



**Arena football**

**Blaze: Trio shine in down season**

Three Blaze receivers are having career years in stats despite team's poor record

**By Jay Drew**  
**The Salt Lake Tribune**  
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As far as nicknames go, the trio of Utah Blaze receivers seemingly could come up with something better than the "Big Three."

But that fits, especially because Huey Whittaker is 6-foot-5 and J.J. McKelvey and Aaron Boone are 6-3, extremely tall for receivers by Arena Football League standards.

"When we get ready to go on the field, we say 'Big Three.' That's about it," McKelvey said.

Together, they make up by far the most prolific group of receivers in the league, as any quick glance at the league receiving leaders list will show.

All three are having career seasons, with at least 100 receptions and more than 1,100 receiving yards apiece with three regular-season games remaining.

"To be honest, I have never seen anything like it before," said McKelvey, who credited the Blaze's offensive line, quarterback Joe Germaine and even the defense for the threesome's success. "I have never even heard of it before. It's pretty remarkable. To see those numbers that the three of us are putting up, I am amazed that we are, what, 3-10."

Therein lies the mystery.

How can a team with three receivers who rank among the top eight in the league in receiving yards have just three wins this far into the season?

"It is pretty strange," Blaze coach Danny White said. "When you see a receiver have a great, great year, they are usually on a losing team. We haven't had the luxury of running the ball at the end of games because we haven't been far ahead. As a result, our receivers are getting a lot of catches. So I guess in a way it is a sign of a team that has struggled."

Still, White says he's never seen it before in his 16 years in the AFL - or as a member of the NFL's Dallas Cowboys, for that matter. He has also never seen a season in which two receivers on the same team (Boone and Whittaker) were tied for the league lead in receptions with just a few games remaining.

"The positive for them is that they have absolutely been the bright spot of the season for us," White said. "They've carried us."

Whittaker, a South Florida product who was picked up midway through the 2007 season, is No. 3 in the league in receiving yards (1,367), tied for first in receptions (114) and tied for sixth in touchdowns (26).

The Blaze traded lineman Steve Konopka to the Philadelphia Soul for the rights to McKelvey in the offseason. The upbeat Clemson product is ninth in the league in receptions (100), eighth in receiving yards (1,166) and third in touchdowns (33).

"I had real high expectations for Huey, based on what we say last year," White said. "[McKelvey] was an unknown to us. To say the least, we've been pleasantly surprised with those guys."

As for Boone, a local boy from Millard High and Snow College who graduated from Kentucky, he is performing like the Blaze believed he would prior to signing him before his injury-plagued 2007 season. He is sixth in the league in receiving yards (1,249), tied for 26th in touchdowns (19) and tied for first with Whittaker in receptions (114).

"It's been weird," Boone said last week. "It doesn't feel like it is an 'up' year for anybody, because of our record. But yeah, it is pretty rare that you have three receivers right up there at the top."

By comparison, only three other teams - Cleveland, Philly and San Jose - have more than one 1,000-yard receiver - and they have two apiece. Only seven other players in the league have 100 or more receptions.

"Wow. I didn't realize that. That's awesome," said Germaine when he heard the receiving numbers that have helped him lead the league in passing yards, completions and touchdown passes. "You know what? That's a pretty great testament to what great talents they are. We came into the year with some [question marks] at receiver, and those guys have been amazing."

The question as the season winds down is whether the Big Three will return for 2009 intact. McKelvey is a free agent when the season ends, while Boone's contract expires in 2009 and Whittaker's in 2010.

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**Utah Blaze at Grand Rapids Rampage**

**When:** Sunday, noon

**Radio:** 1320 AM

**Records:** Blaze (3-10), Rampage (3-9)

**Utah's 'Big Three'**

- \* Only 10 players in the Arena Football League have 100 or more receptions, and three play for the Utah Blaze.
- \* Only 12 players have 1,100 or more receiving yards, and three play for the Blaze.
- \* Only three teams - Cleveland, Philadelphia and San Jose - have two 1,000-yard receivers. The Blaze have three.

### **Where the 'Big Three' rank**

#### **RECEPTIONS**

##### **Rank Name Total**

T1 Aaron Boone 114  
T1 Huey Whittaker 114  
9 J.J. McKelvey 100

#### **RECEIVING YARDS**

##### **Rank Name Total**

3 Whittaker 1,367  
6 Boone 1,249  
8 McKelvey 1,166

#### **TDs**

##### **Rank Name Total**

3 McKelvey 33  
T6 Whittaker 26  
T26 Boone 19

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