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1930 Utah How Good Were They?

By Mark Purcell
College Football Historian

In these postwar Bowlmania days, if we had a team that dominated its geographic region, went unbeaten and untied, had a dazzling team offense and possible national rushing champion; we would need to fight off the Bowl promoters with whips; not to mention their checks in the mail. But 1930 Utah, with Ike Armstrong coaching, belonged to the days when the only really interesting post-season college football game was played in Pasadena, where there was no way his boys would play. And so 1930 Utah, probably the strongest regional team in the area before 1939, goes down in the history books as an untested major offensive power, somewhat like the even stronger 1917 Georgia Tech squad.



Ute QB Davis carries a would-be tackler on his shoulders in the game against Denver.

How good were they? Contemporary 1930 media and coaches put eight of Utah's men on the 11-man all-conference team, therefore staking a claim Utah was a 2-1 favorite over any inclusive all-star team put together in the Rocky Mountain time zone (outside the Southwest). It was a voters' consensus that Utah had the best regional lineman in center Marwin Jonas, and the best regional back in their sophomore runner, Frank Christensen.

I leave the team-player yardage statistics until a little later in this article, but they proved as one-sided as the game scores would suggest. With the advent of Armstrong into Utah coaching (1925-49) the inclusive Rocky Mountain Conference (12 teams) had become basically a two-team dominant conference, Colorado and Utah, and the 34-0 trouncing of Colorado was as close as Utah ever got in 1930 to having some opponent "measure" its power.

While an accepted preseason conference favorite, nobody seems to have anticipated the team's explosiveness. First of all, preconceptions of how the team offense would be put together were all wrong. The strength of the team was presumed to lie in a brilliant new tailback, Preston Summerhays, and a sound senior runner, team captain Ray Price. The team's presumable "weakness" lay in replacing their star 1929 fullback, Pomeroy, with a newcomer, Frank Christensen. This Summerhays-Price-Christensen offense played and beat Nevada in the opener, 20-7, with a 301-yard total offense (163 rush & 138 pass) which was impressive for the era, but pipsqueak compared with future yardage-scoring totals produced by a different Utah backfield. All the Nevada game forecast, was that the opponent could not defend Utah passing, notably the big-strike Summerhays-to-Watkins 50-yard TD, and that Christensen would be the lead-dog runner, though here with only 50 approximate rushing yards.

Summerhays went out with an injury removing him from the playing field till Game 6. This looked like a disaster, but unfortunately for him actually remade and galvanized the team. The key was the willingness of captain Price to be a straight blocking fullback, who would run minimally and of course drop out of the Sunday morning game-report headlines. Summerhays' replacement (as a passer) Forsberg, went not to tailback but to quarterback, so that Christensen, originally the "replacement" fullback, could now play where he belonged, as the running tailback in the standard power off-tackle plays of the Notre Dame single wing formation.

Christensen had a strong arm and passed just enough to remind the defenses of this capability. But in fact, Chris could break the long run and was a dangerous receiver and kickoff returner. (On punt returns he blocked for the light backs.) On most pass plays Forsberg came back to passing tailback, and big Chris rotated to blocking fullback or went out as a dangerous receiver. All this so far omits the senior "sub", Davis, who given his first starting opportunity, became a brilliant outside runner at the wingback (right half) spot as the backup reverse threat behind Christensen's power running and Forsberg's deep passing. Defensively the big backs, Christensen and Price, would have been assigned up front as part of the linebacking while the small backs (Davis and Forsberg) protected deep against passes.



QB Davis breaks into the open field as BYU defenders pursue.

Back to the offense; nobody in the whole region, let alone the conference, could handle the resulting pass-rush combination that suddenly jelled in Game Two, as the result of the coaching adjustments to their "star" Summerhays' injury. It finished off the whole package that the big senior end George Watkins was a killer long-ball receiver. When Armstrong had a chance to try out his new combination against

weak sister Wyoming, Utah went rolling 72-0.

Against Brigham Young the balanced offense kept rolling as Christensen rushed for 188 yards and a touchdown on 38 carries, with Forsberg the big offensive story, throwing scoring passes to Watkins, Utter and Davis. For good measure Davis returned an intercepted pass 33 yards for the final touchdown.



The Utes open up a wagon-sized hole in the Colorado College defense for RB Forsberg.

