

## BYU Spring Preview

Written by Sean Stires

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BYU has not been a consistently featured team on the Notre Dame football schedule. Including last season's meeting in South Bend the two religiously affiliated programs have met just seven times over the years – with all seven coming since their first clash in 1992. The Fighting Irish will host the Cougars for a second straight year though in 2013. Brigham Young always has plenty of turnover on its roster each year, because players come and go on their LDS missions after their freshman season in Provo.

There will again be player turnover at BYU heading into the spring, but the team's biggest shake-ups after an 8-5 season that included a 23-6 Poinsettia Bowl win over San Diego State are in the coaching ranks. Jay Drew covers the Cougars for the Salt Lake Tribune and was able to give us great insight into those moves and more as BYU gets ready for spring football.

### Coaching Staff

Bronco Mendenhall, who just completed his eighth season as BYU's head coach, did something nearly unprecedented for a college football coach after the season – he released every member of his offensive coaching staff from their positions and told them they could all reapply for their

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jobs if they still wanted to have them.

“A lot of people thought it was an awkward way of doing things,” Drew said of the purge. “The bottom line was Brandon Doman, the former BYU quarterback who had been the offensive coordinator for two years, and it was basically a signal that Mendenhall wasn’t happy with the job he did.”

The new BYU offensive coordinator is Robert Anae, who spent the last two years at Arizona. Prior to that thought Anae was BYU’s offensive coordinator from 2005-2010. Arizona ranked No. 7 in the nation in total offense in 2012. Anae left BYU under similar circumstances after the 2010 season. Drew said it is believed there was a rift with longtime BYU assistant Lance Reynolds, who is among the Cougar coaches who will not be back in 2013.

“Bronco basically turned it over entirely to Robert Anae and said go ahead and bring in your guys, whichever guys you want,” Drew continued. “Basically that’s what he’s doing. He’s got free reign to assemble his offensive coaches.”

The new coaches added to the staff are Mark Atuaia and Garrett Tujague – both former BYU players. Atuaia was a running back for the Cougars, while Tujague played offensive line. More hires are expected to be made in the near future and position assignments are expected to be made at that time.

### Offense

The Brigham Young offense loses four starters – the biggest is at the quarterback. Riley Nelson and James Lark took nearly every snap for the Cougars in 2012 and both were seniors – leaving a gaping hole at the most important position on the field. The two combined for 2,789 yards, 21 touchdowns and 15 interceptions in 2012. Nelson started against Notre Dame, but was hampered by a lingering back injury throughout the year. With those two gone freshman Taysom Hill is expected to be at the top of the depth chart heading into next fall, but he will be limited in the spring with an injury of his own.

“He was injured midway through the season on the last play of the game – a needless play,” Drew began to explain. “They should have been taking a knee, but instead they had him try to run the ball up the middle against Utah State and he blew out his knee. They say he’ll be back in time for a little bit of spring ball.”

Drew says BYU’s only other option is a group of four “really inexperienced guys” if Hill cannot play next season. Included in that group is early enrollee Billy Green, who just started classes this semester after leaving high school early. Notre Dame was among the schools that was recruiting Green at one point.

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“Expectations are high for him,” Drew said of Green. “He’s a highly touted freshman, so we’ll see how he does.”

The other position battle to watch on the offensive side of the ball is at running back where Mike Alisa will try to get his job back after suffering a broken arm early last season. Jamaal Williams stepped-in as a true freshman after Alisa’s injury and did a solid job.

“BYU only uses one tailback,” Drew began on the situation in the Cougar backfield. “They use a fullback as just a blocker, so I doubt they’ll go by committee at running back. They always kind of pick a guy and go with him.”

Williams led the Cougars with 775 rushing yards and 12 touchdowns in 13 games in 2012. Alisa rushed for 222 yards and a TD in just five games before his injury.

The key spot BYU does not have to worry about filling is at wide receiver, where senior Cody Hoffman returns for his last year. Hoffman is already the most prolific receiver in school history. The 6’4” senior to be reeled-in 100 receptions for 1,248 yards and 11 touchdowns last fall to bring his career totals to 203 catches, 2,718 yards and 28 TDs in his first three years in Provo.

“He’s probably their most dynamic offensive player,” Drew said of Hoffman. “There are a lot of happy people around Provo that he’s coming back, because the offense without him would have been pretty average this last year.”

### Defense

There is good news and bad news for the Cougars on the defensive side of the ball. The good news is linebacker Kyle Van Noy decided to wait another year to enter the NFL draft to return for his senior season. Van Noy returned both a fumble and an interception for touchdowns in BYU’s Poinsettia Bowl win. He recorded 53 tackles with team-highs for 22.0 tackles for loss and 13.0 sacks last season.

The bad news for Brigham Young is Van Noy will have six new starters around him on defense, which finished the season ranked third in total yards allowed (266.), next fall, meaning all those holes must begin to be filled this spring. The most notable losses for the Cougars are leading tackler, Brand Ogletree (102 tackles, 13.5 TFL), free safety Joe Sampson, their best cover cornerback Preston Hadley and defensive end Ezekiel Ansah (62 tackles, 13.0 TFL, 4.5 sacks). Drew says figuring out immediately what players might step into those roles is a bit of a challenge at BYU.

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“BYU is kind of a difficult team to keep track of depth chart issues, because almost 75-percent of the players go on mission,” Drew commented. “You always have to try to remember who was good as a freshman before they went on a two-year mission and ‘oh yeah, he’s back this year’. Then of course their bodies change, so a kid who left as a cornerback comes back and he’s more of a safety or linebacker build. It really fluctuates a lot.”

The bottom line for the Cougars, per Drew, is they will lack a lot of experience on defense in 2013 due to their key players that have graduated.

### Special Teams

Brigham Young has just one loss among its specialists, but it is a fairly significant one. Second-team All-American Riley Stephenson has graduated. Stephenson averaged 45.4 yards and pinned opponents inside their 20-yard line 30 times last season. Stephenson also took-on some field goal duties, going 4-of-6, when kicker Justin Sorenson struggled last year. Sorenson missed a key field goal in Notre Dame’s 17-14 win over the Cougars on Oct. 20.

“He’s back, but has battled injuries throughout his career,” Drew said of Sorenson. “They’re brought in a juco transfer to maybe do the punting and the punting and the place kicking. We’ll

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see how he turns out.”