

Posted on Sat, Apr. 15, 2006

ARENA LEAGUE NOTEBOOK

Offensive specialist, QB key to success

Top arena football teams have talented thrower, receiver

By BRADFORD DOOLITTLE
The Kansas City Star

A key difference between arena football and the stadium game is the focal point of a team's offense.

In the NFL, there are a number of different systems. Some teams feature a dominant running back, as the Chiefs have in Larry Johnson. On more passing-dominant teams, the focal point is usually the quarterback, who uses a crew of receivers to exploit whatever mismatches emerge on the field, a la Peyton Manning.

In the AFL, the focal point for pretty much all offenses is much more defined. Two players — the quarterback and the offensive specialist — play on every offensive down and concentrate on scoring. No defense for these guys.

As a result, the success of the QB/OS tandem generally dictates the success of an arena offense. Everything else spins off of that.

Over the last three years, there has been no better tandem than Colorado QB John Dutton and OS Damian Harrell. Not surprisingly, the Crush has fielded one of the dominant offenses in the league and has won a lot of games.

"If you look at the great teams in this league, like Colorado, Dutton has Harrell," Brigade coach Kevin Porter said. "At Georgia, (Matt) Nagy has Chris Jackson. There has to be a special relationship between those two guys. Not to diminish the contributions of the other two receivers, but the presence of that one guy makes the other players better."

This season has been the best yet for the Dutton-to-Harrell combo, as Harrell is on pace to set an AFL record for touchdowns.

"It starts up front," Dutton said. "You've got to give the big guys credit. On the other hand, Damian is the OS. He's the guy we're going to. Teams know that, and we're not hiding it. He and I have to be on the same page. We have a great relationship that way."

For much of the season, the Brigade struggled to establish that kind tandem, first with former quarterback Andy Kelly and later with his replacement, Chris Sanders. As a result, the offense played as if it were, well, a little blurry.

Enter Aaron Boone. Since Boone, an offensive specialist acquired from the Philadelphia Soul, joined the Brigade, the Sanders-to-Boone combo has clicked for 24 receptions and seven touchdowns in two games.

"In this league, the offensive specialist is the guy who is going to play every offensive snap," Porter said. "So when he's out there, he has to be a factor. Aaron has come in and really solidified the position and really solidified Chris' confidence. Now he's got a guy that, no matter what, is going to make a play. That kind of confidence between the quarterback and the offensive specialist is critical in this league."

‡ **PLAYOFF UPDATE:** Only five weeks to go in the regular season, and the playoff race is definitely muddled.

A refresher: The AFL expanded to a 12-team playoff format this season. That's six from each conference — the two division winners and four wild cards.

Through 11 weeks, only Dallas and Colorado built up any sizable margin for error. The Desperados lead the Eastern Division by three games. Colorado has a narrow one-game lead over Nashville in the Central Division, but with 4-7 Chicago currently occupying the sixth slot in the American Conference, the Crush might even clinch a playoff spot this weekend.

‡ **AROUND THE AFL:** Kelly was picked up by the Utah Blaze this week. Kelly will back up Jason Gesser, who was replacing Joe Germaine at quarterback. Germaine has been out because of a broken finger on his passing hand. ... Philadelphia's playoff hopes took a hit this week when the team placed starting quarterback Tony Graziani on injured reserve. Graziani suffered a torn hamstring last Sunday against Chicago. ... Austin's Damon Mason, already the all-time AFL leader in tackles, is about to become the first player to surpass 800 tackles. Mason enters the weekend with 791.5. ... Chicago coach Mike Hohensee will try for the third time this weekend to become the third AFL coach to win 100 games.

THE STAR'S POWER RANKINGS

TEAM	SCR%	STP%	OFFe	DEFe	EFF
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Georgia	73.5%	40.2%	4.80	1.98	6.86
Dallas	69.2%	41.9%	4.35	2.09	6.40
Austin	64.5%	40.5%	3.99	2.03	6.10
Tampa Bay	66.9%	38.8%	4.16	1.77	6.03
Colorado	68.5%	34.9%	4.37	1.71	6.03
Orlando	63.7%	40.5%	3.80	2.11	5.93
Columbus	59.3%	46.4%	3.39	2.40	5.85
Nashville	60.0%	42.2%	3.69	2.14	5.78
Chicago	67.2%	34.6%	4.03	1.66	5.71
San Jose	63.6%	34.6%	4.05	1.68	5.71
Utah	60.7%	36.8%	3.82	1.88	5.62
Las Vegas	58.1%	35.8%	3.66	1.84	5.58
Philadelphia	59.2%	42.1%	3.54	2.04	5.52
New York	58.8%	32.8%	3.74	1.64	5.40
Arizona	57.1%	38.0%	3.51	1.84	5.32
Los Angeles	68.0%	26.8%	3.87	1.36	5.12
Kansas City	55.2%	31.3%	3.29	1.67	5.07
Grand Rapids	54.5%	34.3%	3.29	1.74	5.04
LEAGUE	62.6%	37.4%	3.85	1.86	5.71

SCR: Scoring percentage; **STP:** Defensive stopping percentage; **OFF:** Average point value of offensive possession; **DEF:** Average point value of defensive possession; **EFF:** Overall team efficiency, calculated as sum of OFF and DEF. EFF is adjusted for strength of schedule.

Rankings through week 11.

(Formulas by Bradford Doolittle.)

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