With one exception we will note, Utah's games, starting with Game Two, fall into a common statistical pattern, now that Armstrong had discovered the modern coaches' dream of the whiplash combination, whereby every time the hapless defenses adjust to the outside threat (Davis' reverses or Watkins receiving) the inside game killed them and vice versa. Games two to eight the Utah offensive totals run 675-435-432-456-536-511-474. The lead rusher, every game, was big Chris, always with over 100 yards and one 200 yard game. The Watkins-Davis outside threat prevented the defenses making any over-adjustment for Christensen.

The only minor break in the season's statistical pattern occurred in Game 7, contesting the region's number two squad of 1930, Colorado, which went 6-1-1 that year. Colorado's coaches made a strategic commitment

to shut down the killer long pass, basically meaning to take the big end Watkins out of the game. In other words, make Utah grind it out more slowly on the ground. The end result of this decision to concentrate on pass defense shut Utah down to 3 of 14 tries for 40 yards, and no TD's. Watkins went a harmless two catches for 39 yards. But on the ground Utah made five different series of long rushing TD drives, as Colorado had invited them to do. And against his team's strongest rival, Christensen had his biggest rushing day of the season: 40 carries for 201 yards and 3 TD's. All this Utah ball control left the Colorado offense with a mere 93 yards total offense and no points at the end of the game.

In the season finale 41-0 romp over Utah State, Christensen racked up 144 yards and two TD's on 30 carries, but the big offensive indicator was Utah's 207 yards in passing on only nine completions. Forsberg accounted for 164 of the passing yards, including a 48-yard scoring strike to Watkins. Davis added 82 yards rushing and a pair of touchdowns.

My research source, the excellent Salt Lake Tribune, ran several postseason stories on the unsuccessful negotiations for a post-season game in 1930 with the big independent Catholic power on the Coast, St Mary's. The Gaels big line would have tested that Christensen-Forsberg-Watkins-Davis offense properly. But at the time Utah was not established as an intersectional draw yet and a post-season game would have needed to be played on the Coast, not at home, so all fell through. Utah even went so far as to offer to play any team in the country in a charity game, but still there were no takers.

The excellent coverage the Tribune gave Utah in 1930 allowed a quite accurate compilation of their statistics. As a team they rushed 325.1 yards per game, passed 137.9 (with 13 TD passes), for 463.0 yards per game total offense. Their 340 points makes them the modern scoring leader though by 1930 custom Colgate's 382 points (38.2 average) was considered first. In my files, Utah of 1930 is a very probable first or second in team rushing, passing and total offense.

<u>1930 Utah</u>	
Nevada	20-7
Wyoming	72-0
Brigham Young	34-7
Denver	59-0
Colorado State	39-0
Colorado College	41-6
Colorado Univ.	34-0
Utah State	41-0
Record	8-0-0

The sophomore Christensen rushed 221 times for 1131 yards and 10 TD's. Off completing 5 of 10 passes for 99 yards, Chris had 1,172 yards of total offense. He led the region and his conference in scoring with 13 TD's and 78 points, with the help of two TD pass receptions and one kick return TD. His scoring and his total offense are both top-10 NCAA (major players only), and in my files Chris is the modern-rule rushing leader with that 140.4 per-game average. By 1930 rules Wilbur Cartwright, Miami-Ohio, with 1,168 yards rushing in 9 games for a 129.8 average, is or is not the rushing leader, depending whether Miami was then rated small college.

There were other statistical over-achievers at Utah. The key end-receiver Watkins went 15 catches for 408 yards and 6 TD's (game one is incomplete), and it's a safe estimate to make him number two in NCAA receiving yards and TD pass catches. The main team passer, Forsberg, went 30 of 73 for approximately 660 yards and 11 TD's. I estimate number two in the NCAA for completions and passing yardage, probably number one in TD passes thrown, Forsberg was not a major enough runner to boost his total offense too far beyond his pass yards.

The senior wingback Davis led his team in interceptions with five, and was the #2 rusher on the team with 631 yards on 100 carries with 8 TD's. This omits game one where he either didn't play or was insignificant. The 631 yards rushing gives him an outside chance at Top Ten 1930 NCAA rushing.

It's a shame 1930 Utah didn't play anybody who could have stood up to them.