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Utah connection key to Thunder's success

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DUSSELDORF, Germany - If experience is the deciding factor in the NFL Europe World Bowl XIII then Don Eck and Aaron Boone will collect their second consecutive championship rings this weekend.

Eck, a former University of Utah assistant coach, is the offensive coordinator of the Berlin Thunder. One-time Millard High star Boone is his league-leading receiver. Both helped the

Thunder to a World Bowl victory in 2004 and are aiming for a repeat performance against the Amsterdam Admirals on Saturday (Fox, 10 a.m. MDT).

There is a mutual respect between the two, whose careers first crossed paths when Boone was a high school standout and played college ball at Snow Junior College and later the University of Kentucky. Their combination has turned the Thunder into a potent offensive force.

"I've known him for a few years and he actually recruited my two brothers to Utah," said Boone, whose siblings Jesse and Jason are both Utes. "He's a hard worker and a guy that the offense learns from and feels really comfortable with."

Eck repaid the compliment, saying: "I think the experience he has in our offense and having improved from last year means he's able to get open quickly. The quarterbacks trust him because he runs such clear routes and gets open.

"When that happens then he's going to catch a lot of balls. Aaron is a clutch guy and he's not going to drop the ball."

Former BYU quarterback Bret Engemann is also a backup for the Thunder.

Boone's return this season was recognized when he was named to the All-League team this week. His 43 catches for 582 yards and five touchdowns were unparalleled, and he hopes to carry that form into the NFL preseason and Carolina Panthers' training camp. In 2004 in Berlin he had only 12 catches.

"I worked out for them last year and signed with them before the season and I've been getting e-mails from them congratulating me," he said..

"They didn't draft anybody at receiver. This year has given me a chance to show what I can do here, but now I want to go over there and show I can do the same thing in the NFL."

Eck likes Boone's chances of catching on in Carolina and added: "I just know he's a good, solid receiver. If he continues to improve himself and his quickness and blocking, I think he has a chance. He's a big reliable target."

While Boone's second stint in Europe probably will be his last, Eck, currently in his third season coaching overseas, expects to return to Berlin, where the staff has been a model of consistency. In two seasons under head coach Rick Lantz, Berlin is 16-4 in the regular season and 1-0 in postseason play.

"It's been a pure joy to coach here," said Eck, who played center at Utah from 1980 to 1982 and moved through the coaching ranks from 1983 to 1989 and returned as offensive line coach in 1994.

"Coach [Ron] McBride had just lost his job at the University of Utah, as had his coaching staff, so I interviewed with the Scottish Claymores, where I was in 2003, and took it from there."

If the opportunity to return to Utah arises, Eck may find the temptation too great to resist.

"That's my alma mater and I've lived there for the majority of my adult life," he said. "I've worked there and coached there and of course I'd like to go back and coach at Utah some day. I love Salt Lake City and I have a lot of friends there."

While some players and coaches seek the solitude of their hotel room and rarely venture beyond its confines while in NFL Europe, Eck and Boone have reveled in the European culture. For Boone, a foreign destination is nothing new. He spent two years on an LDS Church mission to Peru.

"This year I took it upon myself to take the lead and tell people where things were in the city and how to adapt to life here," he explained. "I've done a lot of traveling, so for me it is a big adventure, but for some of these guys who have never traveled it's a shock."