

Moss, Utah run past West Virginia in Heart of Dallas

The Associated Press

DALLAS — Zach Moss took a third-down handoff and quickly burst through the line and into an opening in the middle of the field. Utah was off and running to another bowl victory.

Moss ran for 150 yards, including a career-long 58-yard run for a touchdown on the Utes' opening drive in the Heart of Dallas Bowl on way to a 30-14 win over West Virginia on Tuesday. They are now 11-1 in postseason games under Kyle Whittingham, who matched Alabama's Nick Saban for the most bowl wins by an active coach.

"He knows how to coach the team and he always caps the year off right," Utah sophomore quarterback Tyler Huntley said.

Huntley scored twice, both on 2-yard keepers, but they led for good in their fifth straight bowl victory after Moss broke free on a drizzly and chilly day in Cotton Bowl Stadium.

"It was very important for us to come out of the gates with a big play early on and set the tone," said Moss, who like Huntley still has two seasons left with the Utes (7-6).

West Virginia (7-6) finished the season with its third straight loss. The Mountaineers had only 153 total yards without junior quarterback Will Grier, who broke a finger Nov. 18, and 1,000-yard rusher Justin Crawford, a senior who bypassed the bowl game in advance of the NFL draft.

"It was a pretty disappointing loss to end a pretty disappointing season," Mountaineers coach Dana Holgorsen said. "You never hear me use it as an excuse. If you lose guys, you need guys to step in and play at a high level and that is the bottom line."

Whittingham's debut as head coach was a Fiesta Bowl win at the end



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Utah running back Zack Moss (2) runs the ball against West Virginia during the first half of the Xaxby's Heart of Dallas Bowl at Cotton Bowl Stadium in Dallas on Tuesday.

of the 2004 season. He coached that game with Urban Meyer, who had taken the Florida job three weeks earlier but returned to be part of Utah's postseason win over Pittsburgh after his defensive coordinator had been promoted to head coach.

Under Whittingham, the Utes prepare for bowl games like regular season games, often in full pads and with continuing conditioning work. There is also a little bit of peer pressure.

"We've got a group of guys and have had several groups of guys come here that take a lot of pride in their bowl performance and the bowl record that

we have," Whittingham said. "This group was no different. Each subsequent group doesn't want to be the group that lets the previous groups down. They want to keep that bowl prowess alive."

Duke 36, N. Illinois 14: In mid-November, after a loss at Army, the Duke Blue Devils were looking at spending a second straight holiday season at home.

That made Tuesday's success in the Quick Lane Bowl even sweeter.

After a six-game losing streak dropped them to 4-6, the Blue Devils (7-6) had to beat Georgia Tech and Wake Forest just to get bowl eligible. They managed that, got a bid

to spend Christmas in Detroit, and salvaged the season with a 36-14 win over Northern Illinois.

"People ask me how we came back from 4-6, especially since we don't have a star player who we could turn to," Duke coach David Cutcliffe said. "I tell them that we have a roster filled with great teammates. They decided they had to work together if we were going to come up with a decent finish."



Duke quarterback Daniel Jones finished with 338 yards of offense, throwing two touchdown passes while running for a third score, and Shaun Wilson and Brittain Brown added rushing touchdowns.

"We knew Northern Illinois had a lot of success rushing the passer this year, but our offensive line really controlled things," Jones said. "That really opened things up for our offense."

"We were frustrated after losing to Army, but we were finally able to channel that into motivation."

Redshirt freshman quarterback Marcus Childers threw for 234 yards and a score for Northern Illinois (8-5), while fellow redshirt freshman Tre Harbison ran for a touchdown.



"Marcus and I know that this offseason is crucial," Harbison said. "If we work hard, we should have a special backfield next



HEART OF DALLAS BOWL

UTAH 30



WEST VIRGINIA 14



QUICK LANE BOWL

DUKE 36

NORTHERN ILLINOIS 14



CACTUS BOWL

KANSAS STATE VS. UCLA

LATE

year."

The Blue Devils took a 14-0 lead in the first quarter, sandwiching rushing touchdowns around a failed Northern Illinois fake punt on 4th-and-18 from their own 11.

"They were being physical with our gunners, so we thought we could get a pass interference and a first down," Huskies coach Rod Carey said. "They didn't bite, and we had a punter throwing to a defensive back."

The Huskies had two first downs and 46 yards in the quarter, but tied the game with two scores in the first 2:38 of the second. Duke, though, moved back into a 26-14 lead with two touchdowns before halftime.

Jones fumbled on the first possession of the second half, but Northern Illinois turned the ball back over after a failed fake field goal.

Other than the start of the second quarter, where Duke lost defensive focus on back-to-back possessions, the Blue Devils were in complete control.

The Huskies recovered from the disastrous first-quarter fake punt to get back into the game, but couldn't stay with Duke on either side of the ball.

Tide

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how it ended the regular season — with a 26-14 loss at rival Auburn.

Of course, the Tide players still haven't forgotten their final game last year, when former Clemson quarterback Deshaun Watson led a last-minute touchdown drive to steal the national championship away from Alabama in the final second.

"They are a very good team. They put together a phenomenal season," tight end Hale Hentges said last week. "I mean, they beat us last year, so they have our number, definitely. We're hungry, and we're going to keep that same mentality moving forward and hopefully try and win."

That mission moves into full swing Wednesday when Alabama's team plane lands at the Louis Armstrong International Airport at approximately 10 a.m.

Once on the ground, head coach Nick Saban, unanimous All-American defensive back Minkah Fitzpatrick and junior running back Damien Harris will briefly speak to the media on the airport tar-



KENT GIDLEY / UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Alabama linebacker Anfernee Jennings said he and his teammates will try to take advantage of being selected for the College Football Playoff for the fourth consecutive season.

mac.

