strong committed to the path.

"People learn differently," Graham said. "We've got kids on our team that have 2.4 (GPA's) that are busting their tail and I want them on my team. They know how important academics are.

"We also have 70 of 110 that have 3.0 or higher and that's great, too. My philosophy is research the history."

The transition wasn't too hard, junior-college transfer Randall said, "because ASU has everything set up in place for you with the academic stuff."

Athletes go to junior colleges for a variety of reasons. For many, it is grade-related. Others are still coming into their own athletically and aren't ready to compete yet at the Division I level.

Graham is right. A stigma has been associated with JC players. But as long as a school does its due diligence in investigating a player's background, it can be a beneficial experience.

Graham likes that they can make a successful transition much quicker than a player coming out of high school.

"A kid that's 18 and a kid that's 20 – I spend a lot of time (studying this), I'm a research person – there's a big difference," he said. "The (JC) kid only has a couple years left. They've been out of high school, they aren't just looking at a logo. And they come here and go 'Wow, I get to live like this.' They appreciate the Valley and the climate and the university. They're grateful.

"And I like that they have a sense of urgency about them. They don't have long."

For Graham, it's personal.

He embraces the underdogs, the athletes who have to work the hardest to reach their goals. He was that guy, a defensive back who played college ball at East Central College in Oklahoma, a coach who started his career in the high school ranks.

"I kind of took the path least traveled," he said. "I went to a small college. It was tough but I was hungry. I had something to prove. I like (JC players) because they haven't had it easy.

"But make no mistake, I also look for the same things I'm looking for from kids out of high school. I'm looking for character first. I don't care how much talent they have, I'm not sacrificing character."

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It doesn't appear that he has. You rarely hear about players in Graham's program getting in trouble. The announcement before Saturday's game that defensive lineman Demetrius Cherry, a transfer from Contra Costa College, was suspended against Utah for undisclosed reasons was the exception.

Most have delivered on the field. Last season's team that won the Pac-12 South Division not only included Strong but Marion Grice and Chris Young, who this season are with the Cardinals and New York Jets, respectively.

And this year? Center Nick Kelly, who played his first year at American River College in Sacramento, has been a key factor in the offensive line's success.

The defense has benefited from JC transfers, starting with the team's leading tackler, Randall, who also played baseball and had two junior college stops, including Mesa Community College.

JC transfers have been key to the success of the defensive line, from Cherry to Marcus Hardison to Edmond Boateng. The defensive also has been aided by linebacker Antonio Longino and cornerback Kweishi Brown.

Graham understands, and, in fact, embraces the doubters.

"It motivates me," he said. "When I came here, people were like, 'What's his name?' I like being in that role.

"When I first came here, there were people going, 'What are you doing?' And then you put Jaelen Strong and Marion Grice and Chris Young and De'Marieya Nelson on the field and they say, 'Oh, OK.' "

Graham hates the junior-college player stigma.

Considering the way many of them played Saturday, that stigma might not be around for long.

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Who: ASU (7-1) vs. Notre Dame (7-1)

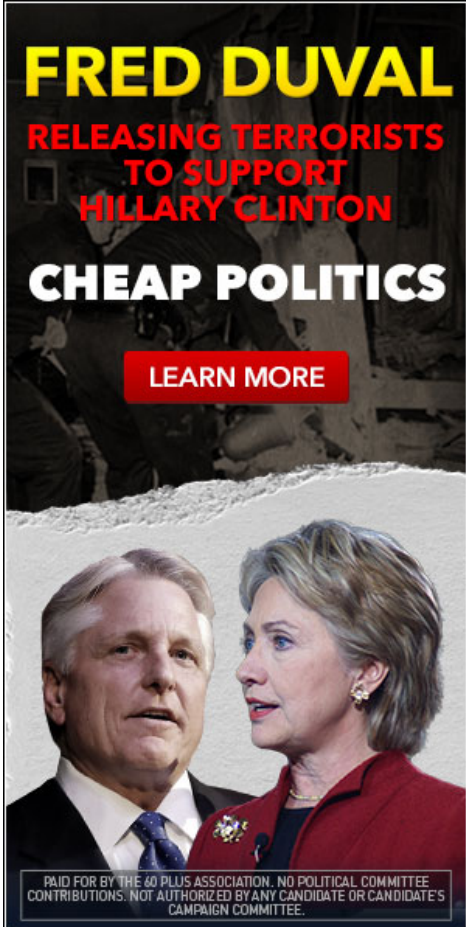
When: Nov. 8 at 1:30 p.m.

Where: Sun Devil Stadium, Tempe

TV: Channel 15.

Series: Notre Dame has won all three meetings against ASU, including a 37-34 win in Arlington, Texas, in 2013. Notre Dame won 48-17 in South Bend, Indiana, in 1999, and 28-9 in Tempe in 1998.

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