

No One Can Call SRJC Football Coach Predictable

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Wedged between the business administration building and the south parking lot on the Santa Rosa Junior College campus is a worn practice field where, five afternoons a week, one of the keenest football minds in the Bay Area puts a towel around his neck and goes to work.

Much of head coach Keith Simons' work involves keeping his players focused and motivated. Through three games this season, the Bear Cubs have battered opponents by a combined score of 142-7.

For the past two seasons, Simons' teams have led the nation -- the 141 junior colleges that

play football -- in total passing yardage, averaging 347 yards per game. During that stretch, his quarterbacks combined for 89 touchdown passes, also the most in the country.

"When they go out there, they have a chance to win every Saturday because of Keith's system," said former Chicago Bears star Brad Muster, who stepped down this fall after six years as the SRJC running backs coach.

"If you try to take care of something, they exploit something else," said Shasta College coach Craig Thompson. "They come back and hurt you big time."

At the heart of the SRJC offensive machine is the no-huddle, spread formation Simons installed when he was hired nine years ago, a system he continues to refine. "People prepare for what we used to do, but they don't know what we are about to do," said receivers coach Matt Collins.

Unlike the traditional alignment of two backs, two wideouts and a tight end, the Bear Cubs line up four wide receivers, no tight end and one running back, who often becomes a fifth receiver. Simons calls the plays from the sideline with the team spread along the line of scrimmage, and the quarterback and receivers make further adjustments. A play often unfolds like a fire drill, with all five receivers running unpredictable routes. Opponents are forced to defend extra space on the field, and mismatches are created.

"My offense is a bunch of things combined," Simons said. "It's like fast-break basketball on grass. It's like the wishbone, except we're throwing it forward instead of flipping it backward. We flip passes to guys who can make plays."

"Coach Simons is the guru of the passing attack," Thompson said. "He spreads you out and hits you at all different levels -- quick, intermediate and deep routes. It's a waste of time to try to blitz."

"When you're getting ready to play him, you try to duplicate his offense in practice, but it is very, very difficult," said Tom Gang, Mendocino Junior College coach. "You never see a Santa Rosa quarterback making bad reads or receivers running bad routes. He's so good at it. He's done it for so long."

Simons was a premier high school quarterback in Seattle in the mid-1970s and went on to play at Idaho State, where he was a teammate of current Cincinnati Bengals head coach Marvin Lewis. It was there that he first considered coaching, while influenced by quarterbacks coach Mike Shepherd, now the offensive coordinator for the New Orleans Saints.

He returned to his Seattle-area alma mater, Federal Way High School, where he coached for four years before deciding he preferred college football. He latched on as a graduate-assistant receivers coach at Humboldt State, and he began experimenting with unorthodox passing schemes in which running backs lined up as receivers.

By the time he was hired as the offensive coordinator at Wayne State College in Nebraska in 1989, Simons had his core system in place but was initially instructed to run a conventional, conservative offense.

"My head coach was not a big fan of spreading it out," Simons said. "I had to convince him. By 1991, though, we had it going."

During the next five seasons, Wayne State set several NCAA Division II offensive records, highlighted in 1993 when it became the first school to have a 3,000-yard passer, two 1,000-yard receivers and a 1,000-yard running back in the same season. During that 1993 campaign, Simons' offense averaged a staggering 590 yards per game.

"It's all the rage now, running the option game out of the shotgun," he said, "but we'd been doing that for years."

The Bear Cubs compete in the Nor-Cal Conference, considered one of the three

toughest leagues in the country. Simons looks forward to late-season championship-deciding matchups against Butte Junior College and longtime rival and national power City College of San Francisco. In a memorable display of offensive fireworks last season, City College, led by current Cal quarterback Joe Ayooob, defeated SRJC 47-42.

"It came down to who was going to have the ball last," Simons said.

Like most highly successful coaches, Simons, 47, dismisses the victories but carries the losses with him.

"They grind on you," he said. "One of my toughest losses was at Wayne State in '93. We were 9-0 and played Minnesota-Duluth in our last game. We had eight future NFL guys on our team. Minnesota had a fourth-and-15 on the last play of the game, and a guy made a circus catch in the end zone.

"We had a chance to win the national championship that year," he said. "All of a

sudden, it's over. All the anticipation, all the excitement. Just the finality of it. You can't change it. That will be with me the rest of my life.

"In 2002, we played Butte for the conference championship," he said. "We led by three points with 2 minutes to go. With 20 seconds left, the center snaps it out of the shotgun before the quarterback is ready. The quarterback knocks it down with one hand, picks it up and throws it to the end zone. They make the catch over one of our corners to beat us on the last play of the game. It was like having a bad dream and having the same scenario in that dream."

Still, Simons said, "Losing the tough ones, that's the worst thing about it. But there's nothing else bad about it."

As the architect of the most prolific junior college passing team in the nation, Simons inevitably attracts the attention of Division I schools, but he said he is not interested.

"At one time, I thought so," he said. "But someone told me long ago that the JC jobs are the best in America. After what I have seen over the last 18 years, I would have to agree. You take these kids as puppies, and when they leave they are young men, football smart and school smart, and able to handle themselves in the community. You are proud of them."

-by Ted Gross

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