Game Day Kaimin, November 10, 2001

Associated Students of the University of Montana
Andy Thompson carries on a family tradition in football that goes back nearly 50 years.

All in the family

MONTANA VS. Weber State
By Chad Dundas

I

n the fall of 1998, Eastern Washington head coach Mike Kramer sat in the Thompson family living room in Walla Walla, Wash., and told Andy Thompson he could see him playing strong side linebacker in the Big Sky Conference. Andy Thompson, then a high school senior, just smiled and nodded at the man.

When the coach's recruiting trip was over and Kramer had left, Andy looked at his parents and said: "Well, I guess I'm not going there." Where would he? Thompson was 6 feet 2 inches, 185 pounds and a standout high school quarterback. The lion's share of small universities in the Northwest were courting his school and eventually four major schools were showing some mild interest.

Linebacker? Kramer was obviously off his rocker.

Eventually, the University of Montana Grizzlies won the recruiting battle over Andy. Kramer's Eagles were left out in the cold.

Both moved on. Not long after, Kramer split EUW for the Big Sky and worked at California, and is currently in the process of turning around a program that once seemed on the verge of collapse at Andy Thompson? Well, Andy starts for the Big Sky's best defense ... at strong side linebacker.

"I won't give the guy any credit," jokes Mark Thompson, Andy's older brother and owner of an insurance business. "I wasn't a coaching genius (let alone publicly) could get you hung, it might be safer to think of Kramer's premonition as just a lucky guess. It doesn't seem possible, after all, that anyone could predict places on the field Andy's college football career would take him.

Family Matters

When it comes to football tradition, the Thompson family can match pedigrees with just about any clan in the region. Andy's grandfather, Roy, started coaching at Astoria High School in Oregon in 1962. He went on to win the Beaver state's prep championship in 1961 with Roseburg High School, and Norm Turner, who in 1955 turned the ball to a wide receiver named Bobby Moore. Moore would later change his name to Ahmad Rashad.

The coaching staff at Oregon at the time was a who's who of future football greatness with the likes of John Robinson, George Seifert, John Gunther, Cunningham and Bruce Synder on board.

After graduation, Mark started coaching at Portland State, under Mouse Davis, the inventor of the run-and-shoot offense. Davis taught his offense to people like the Hawini's June Jones, former Houston Oilers coach Jack Pardee, NFL journeyman and current HBO television personality Jerry Glavine and the Denver Broncos' Mike Shanahan.

Future NFL quarterback Neil Lomax played at PSU during Mark's work there, for a three-year stint then. When Davis took a job with Roger Thayer's program at the University of California, Mark Thompson left for the state of Washington.

Coincidentally, the man, who also took over for Davis at PSU was a guy named Don Reed. In 1981, while Reed was still five years away from revo­lutionizing the Grizzly football ... and by extension, the entire Big Sky Conference — Mark began coaching at Walla Walla High, where he still mentors the O-line. He also owns his own insurance business.

The Thompson brothers — Andy, older brother Matt and younger brother David — became mainstays at Walla Walla High's practices as soon as they were old enough to be trusted on the sidelines. Mark says Andy became a ball boy at age 6 and never really left practice until he graduated from WWHS 12 years later.

"Andy was always very aggressive," Mark says. "He's always been on the sidelines. He knew all the coaches ... It's always been a family deal because the coaches around here at the time made it a family thing."

Matt Thompson, who went on to blaze a trail to ... for his brother as a Griz wide receiver from 1997-99, remem­bers that Andy's interest in football always outdistanced his own.

"Football was always number one for Andy," Matt says. "As kids, we used to go to prac­tice after school. I'd always get bored after an hour or so and start making a fort out of the tackling dummies. Andy would always be spotting the ball for the offense or getting water for the guys."

As kids, both Andy and Matt attended regional num­ber sports functions, like Mac Bledsoe's All-Western Football Camp. There they received instruction from pros like Fred Biletnikoff, Ronnie Lott, Chris Chandler, Warren Moon and Drew Bledsoe.

