

UW's life without Fletch

Defensive backfield deals with loss of Doering, Fletcher

By Alan Hamari
THE DAILY CARDINAL

Running an out route to the sideline, the wide receiver snags the pass out of midair and slows down to put a juke on the defensive back. It works, and the defensive back flies out of bounds as the receiver runs safely up the field.

The whistle blows, and as the players walk back to the huddle, Wisconsin secondary coach Todd Bradford doesn't look happy. Even though it's only the Badgers' sixth spring practice, he doesn't like what he sees, and he lets his players know it.

"C'mon!" he shouts. "You've got to get to the outside!"

The play runs again, and this time the back steps in front of the pass, knocking it down.



TUCKER

"Good!" Bradford yells. "Now do it again!"

The defense runs the play five more times. Sometimes the secondary is beaten, sometimes it isn't. In any case, whether it's a good play or a bad play, the players are learning.

Over the course of the next several months, the Wisconsin secondary will have to learn a lot. It will have to learn where to line up on an out route, how to run a cornerback blitz and how to adjust to an offensive audible. But more importantly, it will have to learn how to play without two of its top playmakers—safety Jason Doering and cornerback Jamar Fletcher.

Wisconsin lost two key players in the offseason when Doering graduated and Fletcher decided to enter the NFL draft a year ago. Now the Badgers are trying to re-establish their secondary, and the coaches and players both know there can't be a letdown.

"You've just got to come right here and come with the mentality that [Fletcher and Doering] did," junior cornerback B.J. Tucker said. "That's the only way to look at it."

Senior free safety Carlease Clark agreed, but added that the team needs to focus on fundamentals right now instead of trying to find the next Fletcher or Doering.

"They set a standard here," Clark said. "Right now, we've got a lot of young guys on the team, so we just want to get back to the basics."

That's not to say that Wisconsin has to start from scratch. Fletcher's counterpart, senior cornerback Mike Echols, is back and will be the foundation of the Badgers' secondary this season. Echols earned second-team All-Big Ten honors last season, grabbing five interceptions and leading the secondary with 75 tackles.

Joining Echols is senior strong safety Joey Boese, who started every game last season and had a career-high 58 tackles. Both Boese and Echols have seen a lot of playing time and Wisconsin's younger, less experienced players are looking to them for leadership.

"They're out there telling people what to do, and really you've got to just follow their lead," Tucker said.

While Echols and Boese will be the veterans in the defensive backfield, the Badgers will have to find players to step up in the other two slots in the secondary. Tucker saw some limited action last season due to suspensions early in the year and recorded 23 tackles.

Tucker thinks he'll benefit from his



MIKE STAAB/THE DAILY CARDINAL

Wisconsin free safety Carlease Clark (white jersey), is expected to step into the starting role vacated by outgoing senior Jason Doering.

game experience, but he knows that experience doesn't directly translate into success on the field.

"Experience helps, but you've got to step up, first of all, to carry on with that experience," he said.

Clark is the most experienced player at the strong safety position, with 29 tackles last season. He is backed up by sophomore letterwinner Ryan Aiello and redshirt freshman Kareem Timbers.

While the starting positions are still up for grabs, Clark is confident that the secondary will turn into a solid defensive unit once the less experienced players see some significant playing time.

"I mean, we have the talent and we have the speed, it's just that guys haven't been on the field so they don't know any better," Clark said.

Hopefully for the Badgers, the spring practices will teach the younger players how to get better. In fact, Tucker thinks the practices are progressing pretty well already, and he said his starting spot isn't a guarantee.

"You've got a lot of young guys stepping up," he said. "It's good to know that they're out there competing."

The true test of Wisconsin's new secondary will come April 21, when the team holds its annual intrasquad spring game. The coaches and players will evaluate the defensive backfield and see what the team needs to work on before the season officially starts Aug. 25.

Despite concerns over the new faces in the secondary, Clark doesn't think it will be a trouble spot for the Badgers next season.

"We have guys that played," Clark said. "We'll be all right."

