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“Always Believe”

by

Tom Holbrook

This column today is for football fans everywhere, but especially for all you West Virginia Mountaineer fans here in The Villages.

WVU Mountaineers vs. the Mighty Oklahoma Sooners in the Tostitos Fiesta BCS Bowl... David vs. Goliath many have said and they were right. The biggest surprise about this game is that Goliath won. That’s right... even though every single talking head and “expert” football analyst I heard over the last few weeks referred to WVU as a David going up against Goliath, the reality of the situation is that our boys were far superior to the All-American laden bunch from Norman, Oklahoma. We were the Giant on the University of Phoenix’s field this 2nd night in January, 2008, and we felled the mighty Sooners with a 48-28 score.

No one... and I mean no one, even thought WVU would show up for the game. For the first time in a long time, if ever, WVU had to send 7,500 tickets back to Arizona because not enough of the Mountaineer faithful wanted to buy a ticket to see a massacre. I understand, however, that a WVU Alum shelled out \$1 Million to the Bowl Officials to reimburse them for our failure to sell our allotted tickets. Unheard of in Mountaineer history.

I know that many sportscasters and TV Analysts were shaking their heads as they cooked up many pounds of crow for breakfast the morning after this game. According to them WVU never had a chance from the get go. They would be outmanned; out-weighted (Average 320 pounds per man vs. 280;) highest passing proficiency rated quarterback in the nation; a much greater success story in school’s won-loss history, and 8 national titles to zip for WVU. Yet our guys “Never stopped believing,” so said the 7 year assistant to coach Rich Rodriguez, Coach Bill Stewart who is the current interim coach.

All through the game coach Stewart could be seen with a smile on his face as opposed to the perpetual grimace we’ve become used to many times during the games by other coaches. He said the players were going to have fun regardless of the outcome of the game and that’s exactly what their actions and demeanor exhibited on the sidelines. None of the players had harsh words for Coach Rod and all of them had nothing but good things to say about Coach Stew, as Pat White called him. And because Coach Stew did such a great job bringing the team together following Rodriguez’s departure the powers that be have wisely selected him to replace his former boss as WVU’s full-time coach.

Any viewer could see that this game was an emotional one for most all the players. Wide Receiver Tito Gonzales of WVU was crying unashamedly after catching a 79 yard TD pass which seemed to be the turning point for the team, and Owen Schmitt openly cried as well while being interviewed by FOX Network representatives. He said the players were playing for the whole state of WV, the “greatest state in the Union.”

Obviously someone was doing something right because Oklahoma, who had allowed only 92 yards rushing by opposing teams, generously permitted our Mounties to accumulate 350+ rushing yards, 150 of them generated by our fantastic quarterback, Patrick White. All in all, Pat had 326 all-purpose yards to add to his impressive yearly total, and the team had 525 total yards, even though we were without the services of our star running back Steve Slaton due to a suspected pulled hamstring muscle suffered early in the first half. Filling in beautifully, however, was true freshman Noel Devine who rushed for 108 yards and two TDs on the evening. The big man himself, Fullback Owen Schmitt rumbled down the field for a 57 yard from scrimmage touchdown.

Bob Stoops, much admired coach of Oklahoma didn't manage the game well for his team and several times made decisions that proved detrimental for them. His teams are known for being able to come from behind and win but this time the magic was gone. Each time they would get a score and threaten our lead, our guys would bounce back with an immediate score of our own... stifling any enthusiasm the Sooners might have gained and strengthening the resolve of our team.

West Virginia's defense did an absolute fantastic job preventing Oklahoma's storied offensive juggernaut to gain any foothold and rush on us for any sizable yardage, with only -1 yards at the end of the first quarter. Somehow the “experts” failed to remember that WVU had the nation's 4th ranked defensive squad who normally only allowed 17.5 points per game and 292 total yards per game. They allowed Oklahoma no touchdowns until late in the third quarter... quite a feat.

WVU entered this BCS Bowl game ranked 9th in the nation and Oklahoma was number 3. It is obvious that regardless of the media hype over the last two weeks WVU was the better team in this game and should finish in the top 5 of the nation at the season's official end on January 8th. And for those of us who failed to “Always believe,”...Go Eeers and forgive us for not believing.

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