"I learned a lot from all those guys," Andy says. "At the time, they were so personable that you didn't really think about (their fame). You just think about them as another coach. But when you look back on it and you're really thankful that you were fortunate enough to have guys like that around."

When Andy got his own shot to play at Walla Walla High School, he immediately took over backyard duties for the freshman team. Matt Thompson, a senior at the time, recalls that Andy's frosh team only lost one game. It was doubly impressive, Matt says, because Andy was also calling the plays.

"Halfway through the season ... on the field, Mark says. "He only made one bad call that season. On a fourth-and-two at a cru­cial point in a game he decided to throw a fade and overthrew the receiver. My dad and grandfather gave him an ear­ful."

"Compromise for playing time as a quarterback was stiff at Walla Walla. Andy was a year behind Jared Jonas, who went on to be a Parade All­American and attend Florida State. Jonas later transferred to Oregon State and also plays baseball for the Seattle Mariners in the summer. Andy says he wasn't frus­trated spending most of his high school years as a backup. He saw plenty of action on defense and his friendship with Jonas was too strong to harbor any bitterness.

"He was my best friend," Andy says. "We learned a lot from each other ... I think just waiting for your chance was my story in high school. My senior year was my time to play quarterback and be a leader on the team."

When Jonas graduated, Andy took over and performed admirably. His senior year he passed for 2,600 yards and 26 touchdowns. He broke Drew Bledsoe's record for single­game touchdown passes with six. He was named first team all-state and the Big Nine Conference's "Offensive Player of the Year." At the same time, playing at safety, he led the team in tackles. He had a school-record 26 in one game.

The colleges came calling. When Andy settled on UM, with Matt already a Grizzly, Montana's coaching staff said they didn't know what position they wanted him to play.

"The coaching staff was always very realistic about it," Mark Thompson says. "They told him they didn't know what he'd be. They recruited him as an athlete. They said his thing would be to just feel it out and see where he fit." At the time, no one knew how right those coaches were.

Finding out where Andy fit would turn into a three-year ordeal.

Compromising Positions

Andy came into Montana as a quarterback, expecting to redshirt, learn the offense and see very few reps, even in prac­tice. But two weeks after he arrived in Missoula, a shoulder injury to safety John Hefty left the Griz shorthanded in the defensive secondary. Andy was the obvious choice to fill-in, burning his redshirt year in the process.

"It was one of those things where I just wanted to be getting on the field," Andy says. "If I think 11. you ask every freshman who comes in, every­body wants to play. At the time I really wanted to do it. I had my brother here and I wanted to play with him, that was a big thing. Looking back right after the season I wish I would have redshirted." Once Hefty recovered and the Griz secured the secondary, Andy didn't get regular playing time at safety. The following year, Mick Denneny's outgoing coaching staff asked him to move back to quarterback.

Andy jumped at the chance and, through appealing to the NCAA, got his redshirt year back.

"Looking back on it now, that redshirt year is huge," Andy says. "If I was a junior this year everything would be totally different for me. But now I have two more years and it's exciting. You're only going to get better." Last season, the incoming coaches gave Andy a shot to...
Backups to take stage when Griz battle Weber

Carl Hennell
GameDay Kaimin

Although Saturday’s Griz game against Weber State could be dubbed the “battle of the backups,” points could come at a dime a dozen.

Both starting quarterbacks will probably nurse injuries on the sidelines as both defenses try to cover up their weaknesses.

The Griz (5-0, 8-1) defense has been the team’s bread and butter in a conference full of offensive firepower, but the secondary is currently pocked with injuries. And WSU (-2-4, 3-6) is second in the Big Sky Conference in passing.

“We’re pretty thin on defense and a little nicked-up in the secondary right now,” said Griz coach Joe Glenn (21-31). “We last Joel Rosenberg, Vernon Smith won’t play. Johnnie (Peeples) isn’t practicing this week. And when you don’t practice all week, it shows come game time.”

