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to make a Change!*



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Few Fan-atics

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The irony is too rich
to let pass.

Ron McBride is
apparently headed for
his last game as the
University of Utah's
football coach Saturday
against Brigham Young,
before what is
anticipated will be a
sellout crowd of 46,000
at Rice-Eccles Stadium.

Yet, McBride is
being shown the door
after 13 years for reasons that have a lot to do with empty seats.

Despite 10 winning seasons, a couple of shared conference titles
and six bowl appearances, McBride's Utes have been a bust at the
box office the past couple years. This fall they are struggling on the
field (4-6) and averaging fewer than 33,000 paid admissions per
game, with far fewer fans than that actually bothering to show up.
Fewer than 15,000 attended the Nov. 9 game against UNLV.

Those would be coach-frying numbers at many Division 1-A
football schools; McBride is particularly vulnerable given the fact
that Rice-Eccles is a state-of-the-art facility, just 5 years old and
not yet paid for.

But there are no guarantees his successor will be able to pack the
house either. In fact, there is compelling evidence that he probably
will not.

On top of being located in a large metropolitan area -- where
even the most successful college teams struggle to compete with
pro sports and other big-city amenities -- the U. is smack dab in the
heart of the West, which will never be confused with the South or
the Midwest in terms of its college football fanaticism.

Out West, notes University of Utah sports historian Larry
Gerlach, "you try to fit the football game in around all the other
things you do during the weekend. In places like the South, football
is what you do on the weekend, and you find a way to fit the other
stuff in around the game. What you're talking about is a football



At the University of Utah's home football
game against UNLV on Nov. 9, fewer than
15,000 fans -- less than half the capacity of
state-of-the-art Rice-Eccles Stadium --
showed up. The U. is among many schools
in the West that fail to generate genuine
fanaticism on fall football weekends among
its faithful. (Trent Nelson/The Salt Lake
Tribune)



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culture."

On home game weekends, the tailgate lots start filling up as early as Thursday night in towns such as Knoxville (home to the University of Tennessee), Gainesville (Florida), Ann Arbor (Michigan) and Lincoln (Nebraska), and often don't empty until Sunday morning.

In Gainesville, says Florida alum Maire Griffin, "you can basically see a caravan of RVs and campers roll into town when the Gators are home. For three or four days, it's nothing but orange and blue."

Of course, Florida, Tennessee, Michigan and Nebraska are college football powerhouses that annually contend for the national championship. But if you think this is just about jumping on the bandwagon, think again.

Millard High School graduate Aaron Boone, now a wide receiver for the University of Kentucky, reports that even the victory-challenged Wildcats pack their 68,000-seat home in Lexington.

"The fans here are crazy," he says. "I mean, we went 2-9 [last season] and our stadium was still getting filled up. We get tailgaters three days before the game. It's a tradition."

With just a few exceptions, the West lacks such win-or-lose devotion.

West Woes: Of college football's top 20 attendance leaders last year, only one school -- the University of Washington, located in Seattle -- hailed from West of the Rockies. And a cursory survey of the region reveals only a handful of teams that regularly fill their stadiums: the UW, Colorado, Oregon -- and BYU.

Thanks to a 30-year resume that includes one national championship and multiple conference titles, bowl appearances and top 25 rankings, the Cougars generally fill each week -- or come close to filling -- the 65,000 seats in LaVell Edwards Stadium. Even in a sub-par season like this one (5-6), fans still come to Provo. On the same chilly evening the U. drew its basketball-sized crowd for UNLV, BYU got almost 62,000 for Wyoming.

"What LaVell [Edwards] did here was unique and extraordinary, and it's because of him that we have the fan base that we do now," says Duff Tittle, BYU's associate athletic director. "Today, we have a generation of fans that has seen us win a national championship [1984], and this group thinks we ought to contend for the national title every year."

Those kinds of expectations, along with BYU's affiliation with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, have turned the Cougars into Utah's de facto state football team, drawing fans on game day from as far away as St. George, and even southern Idaho and western Wyoming.

The rest of the West?

In the high-profile Pacific 10 Conference, Southern Cal and UCLA more often than not play to half-full houses in huge stadiums. Cal, Stanford and Arizona State toil before thousands of empty seats. Down a rung in Utah and BYU's Mountain West Conference, not even perennial championship contender Colorado State sells out its small, 30,000-seat stadium with any regularity;

the football programs at San Diego State and UNLV are mere afterthoughts in their respective markets.

