

The magic of the '94 football season

BY LARRY BURKE

From somewhere high in the heavens, legendary Bronco football coach Pokey Allen smiled as he looked down on Boise during Homecoming weekend in early October.

Forty-three of his former players from the 1994 season — dubbed by the Boise media as the “magic carpet ride” — were back on campus for a 10-year reunion to renew acquaintances, reminisce about their coach and reflect on one of the most spectacular years in Bronco football history.

True to Allen's happy-go-lucky spirit, players at the Friday night reception hoisted their glasses in a long, lively toast to the fallen coach, who died of cancer two years after the magical season.

“Look at what these guys are doing ... each and every one of them is successful,” says Chadwick Byrd, a defensive back on the '94 squad who now works for an off-shore drilling contractor in Norway and made the long trip just to see his ex-teammates again. “It comes from the desire to win, to do the best, that Pokey instilled in all of us. That transfers over.”

“Pokey was as close to a father figure as a football coach can be ... he was [a father] for a lot of us in different ways,” adds Tony Hilde, the team's star quarterback who is now a teacher and coach in Pendleton, Ore.

On preseason paper, Allen's '94 Broncos didn't cause rival coaches to lose much sleep. Picked to finish sixth in the Big Sky, the team featured only 10 seniors and a fleet of new junior college transfers recruited to stop the bleeding after Allen's 3-8 debut season as Bronco head coach.

What couldn't be measured was the team's heart.

“We just believed in a vision and we all worked hard to achieve it. We held a players-only meeting in January. At that moment everyone bought in. We became responsible for each other and for nine months we worked so hard we definitely knew we were going to be a good football team,” explains Jarett Hausske, a wide receiver who is now with an advertising firm in San Francisco.

Adds Hilde: “It was a belief system that bled through our veins by the end of the year. We had one identity.”

“We came through a lot of adversity and it made us a close team ... the

chemistry we had was magic,” adds Brian Smith, a linebacker who is back in Boise after a career in arena football.

After years of mediocre teams, the Broncos surprised their fans with six straight wins to start the



Above, the late Pokey Allen rides down Broadway in December 1994 as part of a publicity stunt. In early October, 43 of Allen's former players reunited in Boise and were honored at Bronco Stadium prior to the 2004 Homecoming game against Southern Methodist. Clockwise from top, Brian Smith and Mark Paljetak run onto the blue turf during the introductions of the 1994 team members; Tony Hilde and his 22-month-old son Chase; Smith with Mike Richmond (left) and Lee Schrack (with hat) during the SMU-BSU game; Danny Weeks (left) and Chris Davis embrace.



rekindled at Homecoming reunion

season, won the Big Sky Conference crown for the first time since 1980, and ended Idaho's irksome 12-game winning streak. Community interest surged after the Broncos won three Division 1-AA playoff games in Bronco Stadium, including a comeback against powerful Marshall, to advance to the national championship game on Marshall's campus in Huntington, W.Va.

The Broncos' magic carpet ride ended with a 28-14 loss to Youngstown State in the 1-AA title game. But that did nothing to diminish the accomplishments of a season in which they finished 13-2 and beat the Nos. 1, 2 and 3 ranked teams in the nation — Montana, Marshall and

Idaho. Those 13 wins in a single season remain a school record matched only by the 2003 Broncos, and their record compared to the previous year was the second-best turnaround in 1-AA football history.

But as amazing as its feats were, the legacy of the '94 team is more important: It rekindled the community's enthusiasm for Bronco football after a string of ho-hum seasons. A large sign held high at the national championship game summarized the fans' sentiments: WE BELIEVE!

"It was an opportunity for a lot of Boise State fans to be proud of the football program again," says Hauscke. "Every week we just barely won; we were fighters. That made it fun for everyone involved. It got people excited and back in the stands."

By restoring Boise State's long tradition of championship-caliber football, the '94 team sowed the seeds for the progress of the last decade: an expanded stadium, membership in the Western Athletic Conference, postseason bowl victories, national Top 25 rankings and exposure on ESPN and in *Sporting News*, *Sports Illustrated*, *USA Today* and other media.

"Boise State football today has evolved from what we were trying to do; we helped the city believe again and that brings in coaches and players," says Hilde. "I think we had a lot to do with that."

"We revamped the program by getting us back on track by being noticed nationally, by doing what the community expects — beating Idaho and going to the national championship [game]," adds Smith.

Magic? Perhaps. Hard work? Certainly. But there was one more important ingredient — fun.

Allen and his coordinators Al Borges and Tom Mason brought the joy back into Bronco football for fans and players alike. Ever the showman and promoter, who but Pokey Allen would ride a horse down Broadway Avenue in a snowstorm to repay fans for breaking the 20,000 attendance mark against Marshall?

And who can forget Borges, his pants slipping lower and lower, swinging from the goal post in a wild celebration with students after the long-awaited Idaho win?

"I love pointing out to people that the guy in the Bronco jacket is our offensive coordinator ... not just a coach, but our offensive coordinator," says Alex Toyos, an offensive lineman on the '94 team who is now the Norwalk, Calif.-based manager of a regional special investigations unit for an insurance company. "What possessed him to get up there only he knows; it was part of the magic of that season."

The Broncos took Boise State fans on a roller-coaster ride that will be etched into memory forever. But Allen's gift to his players goes much deeper than the happy memories relived at the Homecoming reunion.

"Pokey turned my life around. When I met him I wasn't going in the right direction; he put me in that direction. I thank him every day for that ... he believed in me," says Smith.

Yes, for some the magic carpet ride has never ended.

Editor's note: The 1994 season is chronicled in detail in Allen's autobiography, POKEY: The Good Fight, available at the Boise State Bookstore.

