

The USC Trojans' Painful Season Has Little to Do with Football



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(Photo by Otto Greule Jr/Getty Images)

Forget for a moment about the Trojans' annual loss to an unranked conference foe, which will probably cost them a shot at the national championship.

Put on the back burner a disappointing offense, which was supposed to be the strength of this year's Trojan team.

Set aside the fundamental flaws that saw the men of Troy commit 13 penalties against an outmanned Washington Cougar team last Saturday.

These are just transitory concerns that can—and probably will—be corrected in the upcoming weeks as a largely young Trojan team continues to mature.

For the Trojans, even the atypical rash of on-field injuries, which has seen players such as Hebron (Loni) Fangupo, who broke his leg, and Marshall Jones, who fractured a vertebrae in his neck (both injuries occurred last Saturday), while unfortunate, can still be reconciled because they occurred on the playing field.

No, the Trojans can deal with all of these things because they, for the most part, controlled their destiny in regard to circumstances.

What the Trojans can't control, and what they must deal with now, is the uncontrollable sweep of fate.

Late in the summer, Frankie Telfort, one of their star linebacker recruits in 2008, was found to have a serious congenital heart defect which has forced the young man to quit the game he loves.

Telfort, a heat-seeking, 4.4 40-yard dash missile, was being counted on to play serious minutes both at linebacker and special teams.

A bit later, Blake Ayles, the highly regarded sophomore tight end, was diagnosed with an irregular heartbeat, which necessitated an operation in order for him to continue his football career.

Fortunately, Ayles procedure went as planned and the young man recovered.

Blake Ayles is now back to playing football and is contributing very nicely as evidenced by his long reception last week against the Cougars.

Now, Stafon Johnson, an emotional leader and one of the first running backs in the Trojans' rotation is laying in a southern California hospital recovering from a serious weight room accident that left him with a crushed larynx, amongst other injuries.

Johnson, whose doctors expect him to recover fully, will not play again this year and his future as a football player is murky at best.

Stafon Johnson has gone from a malcontent, who spent his first year and a half in Pete Carroll's doghouse, to an emotional leader for the Trojans.

His example as a "team first" guy, has been an inspiration for the team and he will hold a prominent place in their hearts when the Trojans meet the Cal Bears this Saturday in Berkeley.

This rash of accidents and illness are completely out of the Trojans hands in terms of football.

More to the point, football has nothing to do with the pain that the Trojans have experienced in this heartbreaking season.

No amount of practice or studying of the playbook can fix the hurt that the Trojans have felt in this young season.

If the Trojans can somehow find a way to repair both their football related problems and get through what has been a brutal off-the-field season, it will be a tribute to both the team and the coaching staff.

The road in front of USC is littered with football related fundamental problems, all of which can be fixed, and also with the painful shards of fate which the Trojans have no control over.

What lies ahead will be the measure of what this Trojan team is made of.

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