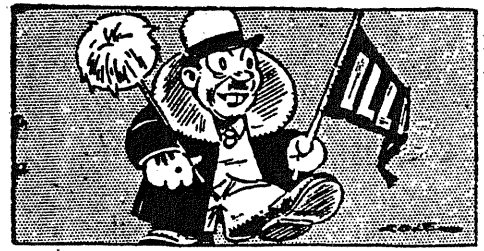


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LEE GROSSCUP OF UTAH: PRECISION FORWARD PASSER

By Gino Malattia

When Lee Grosscup entered the University of Utah in 1957, he had already earned All-America honors at two different academic-football levels before ever enrolling in what was his third college. In 1953 at Santa Monica High near Los Angeles, Coach Jim Sutherland had handed Grosscup the football at the start of the season and the junior quarterback had proceeded to pass for 1426 yards in eight games, for which he received Prep All-America mention.

After graduating from Santa Monica, Grosscup followed his high school coach to the University of Washington in 1955, where Sutherland had accepted an assistant coach position. What he found there in Seattle was a school embroiled in what would become the eventual breakup of the legendary old Pacific Coast Conference in 1959, while in 1955 the Huskie football program was in revolt against its head coach, John Cherberg. Players were quitting the team and assistant coaches were being fired. Sutherland would soon move on to Washington State as head coach in 1956, while Grosscup returned to California where he became a Junior College All-America quarterback at Santa Monica City College in 1956.

At that time the University of Utah football program was under the direction of Coach Jack Curtice, and "Cactus Jack's" teams had won three Mountain States (or Skyline) Athletic Conference titles (1951-1953) in seven years at Utah as he had developed an innovative forward passing game. One play, the shovel or Utah pass, was a short, quick toss to a receiver just past the line of scrimmage where the runner would be in a seam with both the defensive line and backfield men moving away from him. If necessary, Cactus Jack was even willing to have his offense run over an opposing defense.

Going into the 1957 season the Utah Indians (or Utes) had five quarterbacks on the roster. One platoon football allowed fourth and fifth string men to garner some playing time in the defensive backfield, where they hopefully proved their value with some pass interceptions. The 1957 Utah season opened up with a Lee Grosscup pass, and Wally Suba and Grosscup took most of the snaps at quarterback while the Indians gained 235 yards passing and conference rival Montana fell 32-13.

The Orange Bowl champions from the University of Colorado had not lost to Utah since 1948, yet with less than seven minutes left to play Utah end George Boss kicked a 26-yard field goal and the Indians were up 24-23. But then the Buffs drove 66 yards for an answering score and the win by a count of 30-24 with 41 seconds left to spare. Through the first two weeks of the season Grosscup had completed 18 of 23 pass attempts for 259 yards and three touchdowns.

The next week, on a rain-slickened field in Boise, the Idaho Vandals literally sacked Utah, as Indian quarterbacks were repeatedly dropped for losses, while Ute ball carriers failed to crack the Idaho defense.

Grosscup was five of 10 passing, but three first half fumbles and the inability to score on four plays from just five yards out sent the visitors from Utah back home with a 21-6 defeat.

Next up was a matchup at home against a young Brigham Young team, and at day's end the visiting Cougars left Salt Lake City carrying the burden of the school's first shutout loss to Utah in eight years. Injuries and the flu bug left Stuart Vaughan as the only first string Ute back able to start the game. Suba and Pete Haun alternated at quarterback in the early going, but then Grosscup finally arrived at the stadium direct from the hospital. Entering the game, he stunned BYU with a 10-yard tackle-eligible pass to Evert Jones for a touchdown. Taking Haun's place at quarterback, Grosscup picked up 11 yards on his first carry of the season. He later scored touchdowns on runs of one and two yards. Grosscup finished his work in Utah's 27-0 victory with seven completions in 10 attempts, and he had now completed nearly 65 percent of his aerial attempts for the year and Utah was the national passing leader.

The Utah gridmen next traveled to the Rocky Mountain state for the annual "Battle of the Bell" against the Denver University Pioneers. The favored Utes quickly scored on their first possession, but the Pioneers replied with 12 unanswered points. Utah spent much of the game around the 50 yard line, driving inside Denver's 20 only three times for the day. With less than a minute to play in the game the Utes faced a third down on the Denver five yard line, only to have Grosscup sacked back at the 17 yard line. A fourth down fumble then followed, and the Railroad Bell tolled out Utah's first conference loss by a score of 12-7. Grosscup had been 12 of 16 passing for 138 yards in a losing effort.

Next up was a showdown against the Wyoming Cowboys who were undefeated in their last 15 games (12-0-3), while the Indians were coming in as the national passing leaders. Several times Utah kickoffs forced Wyoming to begin its drives from inside the shadow of their goal posts. Meanwhile, fullback Merrill Douglas ran for 101 yards on the day as the Utes piled up 231 yards rushing on their way to a 23-15 win.

