
Posted on Fri, May. 12, 2006

Brigade's year in review

By SAM MELLINGER
The Kansas City Star

Wild success? Terrible failure? Somewhere in between? The Brigade's inaugural season is just like that old line about beauty being in the eye of the beholder.

Judging by the box office, it's hard to imagine expecting more out of the Brigade than averaging 15,234 fans, third best in the league and 23 percent above the AFL average, and selling \$223,000 of merchandise before last weekend.

Judging by the standings, it's hard to imagine expecting less out of the Brigade than 3-12, entering the last week guaranteed of at least tying for the worst record among the league's 18 teams.

Not surprisingly, Brigade officials are concentrating more on the good than the bad, at least publicly.

"We feel like we got to go to a dance and somebody gave us a beautiful suit to wear," majority owner Chris Likens said. "But we haven't had a chance to pay for that suit yet."

Likens and the rest of the organization have plenty of reason to smile. AFL commissioner David Baker called the Brigade's home opener — a capacity crowd of 16,523 — the best atmosphere he'd seen in a decade.

More than 3,000 season tickets sold before the team did any real advertising. Fans waited nearly an hour some nights for the team's regular postgame autograph session. A few even made every home game Halloween, dressing up like an airline pilot (he goes by "Wingman"), Darth Vader ("Striker") or a supersized B.J. Cohen with a cape on the back (we didn't get his name).

After spending the preseason and much of the early going talking about playoff expectations, the Brigade's company line changed to pointing out how it was forced to throw the team together in four months. Either way, Likens is on record as saying anything less than the playoffs in 2007 will be a failure.

"If we don't, there's only one person to blame and that's me," said Likens, who became the team's official majority owner and decision-maker in March. "That's it. That's my responsibility. If I didn't get the coaches what they need, or the players they need, that's my fault."

With that in mind, let's take a look back and forward with the Brigade.

Say it with us: It's the Brigade

Not the Brigades. Everyone from ownership to players mispronounced the team name all season. You could hear the "s" at the break of practice huddles, and you could even see it on the charter bus that took the team to and from its season opener in Dallas. B-R-I-G-A-D-E. If you need a reminder, read the 25-foot print in the end zone.

Why Brigade support already peaked

Word around the AFL is that most teams do well with attendance the first year, then have a drop of about 20 percent the second year. Entertaining as it might be, the AFL still suffers after the novelty of cruddy defense wears off.

Why Brigade support will continue

You mean, besides that football fans here are used to paying to watch bad defense? Well, Chris Likens thinks Kansas City is home to a special breed of sports fan, especially when it comes to football. He might have a point.

Know your role

If there's any thought — even just a smidge — that football fans are converting from the Chiefs to the Brigade, slow

down. Fans screamed "BRIGADE!" at the end of the national anthem in the season opener, but the rest of the way, as the losses piled up and Chiefs' training camp got closer, the national anthem at Kemper sounded an awful lot like Arrowhead, with fans finishing the last line with "CHIEFS!"

Lin Elliott, you're not alone

Brigade fans proved themselves to be just as brutal on kickers as their Arrowhead Stadium counterparts. The front office thought enough of Tim Seder to trade for him in the preseason, but after some early struggles, Seder was on the wrong end of some loud, sometimes R-rated and oftentimes vicious, taunts. And that was just during warm-ups.

Talk about fan-friendly

Darrin Butler, a.k.a. Wingman, had a military-style dog tag made for Brigade lineman B.J. Cohen. It reads "The General," and Cohen wears it under his jersey during games. "When people come out after the game for autographs, it's never anything negative," Cohen says. "It's all positive, like, 'Don't worry about it, we're glad you're here, take your time, we'll be here next week.' That makes you want to play harder and really want to win for them."

Team MVP

The easy answer is **Jerel Myers (above)**. And he's worthy, entering the final game with 115 catches for 1,193 yards and 16 touchdowns, all team highs. But Aaron Boone's six games were more productive on average, and besides, should the MVP of a 3-12 team really be based on stats? The choice here is B.J. Cohen, the team's unquestioned leader who helped the coaching staff maintain order during a crazy inaugural season.

Best moment

Lucas Yarnell, the 315-pound lineman who sometimes refers to himself as "The Vending Machine" and is perhaps best known for getting kicked in the you-know-whats in "The Longest Yard," scored the first touchdown of his life in the home game against Tampa Bay. Tim Seder went wide right on a long field goal at the end of the half, setting off a scrum. Abdul-Salam Noah dived in and knocked the ball loose, and Yarnell fell on it in the end zone.

Worst moment

The halftime mascot game against Georgia. Good gracious. Maybe it looked good on paper to have Neil Smith playing quarterback opposite "Survivor" winner Danni Boatwright, but in practice, it looked like a bad cartoon. Smith took snaps from Wonder Bread, and Boatwright kept exchanging late hits with a giant cupcake. Or maybe it was an ice cream cone. Whatever.

Best play

Boone had a Tecmo Bowl-moment on a 9-yard pass-and-catch at Nashville. Boone was immediately wrapped up by a Kats defender, and officials ran over and appeared close to blowing the play dead. Boone, though, fought through that tackle and two others on his way to a 39-yard touchdown. Chris Sanders gets special mention for knocking Colorado defensive specialist Rashad Floyd back 5 yards on a touchdown run.

We'd like to see ...

The Brigade get a permanent practice home. As it stood, practices were split between Kemper and SportsCity in Blue Springs, with a dash of Hale Arena thrown in. Kemper's turf is hard on the knees, SportsCity's low overhang makes long passes and kicks impossible, and Hale smells like, well, horse doo. The team is negotiating with the Soccer Dome off Front Street for a practice facility.

Good sign

The on-field struggles were obvious, but the team avoided name-calling, finger-pointing and, perhaps most important, a loss of hope. Not only that, but a bulk of the Brigade's most important players have agreed to stick around at least through next year, including Cohen, potential star James Jordan, and quarterbacks Chris Sanders and Raymond Philyaw. Interestingly, Jordan said a big factor in his decision not to return to New Orleans was his pastor's distaste for the nickname: VooDoo.

SEASON FINALE

■ **WHO:** Brigade at Utah Blaze

■ **WHEN/WHERE:**

8 tonight at the Delta Center in Salt Lake City

■ **TV/RADIO:** Channel 62; KCXM (97.3 FM)

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