

SPORTS

Ruse's return as Georgia Southern football's OC stirs memories of successful 2-QB system

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STATESBORO — Five years later, Favian Upshaw remembers the GoDaddy Bowl vividly. The constant rain, the cold air of a December in Mobile, Alabama, and the first bowl appearance and victory in Georgia Southern's storied football history.

"The first bowl victory was a big deal for all of us," said Upshaw, who was the backup quarterback for the Eagles in 2014-16. "Everybody was saying we couldn't match up against a team that could pass the ball like that. We had just lost our head coach. There was a lot that was going against us." Despite the three-week layoff between games, GS was able to defeat Bowling Green 58-27. Upshaw rushed for a career-high 199 yards and four touchdowns.

Upshaw was a backup to fellow redshirt-junior Kevin Ellison. From 2014-15, the two ran a two-quarterback offense headed by offensive coordinator Doug Ruse.

For three seasons, Ellison would start games, go two series and then Upshaw would take over for a few series. It worked and was part of the reason GS was the top rushing offense in FBS for 2014-15.

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“In the NFL there’s the (computer) tablets and high school has Hudl (online video service for game footage), but in college you don’t have those resources,” said Upshaw, now the wide receivers coach at Savannah State. “I actually always felt like I had an advantage coming in because I could sit there and watch what’s happening to Kevin on those first two series. I would already know what I’m getting myself into by the time I get in the game, so I felt like Kevin got dealt the short hand.”

By the end of their careers, Ellison had 6,593 total yards and 54 total touchdowns in his four years. Upshaw had 2,435 yards and 16 touchdowns in his three seasons.

“We were two different guys that brought things to the table,” Upshaw said. “The coaches just kept expressing to us that the team was better when we both played. We just understood our roles going into each game.”

The 2015 bowl game was also the last time Doug Ruse coordinated an offense for the Eagles, as he went with Willie Fritz to serve as offensive coordinator at Tulane following the 2015 season.

This Saturday against Florida Atlantic will be the first time Ruse calls plays for GS since that night in Mobile.

The former OC had returned to Statesboro this season as tight ends coach. When head coach Chad Lunsford, felt a change on offense was needed for the 6-4 Eagles, he fired third-year offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Bob DeBesse on

Sunday morning. Lunsford wanted someone on the staff with experience to be the interim OC and QBs coach for the remainder of the season and turned to Ruse.

“I’m excited to have the opportunity to be coordinating again,” Ruse said in a news conference Monday. “I am, but at the same time I lost a member of the coaching staff and a close friend in Coach DeBesse. A great friend, a great ball coach, great guy. That’s the business, been there, done that.”

Possibilities at QB

Ruse talked about where the offense was headed this week, how he isn't going to change too much the last three games of the season and the need for the Eagles to finish drives with touchdowns instead of field goals.

All of that has been said by other coaches and players this season.

But a new idea was spawned by Ruse on Monday after mentioning that starting quarterback Shai Werts' right (throwing) shoulder is not full health.

"I don't think it's tough to rotate guys," Ruse said. "I know that goes against what a lot of guys will tell you. A lot of people will say if you're playing two (quarterbacks) you don't have any."

In close losses the past two Saturdays at Army and Georgia State, redshirt-sophomore quarterback Justin Tomlin came in for several drives. Tomlin went 5-for-7 passing for 63 yards, two interceptions and ran for 20 yards on eight carries in those two games.

Tomlin started two games in 2019 for GS when Werts' shoulder was unavailable. In those two outings, he went 9 for 18 for 138 yards and rushed for two touchdowns and 189 yards on 25 carries.

Given a full week to prepare for a game, a young quarterback could be expected to perform better. With Werts' availability regarded as day-to-day, Tomlin is getting the opportunity to develop that mindset.

"The heart, the warrior spirit, the want-to, the leader that (Shai Werts) is, there's no question we want him to play," Lunsford said Monday. "We do have to make decisions that are for the best for our football team and we have to ask those questions daily. Justin Tomlin has to go into this week going, 'I'm the guy,' and he needs to know that."

Tomlin and Werts weren't the only two to take snaps in the loss to Georgia State. Freshman Sam Kenerson was in for two plays for the first time in his GS career, taking the ball 12 yards on his first carry and no gain on the second carry. Lunsford said Sunday that Kenerson took a big hit on the second play and they didn't want to risk putting him back in.

Saturday's game

Three GS quarterbacks, with three different skill sets, could see the field in a non-conference game against FAU (5-1) at 6 p.m. Saturday at Paulson Stadium.

Ruse recalled alternating Ellison and Upshaw five years ago.

"We alternated those guys almost by the series because they were two really good players," Ruse said. "They both showed they could lead their team and go out there to put points on the board. We were fortunate to be able to play two guys."

Upshaw also remembers those days.

"(Ruse) always had the same message that you can't play for him if you don't have good effort or take care of the football. He stressed different things to each one of us," Upshaw said. "He's laid back. A lot of people don't see it but he's a very funny guy. He just loves football. He loves talking ball. He loves coaching. He's a very easy guy to play for."

The Eagles might return to a two-quarterback system, Tomlin could start, Werts could start or another scenario could arise. Ruse said ultimately it will come down to the health of his quarterbacks.

"Our quarterback situation this week really comes down to what the doctors tell us," Ruse said. "Regardless of who the quarterback is, we'll put 11 guys out there who are playing fast and physically and that's the bottom line. If you do that, you've got a chance."