JAMIE DUKLAS
Put Up Your Dukes



Questions? I have answers

Birds are chirping, sunlight breaks through the cloudy doldrums of days gone by, the green grass glistens with a light morning dew. Ah, it is spring.

And what better time for some spring cleaning? This week's chore is cleaning out the sports e-mail box. After deleting countless unopened updates from Sports Info, I have stumbled upon a few noteworthy messages. Some of you out there have questions, so here are your answers:

Bucky69: Hey sports dude, was there any chance of Heatley sticking around for a junior campaign with the men's hockey team?

—Let me answer this as succinctly as possible: No. Would you turn down a couple million dollars for a third season on a team that already relies heavily on you for offensive production? No. In the words of the Steve Miller Band, "Take the money and run."

KelleyAndCo: Hello, I am long-time reader, first-time writer and I just wanted to know what is going on with Brad Soderberg. Is anybody going to hire this guy?

—Brad deserves a Division I coaching position. Looking back at the way things unfolded here in Madison many would say he deserved the UW job that now has Bo Ryan's name on it. Regardless of that, however, somebody out there should give him a chance. His name was rumored for the Northern Iowa and Ohio University head-coaching vacancies, but both of those positions were recently filled.

As for where Soderberg is now looking, there doesn't seem to be too much information, but there are still plenty of openings left. At last count there were 14 D-I openings.

SectionCloser: Yo, Cardinal, the draft is coming up April 20-21; how many first-round draft picks are gonna come from UW this year?

—There is a good chance of three: Michael Bennett, Chris Chambers and Jamar Fletcher. Bennett is a virtual lock with his speed and what he did in one season as a starter. Chambers has impressed scouts with great workouts; his vertical jump was among the best in the nation. Add that to the senior's speedy 5'11 1/2" frame and it helps to explain why Chambers seems to be continuously moving up everyone's draft boards.

As for Fletcher, the junior is not a first-round lock, as speed and size are both concerns with the trend toward bigger cornerbacks in the NFL. These days, however, basically every team could use another cornerback and the Jim Thorpe award winner should find a home before the end of the first round. Despite any concerns over size or closing speed, Fletcher has done it all in his three years at Wisconsin, way too much to be ignored.

If all three are drafted in the first round, it will break the UW record of two first-round draft picks set just a season ago when both Ron Dayne and Chris McIntosh were first-rounders.

LightUp34: Dukes and Wide World, with NCAA basketball all wrapped up, I have turned my attention to the NBA game and more specifically the Milwaukee Bucks. I have been waiting for years to see a Bucks team play this well. Do you think this can carry over to the postseason? Just how far can Big Dog and company go in the playoffs?

—The Bucks have a chance to make some moves in the playoffs, but, then again, they could fall on their faces in the first round as they have the last two years; that is just the way this team is.

The Bucks rely on offense. But when they are on, they can outshoot any team in the league. What bodes well for the Bucks is their record against some of the top teams in the association. Milwaukee split the season series with the Sixers, the favorite to win the Eastern Conference, 2-2 and is an impressive 8-0 against the current top five teams in the Western Conference.



SCOTT ANDERSON/CARDINAL FILE PHOTO

Former UW cornerback Jamar Fletcher was an All-American in 1999 and 2000.

Two out of four

UW replaces two DB starters

| Right cornerback | |
|-------------------|---------------|
| *Mike Echols | Sr. 5-10, 171 |
| Michael Broussard | So. 5-10, 185 |
| Left cornerback | |
| *B.J. Tucker | Jr. 5-11, 171 |
| Chuckie Cowans | Fr. 5-8, 162 |
| Matt Birkett | So. 6-0, 157 |
| Strong safety | |
| *Joey Boese | Sr. 5-11, 170 |
| Ryan Simmons | Jr. 5-11, 188 |
| Free safety | |
| *Carlease Clark | Sr. 5-11, 192 |
| Ryan Aiello | So. 6-1, 204 |
| Kareem Timbers | Fr. 6-3, 207 |

* Projected starters (Boese and Echols returning starters from 2000 Wisconsin football team)