
Gill has Buffalo in 'uncharted waters' in only his second year

10/17/2007 -

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AMHERST, N.Y. (AP) - Settling into the coach's seat before the microphone, Turner Gill opened his weekly press conference Tuesday the same as usual by running down a list of Buffalo's accomplishments.

It took Gill nearly 2 minutes to get through them, and he could've gone for much longer. And once he was done, Gill shrugged off a wisecrack question about whether there were any negatives to mention.

"Nah, we're not even going to focus on those things," Gill said with a big laugh, and for good reason. For the first time in a long time, everything's starting to look up for a once-woeful program that is enjoying a sudden resurgence.

"There's a lot of good things here," Gill said. "But the other thing is, like I've told them, now we're in some uncharted waters."

In less than two seasons, Gill has done what no one else accomplished since Buffalo returned to major college football in 1999: The first-time head coach and one-time Heisman Trophy-finalist has the Bulls pointed toward respectability.

Off to a 3-1 start in the Mid-American Conference and 3-4 overall, the Bulls have pulled off a number of firsts following last weekend's 43-33 win over Toledo.

Buffalo had never before won three conference games in one season, never mind winning two in a row, following 31-10 win against Ohio on Oct. 6. With five career wins at Buffalo, Gill's already matched the number the Bulls won in the previous four years before he arrived and begun turning around a team that went 10-69 in its first seven seasons at the Division I-A level.

Just to be sure, the success, as modest as it's been, isn't going to Gill's head.

"We're still hungry for some more, so we're not just satisfied with that," said Gill, who's Bulls play their final nonconference game at Syracuse on Saturday.

Now the challenge - and no Bulls coach has uttered these words before - for Gill is keeping his players grounded.

"I talked about it last week, about being able to handle prosperity," Gill said. "I'm excited that this is happening. I was certain that it was going to happen. But we've still got some ways to go here."

Gill, the former quarterback, has the Bulls' offense on a roll after taking over the play-calling duties this year. Buffalo has scored 31 or more points three times this season, and is powered by a balanced attack.

James Starks had 231 yards rushing - the third most in school history - and three touchdowns last weekend. His 12 scores this season lead the MAC and are tied for fifth in the nation.

Then there's junior quarterback Drew Willy who's averaging 200 yards passing and leads the conference with a 66.5 completion percentage.

The Bulls' defense is young, but getting the most out of its senior starters, such as defensive end Trevor Scott, a converted tight end, who's tied for 10th in the nation by averaging one sack per game.

Starks, a sophomore, is excited about the unprecedented success the Bulls are enjoying. Starks would know because he grew up in nearby Niagara Falls and always dreamed of playing at Buffalo.

“Growing up here, I saw how UB struggled,” Starks said. “And as a kid, I always wanted to come to UB and change the program around. So to come here and have a chance to do that, the way we're going right now, is a good feeling.”

Tell that to Bulls athletic director Warde Manuel. In three years since taking over, Manuel is being credited as being the architect for the team's turnaround, starting with his decision to convince Gill, who was with the Green Bay Packers at the time, to give Buffalo an opportunity.

“The 3-4 record doesn't seem like a lot except at an institution where the most you've ever won is three, said Manuel, who played at Michigan. “It's small steps. But I think those who have followed the program for many years understand how big this is for us and how far we've come in a very short period of time with Turner.”
