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# UW Football Faces Major Uncertainty After Championship Loss

Qasim Ali, Sports & Opinion Editor

After a 2023 season that saw University of Washington (UW) Football earn the most wins in program history, have a Heisman finalist quarterback in Michael Penix Jr. and a Blietnikoff candidate in wide receiver Rome Odunze, the Huskies had a rare chance to win a national title. Led by second-year head coach Kalen DeBoer, who took home numerous coach of the year awards after the regular season, Washington looked to climb to college football immortality for the first time since 1992.

No. 2 Washington faced off against No. 1 Michigan at the national championship in Houston, Texas Jan. 8. UW defeated Michigan over 30 years ago to claim that 1992 championship at the Rose Bowl, but that storyline wouldn't repeat itself this time around. The Wolverines handed the Huskies their first loss of the season in a decisive 34-13 game, amassing 300 yards on the ground. Michigan also held Penix Jr. to under 300 yards passing for just the fifth time this season.

Before the game, however, with history at hand for the Huskies, Washington fans trekked down south for a chance to watch history. UW alumni Katie Schorr and Nick Van Wiggeren said they raced to arrange a trip to Houston the moment the clock hit zero in Washington's dramatic 37-31 semifinal win over No. 3 Texas Jan. 1.

"We thought this might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see Washington play on a national stage... we weren't going to miss it," Van Wiggeren said.

Even after the loss, Schorr felt justified in deciding to make the trip.



Courtesy of Katie Schorr

“No regrets, you never know when this will happen again, especially with the playoff format changing and going to 12 teams,” Schorr said. “If it never happens again, we can say we were there.”

At the game, Schorr and Van Wiggeren noted a very solid presence of Washington fans, albeit still outnumbered by Michigan supporters. Ali Salahuddin, another Washington alumnus, also traveled to Houston for the game. Like Schorr and Van Wiggeren, Salahuddin went to Atlanta for the Peach Bowl against Alabama in 2016, UW’s last playoff appearance and a 24-7 loss, where he says there were barely any Huskies fans. He attributed the increase in fan support to Washington’s very real chances at victory this time around.

“I don’t think the aspirations were really a national championship (in 2016)... that’s where the hype difference was,” Salahuddin said. “I think fans understood that we had a cap back then. We didn’t have a cap this year because we felt like we could compete with anybody based on the personnel we had on the field.”

But, that personnel’s time was up when the confetti began to fall at NRG Stadium.

Penix Jr.’s NCAA eligibility expired this year. Odunze and two other prominent UW receivers in Jalen McMillan and Ja’Lynn Polk would declare for the NFL Draft soon after, as well as starting running back Dillon Johnson. Star defender Bralen Trice would also declare for the draft.

This wasn’t some tragedy that hit the team out of left field by any means though. The program’s success was built on star power, and that star power was either ready to graduate or move on to the NFL.

But an unexpected development came Jan. 12 when DeBoer, largely credited with recruiting the players that elevated the Huskies to a playoff contender and rebuilding the program’s morale, left Montlake abruptly for the newly-vacated Alabama head coaching position. According to ESPN, DeBoer told the team of his decision that afternoon and was in Alabama by the evening.

Multiple Huskies players expressed their surprise, with UW defensive back Elijah Jackson taking to Instagram Live in the wake of the news to share how that final meeting between DeBoer and the team went.

“The craziest thing about it all is [DeBoer] never said he was going to ‘Bama even in the team meeting,” Jackson said. “Halfway through, bro, I’m thinking bro is staying.”

Linebacker Carson Bruener took to X, formerly known as Twitter, after the news broke, writing “Wow... just wow.”

The jarring news altered more than just internal feelings for the team, as transfer QB Will Rodgers, who was expected to run the offense for the Huskies next year, reentered the transfer portal.

With the team set to move to the Big 10 conference, home of powerhouses like Michigan and Ohio State, starting next season, the uncertainty around this team’s ability to compete in the near future only grows.

The good news for Huskies fans is that the power vacuum only lasted a few days. Washington hired former Arizona head coach Jedd Fisch to fill in the role. With Washington likely heading for a rebuild, Fisch’s hiring made sense, as he took the Wildcats from a 1-11 record in 2021 to a 10-3 finish and a No. 11 rank in the nation in 2023.

But, as the Huskies barrel toward the unknown with a new skipper and not much else, fans can take solace in remembering the most successful year of Washington football in years.

