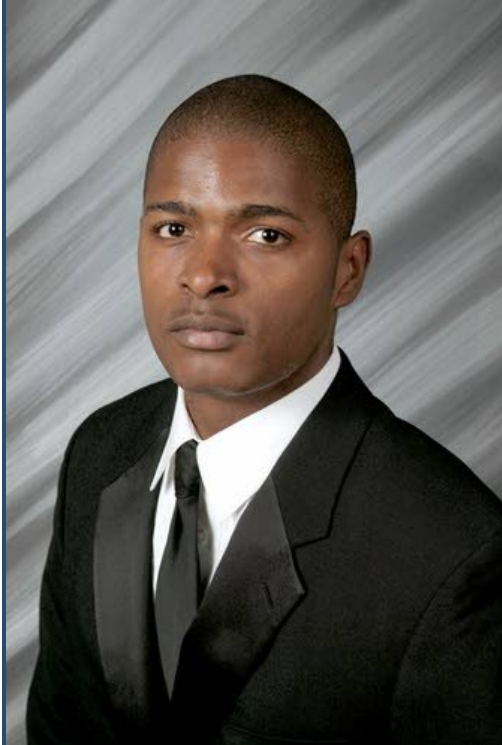


Vandals against Broncos: Somebody's gotta win

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By Dale Grummet Of The Tribune



Marvin Jefferson... Contributed Photo

MOSCOW - Was it really only a year ago that Boise State guard Anthony Thomas guaranteed nothing but wins against Idaho for the rest of his Bronco career?

Nobody is promising anything about tonight's arch-rivalry game at the Kibbie Dome, pitting teams with a combined 1-12 conference record. The star-crossed Vandals and Broncos tip off at 8 p.m. in a Western Athletic Conference contest to be televised by ESPNU.

Of the innumerable factors contributing to Idaho's five-game losing streak, at least one lies outside its control: the WAC schedule. The team's league losses have come against the top five clubs in the standings.

So the Vandals (8-9, 1-5) are eagerly awaiting this intrastate grudge match - not just because it's generally the dramatic apex of their home schedule but because Boise State (9-11, 0-7) is just as lost as they are.

The Vandals are still living off sunny memories from last season, when they beat the Broncos 63-59 at Moscow to snap a 14-game losing streak in the series and induce an embarrassed Thomas to guarantee a clean sweep against Idaho for the rest of his time at BSU. The promise backfired only three weeks later at Boise when Idaho post Marvin Jefferson hit a putback in the final seconds for a 56-54 win.

Thomas, now a senior, can expect some jeers tonight from Idaho fans with long memories, but it won't be anything like what the Broncos endured here last year, when UI placards, remarks and orchestrated chants were caustic enough to offend several Idaho faculty members and prompt an apology to BSU from interim president Steven Daley-Laursen. Scolded by the latter, Idaho fans have toned it down considerably since then.

In some ways, the Vandals' 60-48 loss to Utah State on Saturday night, before a polite 2,570 at the Dome, represented a new low. They solved two of their biggest problems - committing but six turnovers and shooting 14-for-17 at the foul line - and still went down with scarcely a protest, mustering only four field goals in the second half.

Idaho coach Don Verlin flatly admitted the Vandals got manhandled under the basket, then reminded his listeners, needlessly, that Utah State is a perennial WAC power with richly experienced players, led by a masterly coach pursuing a milestone victory. Stew Morrill, who was Verlin's boss for a decade at Logan, Utah, pushed his career record to 500-235 with the win.

"This is not the lower level of the league," Verlin said of the Aggies. "They have a coach who has won 500 games; they have four starters back and they're all over 24 years of age."

Verlin even seasoned his praise of Morrill's coaching acumen with an observation about the Aggies' nonconference schedule, which annually "does a great job building confidence."

Confidence is visibly draining from Vandal faces these days, but an opponent with a winless WAC record may do something to restore it tonight. In conference play, coach Greg Graham's Broncos are shooting 42 percent, allowing 51 percent and getting outscored by eight points a night.

On the other hand, the Vandals will need to make big strides in their post defense in order to handle 6-foot-9, 235-pound Ike Okoye (13.3 ppg, 9.0 rpg), who is shooting 54 percent. The Vandals are looking for more pluck and production from their posts, particularly Jefferson and Luiz Toledo, the latter of whom fell entirely out of sync at times Saturday.

The Broncos should be well-rested, five days after an 88-82 home loss to Nevada. Idaho's health is a bit touchy, with Luciano de Souza battling a stomach virus late last week and guards Mac Hopson and Steffan Johnson dealing with muscle cramps during the Utah State game. Meanwhile, the Vandal bench - deemed an unquestioned strength in the preseason - provided only two points.

Tonight's game is the second of three straight home contests for the Vandals, who play Fresno State (11-10, 4-3) on Thursday night at the Dome.

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