Fortunately for the Griz, the quarterback responsible for leading the Wildcats to a second-ranked passing attack will be on the bench. Insert the 6-6 sophomore Tate Bennett, who has completed only 40 of 85 passes for 473 yards with five interceptions and three touchdowns, and it’s a good bet the Griz will see a heavy dose of senior running back Johnnie Gray III.

At 5-9, 180-pounds, Gray averages more than 200 yards per game. His 1,259 rushing yards places him second in the conference and seventh in the nation. And with 41 receptions, he is WSU’s primary receiver.

“He faster than the dickens,” said Glenn. “The thing he can do that’s scary is he can just about out-athlete anybody on the whole field. He’ll start right, he’ll stop in front of an outside zone, then reverse his field and beat everyone around back to the corner and run 75 yards for a touchdown and nobody else can catch him. He’s an incredible athlete.”

Gray is in front of Yohance Humphrey by 80 rushing yards this season. With 1,179 rushing yards, Humphrey needs 99 yards to break his 1999 single-season UM rushing record. With 241 career points, he is 89 points away from the UM record.

The Griz (5-0, 8-1) defense is second in the Big Sky Conference in rushing defense, allowing more than 250 yards per game, and second-to-last in total defense.

The Griz are second in the conference in rush defense and third in total defense.

“They’re going to get Johnnie Gray the ball,” said Glenn. “He is the premier offensive player in the league, as far as everything he does. I think the real key for us is to contain him. If he rushes for 140 yards and gets another 45 through the air, it might be more than we can withstand.

While the Griz are confident in their defense, they know they must weather an injury to quarterback John Humphrey; the quarterback responsible for leading the Wildcats to a second-ranked passing attack will be on the bench.

“I’m hoping that after they bust to Butte and stay there Thursday night, then come over to Missoula Friday, by the time kickoff comes Saturday, after their four-overtime win last Saturday, that wears on them a little bit,” Glenn said.

UM leads the series 28-11 and has won 10 of the last 12 meetings.

“The one thing about Montana is that they always find a way, and have a tremendous will to win,” said Graybeal. “They are as good a home team as there is in the country and have some of the best, if not the best fans in Division I-AA.”

Montana vs. Weber State

GAME PLAN

**U of M @ MSC**

(Students & Faculty)

(Missoula Salad Company)

**GAME TIME**

(Hour of Operation)

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The Weber State Wildcats are preparing to face Montana, who are coming off a 5-9 season in the Big Sky Conference. Montana, led by quarterback Brandon Neill, has not impressed many this season. They have a talented defensive line, but their secondary struggles to hold back opposing offenses.

On the offensive side, Montana has some weapons in wide receiver Johnnie Gray III and running back Jonny Matich. Gray has been a consistent performer for the Grizzlies, while Matich has shown flashes of brilliance. However, Montana's running game has struggled to produce consistently.

The key to the game will be the defensive line and the ability to get pressure on Montana's quarterbacks. The Wildcats have a solid pass rush led by defensive end Randy Spencer and linebacker Jonny Match. If they can disrupt Montana's passing game, they have a good chance to win the game.

Overall, this will be a test for both teams, but the Wildcats appear to have the edge in terms of talent and experience. If they can execute their game plan and play with intensity, they should be able to come out on top.
The Montana State Bobcats won't know until after their game against Idaho State has ended if their Kate-Moss-slim hopes of a Big Sky Conference title still exist. To have any chance of winning their first conference title since 1984, the 'Cats must beat ISU and 3-6 Weber State must upset No. 1 and heavily favored Montana in Missoula Saturday.

If both MSU and Weber win, the 'Cats will play the Griz for the conference title in Bozeman next week. But first and foremost for the 'Cats championship dreams is getting past Idaho State. Montana State has dropped its last two conference games. A 35-28 loss to Northern Arizona and a 33-22 loss to Portland State, both in Missoula Saturday.

