



Coach to Broncos: Repeat after me

BY BOB EVANCHO

No way. No how. That's what almost all the experts said about Boise State's chances of repeating the magic of the previous year before the 2003 college football season began last fall.

After a storybook '02 season in which the Broncos finished 12-1, ran roughshod over the rest of the Western Athletic Conference and joined the nation's top-ranked teams, almost everyone predicted the 2003 campaign would bring them crashing back to earth.

How low would they go? With the loss of eight starters from the 2002 team's high-powered offense and a tougher schedule, the '03 Broncos were picked to finish second or third in the WAC in most preseason polls.

Respectable? Absolutely. Passable 9-4 or 8-5 records were the popular preseason predictions. But another dream season? No way. No how.

Oh, the '03 Broncos would be competitive, the experts all said, and coach Dan Hawkins' guys certainly wouldn't give up their WAC title without a fight. But really ... a repeat of the headline-grabbing, bowl-winning, record-setting accomplishments of '02? Puh-lease.

Another WAC title with an undefeated romp through league play? Get real.

More time in the national limelight among the nation's elite football programs? Unlikely.

Sure, star quarterback Ryan Dinwiddie was back for his senior season and the defense had several key players returning. But there were too many holes to fill on offense. Furthermore, the '03 Broncos wouldn't enjoy the cushy schedule from the previous year.

No sir, no cakewalk this time around.

The stars (and the schedule) were aligned just right in 2002 as BSU played WAC heavyweights Hawaii, Fresno State and Louisiana Tech in the friendly confines of Bronco Stadium en route to an 8-0 league record.

But 2003 was bound to be a different story, the experts said; Hawkins and the Broncos were certain to get their comeuppance. After all, La Tech, Fresno State and Hawaii, all of whom suffered embarrassing and lopsided defeats on the blue turf in '02, would be laying in wait, eager to avenge those losses on their home fields. In addition, road games at Oregon State and BYU would surely put BSU in its place.

But as the season began, Hawkins says he welcomed the challenge. "We relished the fact that we would be wearing a bull's-eye," the coach says. "That situation called us to be even better than we were before."

Uh, Coach, better than the '02 team? Better than the offensive juggernaut that led the nation in total offense and total points? Better than the team that scaled unprecedented heights and put BSU on the national map? Sorry, Hawk,

the experts said as the season approached, it was fun while it lasted, but the glory of the previous year is certain to be tempered by the harsh dose of reality that awaits you and your team in '03.

But Hawkins says he envisioned the success of the upcoming season in different terms. "We talked about guaranteeing a repeat — a repeat of how we do things, a repeat of our philosophies, a repeat of the process of achieving excellence," he recalls. "The emphasis was not on what the record was or would be, rather an emphasis of specific components of success."

OK, fine. But in the harsh reality that is college football, success is measured by wins and losses. And in the early part of the '03 season, the Broncos' stellar play and good fortune from the previous year had yet to materialize. After dispatching outmanned Idaho State in their opener the Broncos struggled to a 24-10 win over Idaho; the following week their 13-game winning streak ended with a 26-24 loss at Oregon State.

The Broncos were 2-1, but after three games they were also unimposing and unimpressive. Maybe the experts were right. Maybe the predictions were true. Maybe they *were* just also-rans.

Maybe a preposterous official's call late in the OSU game that denied them a chance to pull out a last-minute win was an omen that their joyride was over and the magic had indeed run its course.

Didn't happen. Instead, the tough loss to OSU did just the opposite. As he had done the year before in the loss at Arkansas, Hawkins took that early-season setback and used it to set his team up for greatness.



"I thought [the OSU game] was a defining moment because of how we rallied back from adversity," he says. "That game also taught us about responsibility. We lost that game, not the officials. The bottom line was our coaches and players had several opportunities to win that game based on what we could control, and we did not. The Beavers played a good game and deserved to win — we did not, plain and simple. If we truly want to control our destiny we must take responsibility for everything that happens to us. We cannot point the finger of blame anywhere else but at the mirror."

From that loss, the Broncos looked at themselves in the mirror, regrouped and did what almost everyone said they couldn't: They actually improved on the 2002 team's mark (13-1); ran the table again in the WAC (including gut-check road wins at La Tech, Fresno State and Hawaii); helped Dinwiddie set the NCAA record for career passing efficiency (see page 13); culminated the year with a postseason victory (34-31 over TCU in the Fort Worth Bowl); and, unbelievably, again completed their season among the nation's best (finishing 15th in the *USA Today*/ESPN coaches' poll, and 16th in the Associated Press media poll).

So, Hawk, how did you do it? How did this team surpass all expectations of everyone with the possible exception of you?

"By focusing on the little things," he says, "getting better, pushing the envelope as people, students and a football team."

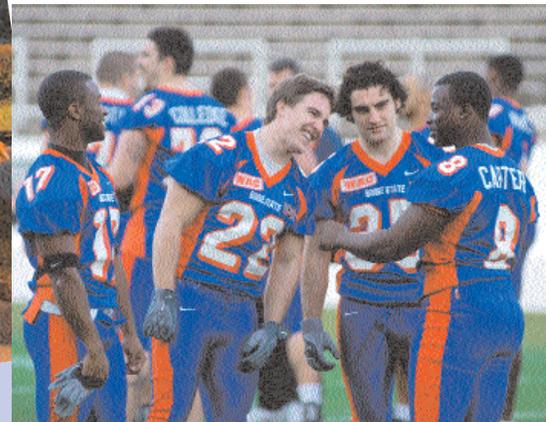
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Scenes from the Fort Worth Bowl, from top left clockwise: The battle begins; cheer squad before the game; Bronco players during day-before team walk-through; postgame victory celebration; David Mikell scores a 75-yard TD; fans in the stands.

Carrie Quinney photos



Mountain West bid fails

Boise State may have defeated Texas Christian University in last December's Fort Worth Bowl, but it was the Horned Frogs who won the Mountain West sweepstakes a few weeks later with the lone invitation to join the conference.

Both BSU of the Western Athletic Conference and TCU of Conference USA were considered the front-runners to receive an invitation to join the eight-team Mountain West as the league sought to expand to at least nine members. BSU made overtures, but with TCU's location in the Dallas-Fort Worth market, one of the largest in the nation, the Horned Frogs were considered to have the inside track if the league decided to invite just one school.

The Broncos kept their fingers crossed and hoped the Mountain West

would expand to 10 teams. But when the league decided in late January to add just one school, the offer, as expected, went to TCU.

"While we were disappointed that Boise State was not extended a membership offer by the Mountain West Conference, we remain confident that the university remains a viable candidate if and when the league decides to expand again," says President Bob Kustra.

While the Broncos will remain with the WAC for the time being, the league will undergo significant changes with the departure of Rice, Southern Methodist and Tulsa to Conference USA and the addition of Utah State and New Mexico State.

The new alignments take effect in 2005.

— Bob Evancho