And up in Logan, Utah State is hard-pressed to fill Romney Stadium for an opponent besides Utah or BYU.

Several factors account for this overall lack of fan fervor.

In large urban locations -- where many major universities in the West are located -- college teams often fail to lure large numbers of students to games because relatively few of them live on campus. Even top-tier football programs struggle for attention in markets where big league professional clubs exist.

Arizona State, for instance, filled Sun Devil Stadium years ago, but now must compete with the NBA Suns, NFL Cardinals, NHL Coyotes and Major League Baseball Diamondbacks for the sports dollar in Phoenix. USC and UCLA face a slew of pro sports competition in Los Angeles; so do Cal and Stanford in the Bay Area.

Only Washington, which has three professional competitors -- the NFL Seahawks, MLB Mariners and NBA Supersonics -- bucks the trend.

"There are just tons of distractions in big markets," says Robert Tuckman, president of TSE Sports Entertainment, a sports marketing consultant. "And it's not just the West. In the Northeast, professional football is huge. Except for Penn State, there are no really big college football programs."

At Penn State, located in State College, Pa., the Nittany Lions are the big league team. Ditto Louisiana State (Baton Rouge), Alabama (Tuscaloosa), Oklahoma (Norman) and Wisconsin (Madison). Invariably, the nation's premier college football factories are the only show in town.

Out West, meanwhile, additional demographic factors come into play. With so many people migrating from the rust belt states to places like Arizona, California, Colorado -- and yes, Utah -- during the past couple decades, developing a large, devoted fan base can prove difficult.

"The West is populated, to a significant extent, by people from other parts of the country," says Timothy Schneider, publisher of Sports Travel Magazine, an industry publication. "That's particularly true of L.A., where everybody is from someplace else. So in a lot of these places you have real fair-weather fans."

That lack of a deep-roots fan base is exacerbated, Schneider adds, by the fact that most college athletic programs are light years behind professional teams when it comes to selling their product.

"What a lot of college administrators fail to realize is that the product on the field has to be entertaining, beyond the wins and losses," he says. "If all you're offering is the same old pep bands and mascots, you're not going to be successful. You're not going to get that wide audience."

Stodgy Effort: In that regard, the U. athletic department has not been McBride's best friend. The school's marketing of the football program during most of his tenure could most generously be described as stodgy.

The Utes did ratchet up their approach this past summer with a

multi-media campaign that attempted to use humor -- warning fans "Don't Make Us Come and Get You," on television and in newspapers -- but the team's 2002 collapse clearly muffled its impact.

The Utes, who sold a peak 26,000 season tickets the year Rice-Eccles Stadium opened, are now down below the 20,000 mark. With a \$10 million stadium bond to pay off -- the rest of the \$50 million cost was covered by donations -- that won't do.

Still, Utah Athletic Director Chris Hill maintains he is realistic. He doesn't expect the school's football program to ever achieve the status of Ohio State or Nebraska. He doesn't foresee the creation of a "football culture" in the Salt Lake City market or even a day when the U. will match BYU at the turnstiles.

But Hill does believe the Utes are capable of consistently reeling in big crowds of 40,000 and higher -- provided they market properly and put an entertaining product on the field.

"You know, we played at Oregon in 1994 and they drew 27,000 people for that game," says Hill. "But that same year they went to the Rose Bowl and look what's happened since: they built on that season and have kept building to the point that their support is at a very high level."

Translation: Oregon now plays to regular sellout crowds at Autzen Stadium in Eugene, even after expanding this year to 56,000 seats. The Ducks are the hottest college football ticket on the West Coast.

"We think the University of Utah can get to that position," Hill says. "We know there are challenges to being in a large city. But we're now scheduling good teams that want to come in and play us; we've got a beautiful stadium and state-of-the-art facilities. We have a really good situation here. It will take a lot of effort, but I'm optimistic."

So, as it turns out, is Ron McBride.

"The idea now is you have to get a new group of people," he says. "You have to get the new people who move into town. And the secret here is you have to get the students.

"You just have to be creative."

So, despite the odds, the Salt Lake Valley may yet discover a passion for University of Utah football. Unfortunately for McBride, he is probably not going to be around long enough to experience it.

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Tribune reporter Michael C. Lewis contributed to this story.