If Weber State has come down the stretch limping losing their last six games by a combined total of 285-99, and things don't look any better for the remainder of the season as they close out with games against NAU this week and Portland State next week.

GDK wonders how cool it would be if NAU got to come up to Missoula for a first-round playoff game.

GDK Prediction: 49-10. NAU into the playoffs.

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The Montana State Bobcats have threatened to ruin an otherwise remarkable season has Northern Arizona's hopes for the Bobcats. The loss of Etu Molden struggles to stay in bounds against Portland State.
Today they are the Pride. Two years ago they were the Flying Dutchmen. But whatever Hofstra may be known as next year doesn’t matter, because to folks here at GameDay Kaimin, they will forever be known as “the bastards who beat us at home in the pouring rain and freezing cold to open last season.”

Of course, after that 10-9 loss, Montana went on to win 15 straight before falling in the national title game to Georgia Southern. Hofstra didn’t do too badly last year either. The Flying Dutchmen went 9-4 last season, losing in the 1-AA quarterfinals to eventual champion Georgia Southern 48-20.

New season and new name, same results for Hofstra this season. Opponents’ defenses have been murdered by the Pride this season, and all the evidence points to “The Butler,” as in Rocky Butler. Hofstra’s Payton Award candidate and preseason All-American has ripped through defenses with stunning efficiency this season, throwing for close to 2,900 yards and a staggering 26 touchdowns in nine games thus far. The senior signal caller has completed 174 of 276 passes while throwing only three interceptions.

Butler has thrown for more than 300 yards in all but two games this season, including a career-high 382-yard, three-touchdown effort against the University of Massachusetts. Butler’s favorite targets this season have been Kahmal Roy and Charlie Adams. Roy has caught 58 balls for 1,092 yards and 13 touchdowns while Adams has 50 receptions, 937 yards and nine scores. When Butler isn’t airing it out, Trevor Dimmie has been solid running the ball. Dimmie has rushed 129 times for 597 yards and nine touchdowns.

With Butler doing his best to make sure that the Payton Award does not go to a running back this season, Hofstra’s offensive numbers have been ridiculous. The Pride is averaging an absurd 38.1 points per game. St. Louis Rams, eat your hearts out. Hofstra has scored more than 40 points in three times this year, including a non-conference football-like 51-44 win over Maine University.

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Get in where you fit in

"That was a dream, that was something I always wanted to do. With the coaches saying 'We think you can be the quarterback, or at least compete for the job.' Yes, I was very excited."

"Since I've been a junior in high school, I've never really been told what position I was going to play," he says. "It's always been what the team needed. I've never had set in my mind where I should be playing."

Joe Glenn's coaching staff had installed a new defensive scheme that rendered most of what Andy had learned as a freshman safety useless. He set about learning the playbook (again) and by the end of spring ball had emerged as the starting strong side linebacker.

"It's been going well for the most part," he says. "I've just been concentrating on getting better every week. Every Saturday I learn something new."

Andy says he's happy to be playing as a sophomore. He contends he's come to a point where he doesn't even miss the offensive side of the ball. Now he uses the knowledge he gleaned from playing quarter-back against rival signal callers.

The Thompson family is doing its part to keep the family tradition rolling. Little brother David is a senior wide receiver and defensive back at Walla Walla High. The team just won its first playoff game. The Thompson parents woke between 4 and 5 a.m. Saturday mornings to drive to Missoula to watch Andy play. At this point in Andy's career, Mark Thompson says he's pretty much content to play the roll of supportive father rather than high school coach.

"I'll only help him if he asks me to," Mark says. "We play (high school) games Friday night, so it's always very relaxing to come over on Saturday and just sit in the stands and watch."

Andy says he hopes to one day be the third generation of Thompson football coaches. He thinks his experience at different positions can only help any future career in that vein.

For now, though, he's got two more seasons in a Montana uniform to worry about. It begs the question: Has Andy Thompson finally found his place in Montana football? As a strong side linebacker of all things?

"I hope so," he says. "But if not, whatever. That's been college for me."