



Hawkins, left, led the way to a 12-1 season.

But it never happened.

The pivotal moment in the 2002 Broncos' amazing season wasn't their 67-21 dismantling of Fresno on national TV in October. Nor was it their title-clinching 44-7 victory over Nevada in November.

No, the Broncos' turning point took

Broncos' triumphant season born of adversity

It could have blown up in their faces on Sept. 7 in Fayetteville, Ark. Maybe — just maybe — the 2002 Boise State football team's dream season could have unraveled before it ever had a chance to build any kind of momentum.

All of the Broncos' great expectations for a glorious autumn — national recognition with a top 25 ranking, a Western Athletic Conference championship and a bowl game appearance — seemed in jeopardy just two games into the season after their 41-14 loss to Arkansas.

"Leave no doubt" was the Broncos' rallying cry going into the '02 season after they were aced out of the bowl game picture the previous year despite posting an 8-4 record and finishing tied for second in the WAC.

Loaded with offensive talent, the Broncos were primed for greatness in 2002; their 38-21 season-opening victory over archrival Idaho indicated as much. But on Sept. 7 at Arkansas their grandiose plans appeared in danger. For not only did they get roughed up by the Razorbacks, they also lost star quarterback Ryan Dinwiddie to a broken ankle.

It could have been disastrous. The decisiveness of the defeat and the loss of Dinwiddie — who many considered the one player Boise State could least afford to lose — could have created self-doubt, second-guessing and a sense a panic among the Broncos.

place in the hours and days following their disappointing performance in Fayetteville. Because it was then that second-year coach Dan Hawkins, his staff and his players decided they indeed would leave no doubt.

"I reminded them that we find out what we are made of when adversity strikes," says Hawkins when asked what he told his players after the Arkansas game. "I also restated something we talk about often: Don't worry about winning or losing, just do things right. Don't try and win, try to be a winner. Our whole mission is a quest for excellence, to become the bow, not try and hit the target. Regardless of the record, we vowed to sit down on Jan. 1 and assess the season. Until that point we would keep coming regardless of the outcome."

And keep coming they did. The Broncos never missed a beat after the Arkansas loss as senior quarterback B.J. Rhode stepped in and deftly ran the Bronco offense as Dinwiddie healed.

"We talk about everyone having a role and how each role is important," says Hawkins. "We talk about how you must be ready when you get your opportunity. B.J. was ready."

And so was the rest of the team. For the remainder of the season Boise State ran roughshod over every opponent in its way, reeling off 11 straight wins and finishing 8-0 in the WAC.

Instead of struggling to find them-

selves following their loss to Arkansas, the 2002 Broncos became more resilient and focused. They also became the offensive juggernaut everyone expected — 67 points against Fresno State, 63 against Utah State, 58 against Hawaii and UTEP, 52 versus Tulsa. The '02 Boise State offense scored no fewer than 34 points against every opponent except Arkansas. Dinwiddie returned in mid-October and running back Brock Forsey, the WAC Offensive Player of the Year, ran wild behind an offensive line that dominated every opponent. At the end of the season, Boise State led the nation in total offense and total points.

While the Boise State offense rang up record-setting numbers, the defense steadily improved. Led by senior safety Quintin Mikell, the WAC Defensive Player of the Year, the Bronco defenders dispatched their WAC opponents each week with increasing ferocity. By the time the regular season ended and the Broncos received an invitation to play in the Humanitarian Bowl, the defense was almost as intimidating as the high-powered offense.

And on Dec. 31 in the H-Bowl, Iowa State of the Big 12 got a dose of the kind of punishment Boise State had meted out all year as Hawkins and his players culminated their amazing season with a 34-16 victory.

With a 12-1 record, WAC title and bowl triumph, the '02 Broncos captured the imagination of Boise State football fans like no other since the 1994 Division 1-AA national runners-up and the 1-AA national championship team of 1980.

Boise State left no doubt. The Broncos finished No. 12 in the *USA Today/ESPN* coaches' poll and 15th in the Associated Press rankings. Only national champ Ohio State had a better record (Miami and Georgia were the only other Division 1 teams with one loss). Hawkins, the WAC Coach of the Year, was awarded with a five-year \$1.5 million contract.

It could have unraveled on Sept. 7. Instead, their single setback made them better.

"Like in *Apollo 13*," says Hawkins, "it was our finest hour."

— Bob Evancho