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Gill spearheads turnaround at Buffalo

By Kevin Gorman

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tuesday, September 2, 2008



Buzz up!

Turner Gill followed a calling to "take a leap of faith" when he resigned his position as an assistant coach at Nebraska, where his legend rose from Heisman Trophy finalist to quarterback coach on three national championship teams, to pursue a head-coaching job.

Blind faith led Gill from one of the nation's powerhouse programs to one of its laughingstocks. All he asked in return was for the University at Buffalo to forget its past, embrace its future and do something that no one thought was possible for the Bulls: become winners.

"You never know exactly all the details of what you're getting into, but I had an idea we were starting from scratch and had to build a program. I was looking for something different because I had been in traditional programs and wanted to start something," said Gill, who credits the support of Buffalo president John Simpson and athletic director Warde Manuel.

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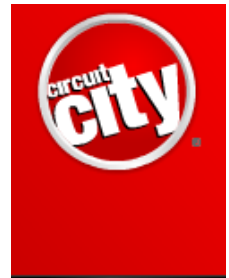
Turner Gill Paul Hokanson/File photo



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"They have made a dedication that they want to have a competitive football program and athletic department. I knew it was going to be challenge. We built a motto of 'believe' and talked about building relationships with young men. I had a vision to build a positive, motivating environment which encourages excellence, growth and balance in every aspect of the lives of student-athletes and the staff."

Now in his third season, Gill is making people believe by leading the Bulls to respectability. Buffalo had won only 12 games in seven seasons since moving up to Division I-A in 1999 before Gill's arrival in 2006. The Bulls have won six of their past 13, including five in Mid-American Conference play last season, and opened this season with a 42-17 victory over the University of Texas-El Paso on Thursday.

Gill was the 2007 MAC Coach of the Year, and appears poised to follow Florida's Urban Meyer and Missouri's Gary Pinkel and use his success as a springboard to a Bowl Championship Series conference.

"Obviously, (Gill) was an outstanding football player," said Syracuse coach Greg Robinson, whose Orange beat Buffalo, 20-12, last season, "but he's been able to take it to the coaching world."

Gill has done so by taking a page from his mentor, legendary Nebraska coach Tom Osborne, and communicating with his players how to perform at a high level on a consistent basis. One method was to create individual highlight tapes so players can see their productivity and eliminate any doubts with continuous positive reinforcement.

"These guys are exciting. They're no different than any school you go to. They want to win, be the best they can be," Gill said. "I know I have to continue to show them how and why they can be good, each individual guy."

Believe it or not			
Turner Gill has led a turnaround at Buffalo, which was one of the nation's worst college football programs. Here is a look at how the Bulls have fared since moving up to Division I-A in 1999:			
Year	Coach	Overall	MAC
1999	Craig Cirbus	0-11	0-8<

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2000	Craig Cirbus	2-9	2-6
2001	Jim Hofher	3-8	1-7
2002	Jim Hofher	1-11	0-8
2003	Jim Hofher	1-11	1-7
2004	Jim Hofher	2-9	2-6
2005	Jim Hofher	1-10	1-7
2006	Turner Gill	2-10	1-7
2007	Turner Gill	5-7	5-3
2008	Turner Gill	1-0	0-0
<b>Totals</b>		18-86	13-59

Gill not only has a reputation as an effective communicator but a dynamic recruiter, and Buffalo sophomore safety Davonte Shannon is a prime example of that. The former Jeannette star became the school's first-ever, first-team All-MAC selection last season.

"First of all, the difference between him and other coaches is he doesn't have to yell or curse to get his point across. We know what he wants and we go out and do it," Shannon said. "It's great to know that, with the history we had as a losing team, that we were able to turn it around."

The turnaround came so quickly that Gill nearly left for his alma mater when Nebraska fired Bill Callahan last year. Gill was a finalist in a search conducted by Osborne, but the Huskers instead hired Bo Pelini. Buffalo rewarded Gill with a three-year extension through 2012.

"It's definitely been a heartfelt deal, but I felt either way I was in a win-win situation," Gill said. "You're trying to build a program -- then maybe not have an opportunity to finish the job. It's always a relationship with kids. That's always the toughest part of leaving a program. I get personal, tight with my players. I develop a relationship deeper than football."

And a football team bound by its belief.

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