

A Big Sky football game ... just two years early

Vandals will open season tonight against a future league rival ... but for now, it's an FBS-vs.-FCS contest

Theo Lawson/Lewiston Tribune

MOSCOW - College football coaches generally deflect any inquiries about the future, insisting nothing is more important than the next practice or the next game.

And really, their reasoning is just.

But in the case of Idaho vs. Montana State, a season opener that's as much of a foray into the Vandals' future as it is anything else, the line of questioning is equally just.

There's simply no way to avoid the subtext that accompanies the first game of the fourth year under Idaho coach Paul Petrino.

Tonight's game between Idaho and Montana State at 6 in the Kibbie Dome (ESPN3, SWX) will be the last time the regional foes meet as programs occupying separate social classes. When UI officially joins the Big Sky Conference in 2018, the Vandals and Bobcats will be even on the totem pole, and most expect that a natural rivalry will respawn between the two.

Idaho's decision to take a plunge into FCS water after being drop-kicked from the Sun Belt was met with both resistance and acceptance. Those who are for it should find tonight's matchup an interesting sneak peek.

"This is a team that's going to end up being a rivalry," Petrino said. "Hopefully the Dome is very, very full. I'm sure they'll bring 3,000 fans themselves, and hopefully we've got all kinds of fans and it should be a great packed house. Loud, excitement. And it's a team that our younger guys are going to play quite a bit in the future. So I think that adds to it a little bit."

But Petrino also certainly fits the "one-track mind" stereotype and therefore is only concerned with the tangible goals available to the Vandals this season.

One of them is an invitation to the postseason - something that hasn't ever truly been plausible for Idaho under Petrino. And for a team that returns its starting quarterback, someone who led the Sun Belt Conference in completion percentage last season, four offensive line starters who've pocketed 81 starts and three receivers who surpassed 500 yards in 2016, the hype is finally merited.

And it hasn't gone unnoticed outside of Vandal lines.

"It's going to be a very big challenge for us," said Montana State coach Jeff Choate said, who will be making his head coaching debut some 60 miles from where he was raised, in St. Maries. "(Idaho) is a team that feels very strongly they should have won six games a year ago. They're battle-tested."

It's all true, but the Vandals' bowl hopes won't ride on how much they can produce on offense, but what they can limit on defense.

And few teams could limit the 2015 Bobcats, who, despite winning just five games, outscored their opposition 41.9-34.3.

MSU will first need to show it can replicate that kind of production with somebody else calling the plays and, more importantly, somebody else throwing the passes.

Dakota Prukop, a first-team Associated Press All-American who threatened just about every passing record at the Bozeman school - and a few rushing marks - took advantage of the graduate transfer exception and jumped ship for the University of Oregon, where he was recently named the starter.

So in one sense, the Bobcats swapped one Pac-12 QB for another.

Choate will go with former Washington State quarterback Tyler Bruggman, who spent less than a calendar year in Pullman before leaving for Louisville and then Scottsdale Community College.

Although his time in Pullman was brief, Bruggman captured the attention of Mike Breske, Idaho's defensive coordinator who held the same job at WSU in 2013.

"He was our scout team quarterback, and very talented kid," Breske said. "Throws the ball, spins it very well. He hasn't played a college game. He was at Scottsdale a year ago, so this will be a test."

That would generally tempt a DC to amplify pressure and ramp up blitz packages, but Breske understands his defense can't treat Bruggman, once the top-rated high school QB in Arizona, like a rookie.

"Tyler's a headsy kid," Breske said. "We'll play our game and hopefully be where we're supposed to be technique-wise and assignment-wise, and get after it."

At QB, the Vandals counter with Matt Linehan, someone who didn't get quite the college interest that Bruggman did, but has turned himself into an elite FBS passer nonetheless. Linehan was the Sun Belt's most accurate quarterback last year and ranked second in four other categories.

The offense followed the junior's lead in 2015, and would be in a great place if it could duplicate last season's showing.

"This is a team that's been on the big stage," Choate said of the Vandals. "I don't care who they were playing against at Auburn, they put 34 points on Auburn at Auburn. That tells you a lot."

NOTES - As former Big Sky foes who are separated by only seven hours, the Vandals and Bobcats have met on a somewhat regular basis since 1905. Their last meeting was in 2000 - a 56-7 UI win at the Kibbie Dome. Idaho also has the overall edge (24-17-1). ... Tonight will serve as Idaho's "Tackle Cancer" game. The team will honor Jace Malek, who signed with the Vandals before receiving his cancer diagnosis, and former director of football operations Mark Vaught. Malek died in February and Vaught in November of 2014.

Lawson may be contacted at tlawson@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2260. Follow him on Twitter @TheoLawson_Trib.