

Inside College Football

by Kelley King

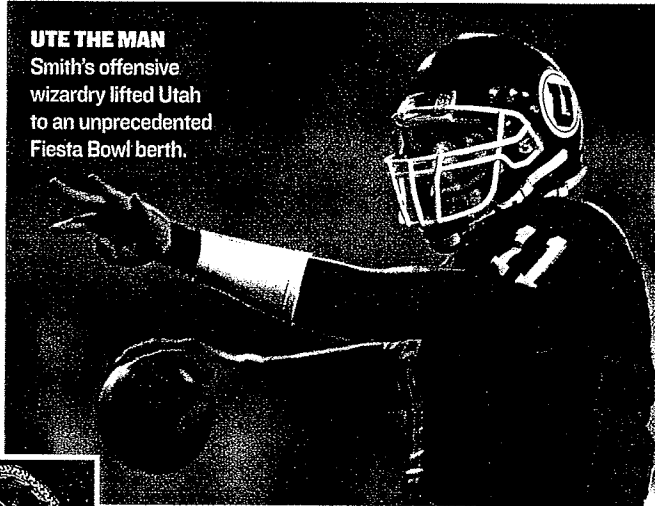
A Wing and a Prayer

Thanks to his perseverance and sterling right arm, junior QB Alex Smith of surprising Utah is SI's Player of the Year

H E SET out hoping to keep his starting job and wound up leading a team into uncharted territory. In his first full season as a starter, junior quarterback Alex Smith guided Utah to an 11-0 record and the Fiesta Bowl, as the Utes became the first non-BCS school to earn a BCS berth. Smith was not only the NCAA's second-most-efficient passer, completing 66.1% of his throws for 2,624 yards and 28 touchdowns, but also a dangerous threat as a runner, piling up 563 yards and 10 TDs. "Without Alex, we're not the same team," says departing coach Urban Meyer, who probably would not have been hired by Florida were it not for Smith's superb performance. "In my mind he's the best



UTE THE MAN
Smith's offensive wizardry lifted Utah to an unprecedented Fiesta Bowl berth.



schools: Utah, which was then coached by Ron McBride, and Louisville, where Smith's uncle John L. Smith was in charge. When Meyer arrived

in Salt Lake City in December 2002, Alex Smith began to devour the massive playbook for the coach's explosive spread-option attack. He became the starter three games into the 2003 season and led the Utes to a 9-1 finish, throwing for 15 touchdowns. "By this summer," says Smith, "the game had really started to slow down for me."

Consequently, his production picked up. Behind Smith's five touchdowns—three through the air, two on the ground—Utah clobbered the Big 12's Texas A&M 41-21 to open the season. The Utes also scored decisive victories over major-conference opponents Arizona and North Carolina, with Smith throwing for 341 yards and four TDs (and adding another on the ground)

quarterback in the nation." Smith did not strike the Heisman voters as such; he finished fourth in the voting, behind two quarterbacks with comparable statistics, USC's Matt Leinart (the winner) and Oklahoma's Jason White. But Smith more than impressed us. For his flawless leadership, exceptional play and uncommon scholarship (Smith entered Utah with 64 AP credits and earned an economics degree in two years, graduating with a 3.74 GPA last May), Alex Smith is SI's Player of the Year.

Like most of his fellow Utes, Smith was overlooked by major college recruiters. After his career at Helix High in La Mesa, Calif., he received scholarship offers from only two Division I-A

against the Tar Heels. Overwhelmed by Smith's pinpoint passing and cunning play fakes, non-BCS teams yielded an average of almost 50 points to Utah, which has set a school

single-season record with 509 points.

Smith's most memorable performance may have come on Nov. 13 at Wyoming's War Memorial Stadium. Because of a power outage the stadium was dimly lit, but Smith was electrifying. Demonstrating what offensive coordinator Mike Sanford calls "incredible game feel," Smith completed 17 of 27 passes for three touchdowns and ran for a 27-yard score in the gloaming as Utah rolled 45-28.

Two weeks ago, in Manhattan for the Heisman presentation, Smith enjoyed his tour of the Big Apple, even though he had little hope of leaving with anything more than an I ♥ NY T-shirt or a miniature Statue of Liberty. "I was just happy to be here," he said after the ceremony. "Anything else was going to be icing on the cake." For Utah fans, his return next fall would be sweeter still. With his bachelor's degree in hand and his coach off to Gainesville, the 6' 4", 212-pound Smith is contemplating skipping his senior season and entering the NFL draft. Whenever he leaves Salt Lake City, a college game with too few true student-athletes will have lost a remarkable one. □

USC vs OKLAHOMA Key Orange Bowl Matchups

THE FRESHMEN Both offenses need big contributions from their go-to rookies, but Oklahoma stands a better chance of containing wideout **Dwayne Jarrett** than USC does of bottling up running back **Adrian Peterson**, who'll be out to show the world he deserved the Heisman. *Edge: Sooners*

REGGIE B VS. SOONERS' D USC sophomore **Reggie** (the President) **Bush** will line up at tailback, in the slot, split wide. Mismatches happen. Just when you think you've got him stopped, he'll hurt you on a kick return. As Bush tells his mother before games, "I'm gonna get mine." *Edge: El Presidente*

THE BATTLE INSIDE Oklahoma's **Vince Carter** is a terrific center. USC's **Mike Patterson** is a better noseguard. Sooners quarterback **Jason White** will come to know what the Trojan ate for lunch. *Edge: USC*

THE INTANGIBLES Four years ago Oklahoma quarterback **Josh Heupel** was beaten out by Florida State's **Chris Weinke** for the Heisman, then outplayed him in the Orange Bowl to lead the Sooners to the national championship. Earlier this month, Oklahoma quarterback **Jason White** was beaten out by USC's **Matt Leinart** for the Heisman, then...

PREDICTION: *Sooners by a field goal* —Austin Murphy

A Wing and a Prayer

1. What is Alex Smith's completion percentage this season?
A.) 66.1% B.) 60.6% C.) 62% D.) 50%

2. What is their team record?
A.) 2-9 B.) 11-0 C.) 3-8 D.) 10-1

3. Alex Smith won the Heisman trophy this year?
A.) True B.) False

4. What was Alex Smith's GPA?
A.) 3.32 B.) 3.80 C.) 3.74 D.) 2.91

5. Which high school did Alex attend?
A.) Helix High B.) Franklin Academy C.) Denver High D.) Utah High

6. How many touchdowns did Smith have against Texas A&M?
A.) 2 B.) 4 C.) 7 D.) 5

7. Smith is thinking about skipping his senior year so he can enter the draft?
A.) True B.) False

8. When did Urban Meyer take over at Utah?
A.) 2001 B.) 2002 C.) 2003 D.) 2000

9. Alex only had two scholarship offers out of college?
A.) True B.) False

10. Who is Oklahoma playing in the Orange Bowl this year
A.) USC B.) Utah C.) Syracuse D.) Canton