Clemson is set to arrive in New Orleans later Wednesday at 3 p.m., when Swinney and two selected players will also talk to the media.

As with all major bowl games, the Sugar Bowl requires a lot of time and energy from coaches and players with press conferences beginning early Thursday morning inside the New Orleans Marriott Convention Center.

The Crimson Tide offense and Clemson's defense will be highlighted

on Thursday.

Alabama's offensive contingent will include first-year offensive coordinator Brian Daboll speaking to the media for the first time since his lone media availability as an assistant coach in early August. Among the Tide's offensive players expected to be made available are senior center Bradley Bozeman, junior receiver Calvin Ridley, sophomore quarterback Jalen Hurts, sophomore offensive tackle Jonah Williams and Harris. Clemson's defensive con-

tingent will include coordinator Brent Venables, defensive ends Austin Bryant and Clelin Ferrell, graduate cornerback Ryan Carter, graduate linebacker Dorian O'Daniel and junior defensive tackle Christian Wilkins.

Alabama and Clemson will then hit the field for the second of four on-site bowl practices later Thursday, with the fourth-seeded Tide drawing the opportunity to work out at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome, while Clemson will practice at nearby Tulane

University.

Select Alabama players will also take a charitable visit to the Ochsner Medical Center on Thursday to meet with patients.

Friday will see outgoing Alabama defensive coordinator Jeremy Pruitt speak to the local Alabama media for the first time since he was named as Tennessee's next head coach earlier this month. Among the Tide defensive standouts also slated to speak Friday include senior linebacker Rashaan Evans, senior cornerback Levi Wallace and likely NFL-bound juniors in defensive tackle Da'Ron Payne, safety Ronnie Harris and Fitzpatrick.

Clemson's offensive contingent includes co-coordinators Tony Elliot and Jeff Scott, junior quarterback Kelly Bryant, freshman running back Travis Etienne, junior left tackle Mitch Hyatt and junior receiver Hunter Renfrow.

The Sugar Bowl's official "media day" is set for Saturday at the Superdome, where both Alabama and Clemson rosters, including all on-field assistant coaches, will be made available to the media. The Tide will kick things off at 8 a.m. while the Tigers will start shortly after 9 a.m.

Clemson will then make

its hospital visit to the New Orleans Children's Hospital before returning to the practice field at Tulane later Saturday afternoon.

New Year's Eve will begin with press conferences for both Clemson's Swinney and Alabama's Saban. Both teams will have pep rallies in the French Quarter for fans that made the trip to New Orleans, bookending the Sugar Bowl's New Year's Eve parade, a Mardi Gras-style event that will travel down Decatur Street between 3:30-5 p.m.

After that, it'll be straight back to work ahead of Monday night's kickoff (7:45 p.m.) from the Superdome, where both Alabama and Clemson will battle for the opportunity to return to the national championship game for a third consecutive season.

"We understand everything that comes with this game," Jennings said. "I personally don't necessarily like the whole system because it can set you up in the end. Like, we're going to New Orleans and we've just got to stay focused and know what we're going to and handle business and get a job done."

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Tigers

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Four weeks later at LSU, when Auburn's offense fell stagnant in the second half of a 27-23 loss in Baton Rouge, La., Stidham completed a career-low 34.6 percent of his passes (9 of 26) for 165 yards and a touchdown. In a win over Arkansas the next week, the sophomore completed 19 of 28 passes for 218 yards and ran for a touchdown.

"He does a great job of maintaining his compo-

sure," wide receiver Darius Slayton said. "Whether something goes really good or really bad, he does a great job of staying even keel and just playing football."

Stidham has done it in individual games, too. On Auburn's third drive of the Iron Bowl, the sophomore quarterback lost a fumble in the red zone for a second straight game. The Tigers led then-No. 1 Alabama 7-0 and could have pushed the margin to two scores. Instead, Alabama tied the game two possessions later.

Stidham answered that mistake by completing 21 of 28 passes, totaling 237 yards through the air and 51 on the ground, and scoring a touchdown in a 26-14 win that clinched the SEC West for Auburn.

"Jarrett is a competitor. He just fumbled the ball, and that's part of the game," head coach Gus Malzahn said after the game. "We patted him on the back and said we were OK. We told him to hang in there. I think he handled himself very well."

The only time over the final six games of the season

that Stidham didn't answer was in the SEC championship game against Georgia. He started the second meeting against the Bulldogs on fire, completing his first eight passes for 70 yards and a touchdown to Nate-Craig Myers.

But on the first play after his first incompletion of the game, with Auburn holding a 7-0 lead and driving, Stidham fumbled in the red zone for a third straight game. Georgia scored the game-tying touchdown on its next drive, and the Tiger quarterback completed just

eight of his final 24 passes for 75 yards in a 28-7 loss.

"There's a lot to learn from a game like this. I just have to do a lot better job," Stidham said after the game. "We just tried to bounce back from it the best way we could, and it didn't go our way."

Stidham will get another chance inside Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Monday's Peach Bowl against UCF.

It's an enticing matchup, too. The Knights rank 111th nationally surrendering 262.8 passing yards per game.

Now, all Auburn needs him to do is bounce back from the loss to Georgia the same way he did after losses at Clemson and LSU.

"A lot of the time, quarterback gets way too much credit and too much blame," Lindsey said. "We had some protection issues and we didn't catch the ball and didn't play our best, to be honest with you. So he's done a real nice job of moving forward, and I think he'll play well."

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