The following week neither a blizzard nor a small Homecoming crowd mattered as Douglas returned the opening kickoff 75 yards for a touchdown against Colorado State. Later, Monk Bailey would outrace the final gun with an 87-yard interception return for a TD. Cactus Jack emptied his bench but Colorado State was still buried 55-0. Pulled from the game after one quarter, Grosscup had completed nine straight passes and 12 of 13 for 158 yards. He had now completed 76 percent of his season attempts.

The next Saturday, at Michie Stadium on the campus of West Point, Utah faced two of the country's finest backfield men. At the end of the 1957 season left half Bob Anderson would be named a First Team All-American, while right half Pete Dawkins would win the Heisman trophy the next year. The Cadets came out and scored on their first possession, while Utah fumbled and it was soon 13-0 for Army. Utah then rallied as Grosscup plunged into the end zone from the six-inch mark, and after an Army punt

Douglas capped off a drive by running in for the score from one yard out, and with the extra point Utah led 14-13.

The Black Knights then drove 87 yards for a score to regain the lead at 19-14, and soon after Anderson's 54-yard run added six more points. Grosscup then drove the Utes 67 yards, with Douglas narrowing the gap with a run for the six-pointer. A lost Utah fumble then set up Army and this time Anderson tossed a five-yard scoring pass. But Utah took just three plays to answer, one of them a 53-yard pass completion, with Grosscup hitting Boss in the end zone for the score. Dawkins then came right back and nabbed a touchdown pass. Utah fought back with another scoring drive, including two final pass plays that gained 65 yards, but the clock finally stopped the Utes with a wild 39-33 defeat. United Press named Grosscup the Back of the Week after his 14 of 26 passing performance for 316 yards.

In the next outing the Air Force Academy faced a quartet of Utah quarterbacks. Grosscup, finished before halftime, tossed a shovel pass to Vaughan that was good for a gain of 74 yards, scored on a one-yard run, and ended the day 13 of 16 passing for 249 yards which brought his season's total to 1327 yards through the airways. Suba and Haun ran the offense most of the way, while subs Terry Nofsinger and Ken Vierra intercepted passes to end each half, and Air Force fell by a 27-0 count.

The 1957 season came to an end on Thanksgiving Day as Utah, shooting for a first place finish in the conference, faced last place Utah State. The Aggies set up an eight-man defensive front intended to disrupt the Utes' passing game, yet Utah runners repeatedly broke into the secondary for long gains. Douglas rushed for 144 yards on 12 carries, scoring on runs of 31 and 74 yards. The final tally was – Skyline champions 31 Utah State 6. Grosscup had finished the season with final totals that showed him completing 94 of 137 pass attempts for 1398 yards, and the Utes had finished 6-4-0 overall.

With the season over the accolades began. Senior fullback, Merrill Douglas, was drafted by the Chicago Bears and Stuart Vaughan led the nation with 53 pass receptions for 756 yards and five touchdowns. Utah finished with the number one ranking in team passing. Lee Grosscup was named to the Skyline Conference First Team, was a Second Team Associated Press All-American, the outstanding Junior athlete at Utah, and was voted co-captain for 1958. Nationally he had finished third in passing and sixth in total offense, while setting two NCAA marks with 68.6 percent completions while having only 1.46 percent of his aeriels intercepted.

On January 16, 1958, Jack Curtice resigned as Utah's head football coach and athletic director and moved to Stanford. After much deliberation, UCLA's Ray Nagel was hired as his replacement and he soon scrapped Utah's offense. Though he had the nation's most accurate passer he decided to convert Grosscup into a Joe Kapp-style plunge, pitch, pass fullback/quarterback. The spring alumni game, which the varsity lost 19-7, was a preview of the season to come as in 1958 the Utes were only 4-7-0. Although basically wasted in 1958, Grosscup ended his two-year Utah career with a .621 pass completion rate.

A number one draft pick of the New York Giants of the NFL, Grosscup would go on to play for seven pro teams in four different leagues in seven seasons. One of the best days of his pro career came in the 1962 season opener when he led the New York Titans of the AFL to a 28-17 win over the Oakland Raiders as he passed for 186 yards, including touchdown passes of 80, 19, and 64 yards. Lee Grosscup is a literate, articulate man. His book, Fourth And One, is a diary of his 1962 season and is arguably the best book of its kind written by an athlete. After retiring from football Lee continued calling plays, albeit for ABC's college football telecasts. Later he joined Joe Starkey at Cal-Berkeley to form college football's premier radio broadcast team for many years. A Bay Area resident, Lee Grosscup remains an active public speaker.