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Friday, May 12, 2006

Blaze try to clear up postseason situation [PDF](#) | [Print](#) | [E-mail](#)

BRANDON JUDD - Daily Herald

It's about as muddled and unclear as a Wasatch Mountain river, but the Utah Blaze know one thing about the Arena Football League playoff chase: Win and they're in.

Utah sits in the sixth and final playoff spot in the league's American Conference heading into a 7 p.m. contest (KJZZ) today against Kansas City at the Delta Center in the team's regular-season finale. The expansion Blaze had a chance to wrap up a postseason spot last week, but fell 84-48 to Chicago in their worst loss of the season.

Now, a win is necessary to ensure a playoff spot.

Even though Utah (6-9) will not have a winning record in its inaugural year in the league, the Blaze could finish anywhere from the fourth to the sixth spot in the playoffs, and could even host a playoff game with a win and losses from Chicago and Nashville.

The reason? Utah went on a three-game winning streak before last week's debacle to put itself in the middle of the postseason mix.

"This is Arena Football," said Blaze offensive specialist Siaha Burley. "Nothing is guaranteed. I always knew, being a veteran of six years, that things can turn around. Teams that look like they were in control of everything can lose it. People that look like they're out of it can (turn it around). I always knew we had a shot at the playoffs."

The best-case scenario for Utah is to win tonight, then hope for Chicago to fall to Grand Rapids and for Tampa Bay to take down Nashville on Saturday. If this happened, the Blaze would own the fourth playoff seed in the American Conference and would host a first-round playoff game (the top two teams have a bye the first week).

Even though the Rush have the same record as Utah at 6-9, they are currently in the fifth playoff spot because they own the tiebreaker over the Blaze with their win last week. The Kats, who are 7-8, are one game ahead of Utah in the standings, but would lose the tiebreaker to the Blaze if they finished tied in the standings by virtue of their loss to

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Utah earlier in the year.

Utah could even sneak in the back door to the playoffs if it were to lose tonight, as long as Grand Rapids (5-10) also loses.

There is even the chance that Grand Rapids or Las Vegas could knock the Blaze out of the playoffs altogether, but both teams need a lot of help for this to happen.

One thing that could hurt Utah tonight is complacency. Before playing Chicago last week, Utah head coach Danny White warned his team about that. Despite the warning, the Blaze were down 35-0 before scoring late in the second quarter of the lopsided loss. White and the Blaze hope the same won't happen again this week against Kansas City, which may not seem to be much of a challenge with the worst record in the AFL at 3-12.

"You start thinking you're better than you are, and all you have to do is show up and you don't have to work during the week," White said. "It's one of the few things about sports that will never change."

White also said, however, that the Blaze, because of some early season adversity -- a pair of long losing streaks and injury problems -- have learned to focus on their own game, and that's helped the team fight its way into the playoff picture.

"It's kind of gotten to the point where we've evolved to the point that it's not so much about them. It's about us," White said. "If we play like we played against Colorado (a 52-40 win over the defending league champs), there isn't anybody in this league that we shouldn't expect to beat. We've evolved to that point, and I wouldn't have said that at the beginning of the season."

Who will be QB?: Last week's loss to Chicago marked the return of Utah's starter signal caller at the beginning of the season, Joe Germaine, who was injured in a Week 7 win over Nashville. Germaine played for the first time since going down, replacing Andy Kelly in the second half and throwing for 150 yards and four touchdowns.

Kelly, in the first half, threw for 185 yards and a touchdown, but was picked off twice and fumbled a snap that was returned for a TD. Prior to the rough outing, Kelly had led the Blaze to wins over Los Angeles, Colorado and Las Vegas while throwing 21 touchdowns and just one interception.

White has not said who will start at quarterback in tonight's game, and it will likely be a game-time decision.

One thing Kelly has going in his favor is he started seven games for Kansas City earlier in the year before being cut by the Brigade, and he knows their personnel.

Returning home: There will be a football homecoming for Kansas City offensive specialist Aaron Boone in tonight's game. Boone, who was born in Provo, will play football competitively in the Beehive State for the first time since playing for Snow College in 2000.

Boone, who played football at Millard High School in Fillmore, has played in NFL Europe and in a handful of NFL preseason games prior to joining the AFL. In 2005 while playing for the Berlin Thunder, he led NFL Europe in receptions and was second in receiving yards and touchdowns.

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the SEC at Kentucky, Boone signed with the Dallas Cowboys in April 2003. Since then, he has also signed with the NFL's Chicago and Carolina and made a TD reception in a preseason game for the Panthers last season.

Boone started this year's AFL season with Philadelphia, but was traded to Kansas City in March. He was named the league's Rookie of the Month for April, when he led all rookies with 13 touchdowns. He finished the month with 48 receptions for 550 yards, and he set franchise records for receptions (13), yards (157) and touchdowns (5) in an April 5 win over Los Angeles.

Taking aim at the record books -- expansion style: Burley has already set the AFL expansion record for receiving yards in a year with 1,782 yards, surpassing former Detroit Fury offensive specialist Robert Gordon's 1,630. Burley will have the opportunity tonight to surpass two more of Gordon's season expansion records: touchdowns and receptions. Burley needs just two touchdowns to surpass Gordon's 42 TD grabs and three receptions to break's Gordon's record of 125 catches.

This story appeared in The Daily Herald on page C1.

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