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December 29, 2008

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Buffalo Savior

In just his third season, Turner Gill turned a longtime doormat into a bowl-bound conference champion

Austin Murphy

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TURNER GILL is big on belief. Upon his arrival as Buffalo's head coach in 2005, he urged his players to "believe in things not yet seen." What they hadn't seen yet was anything remotely resembling success. After upgrading to Division I-A in 1999, the program won 10 games over the next seven seasons. Little wonder that skeptics rolled their eyes when Gill declared: "UB now stands for You Believe."

But the guys in the locker room weren't skeptical. They were eating it up. "He told us we'd be successful," recalls quarterback Drew Willy, now a senior. "He just didn't know when." The Bulls won two games in Gill's first season, "but we were much more competitive," says safety Mike Newton. "Coach told us, 'Never quit. Compete to the end.'"

So when Ball State quarterback Nate Davis plunged over the pile late in the third quarter of the MAC championship last month, a yard from the touchdown that would have put the Cardinals up by 10, the Bulls didn't quit. "I grabbed his knee," recalls Newton. "Then [linebacker] Justin Winters hit him, and [cornerback] Josh Thomas popped the ball loose." Newton's 92-yard scoop-and-score was more than a 14-point swing. It completed a turnaround that propelled Buffalo to the first bowl bid (the International) in the program's 92-year history and sent Gill's stock soaring (*page 88*).

Gill gained fame in the early 1980s as a Heisman finalist at Nebraska, running the triple option with an indelible panache. In three years as a starter he went 28--2, then was a Cornhuskers assistant on three national champions. Job One, upon arriving in Buffalo, was to eradicate the culture of defeat. No matter what happens, Gill told his players, "Continue your swagger."

Another unique Gill touch: story time. Everyone on the team, players and coaches alike, was required to stand before the squad and talk about their lives. "We just got to know each other," says Gill. "Not just on the surface, but in a deeper way." By opening up, Gill's guys learned "to build trust," he explains, "and have faith in each other."

That faith was reflected in the Bulls' nation-high FFD (Flair For the Dramatic). They beat Temple on a Hail Mary, made a 14-point comeback against Army, dispatched Akron in four overtimes and rallied from 20 down with 13:16 left to topple Bowling Green in double OT. A 15-point underdog against undefeated, 12th-ranked Ball State, Buffalo was unbowed. Cornerback Sherrod Lott followed Newton's fumble return with a 74-yarder of his own, and the Bulls won going away, 42--24.

Fire up the YouTube clip from the waning moments, and you see three Bulls giving Gatorade showers, left tackle Ray Norell sinking to his knees as time expires and Gill saying as his voice cracks, "[I'm] just proud of these guys."

You feel a lump in your throat. You Believe.

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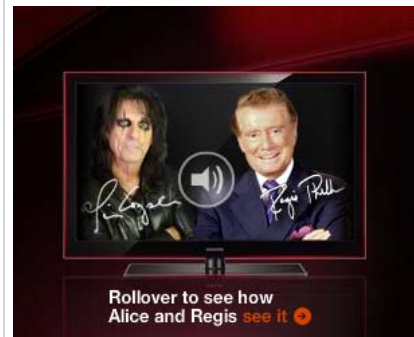
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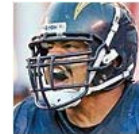
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