

Bears go out like lambs in their final game

ANDREW RENFREE
Sports Staff

After their final game of the season Saturday, the Alberta football locker room was the quietest it's been for a long while. No music, no conversations, just quiet reflection on a frustrating end to a frustrating season.

As the players removed their equipment for the last time this year, the seven graduating players snuck out of the locker room for one last photo after their last time on the field together. David Lowry, Kendall Jeske, Jason James, Jason Moss, Luke Lavorato, Brett Sparrow and Neil Ternovatsky stood out in the blowing snow while the scoreboard at Foote Field glowed 36-25 in the background as a reminder of the disappointing way in which these guys ended their CIS careers. They struggled to put their emotions into words when they came back into the locker room.

"Right now, the game hasn't hit me yet. The fact that I'm done hasn't hit me yet," Jeske said.

"If it had been a win, it would have been a different scenario, but with the loss and not going on, it's hard to really explain the feeling," Lowry said. "A little bit of loss, a little bit of sadness, a little bit of wishing we could still be together for a few more games."

The seven graduating players were the most sombre after the loss, and their teammates patted them on the shoulders as they left the dressing room—a nonverbal "thanks for everything" that every athlete understands. While this group was the most emotional, they can take solace in the fact that they were an integral part in transforming the U of A football program over the last five years.

In 2002, when the bulk of '06 grads started with the team, Alberta posted an abysmal record of 1-7. The



LIZ DURDEN

ONE MORE FOR THE ROAD David Lowry(34) assists on one of the last tackles of his CIS career. Lowry was one of seven Golden Bears who played their last game.

Bears have steadily improved since that rough season, posting a combined record of 25-13 in the past four years. Alberta went on to the Canada West Championship games from 2003-2005, but did not advance to the national semi-final any of those years.

"All seven of those graduating players were just huge contributors to the change of the program, and they're going to be missed a lot," Bears head coach Jerry Friesen said. "These guys were all here when things started to change and they contributed right through it. We have some big holes to

fill next year."

For some, the game Saturday may have been the last time they put on a football helmet. Jeske, who finished his career with 2060 punt-return yards, an Alberta record, has his sights set on teaching and coaching high school football. James, a standout in the Alberta secondary during his tenure, strives for the CFL.

"Personally there are two things I could do now: just give up, or take this off-season to work harder and try and take the shot at the next level. Hopefully somebody will give me a

shot," James noted adding that if football doesn't pan out, he can fall back on his masters degree in public health, which he will complete this year.

Lowry, on the other hand, was drafted by the BC Lions last year but was unsuccessful in his bid to crack the lineup. Still, his impressive CIS stats (at least 40 tackles in the last four seasons) garnered the attention of CFL scouts, and the 6'3" linebacker is now be a free agent and will consider offers from various CFL teams.

"I definitely want to continue on to the next level and play, so the ball's in

their court now," Lowry noted.

"It's going to be tough to be out of this locker room and not with these guys, 'cause they're like family to me and they have been for five years," Lowry added.

"These guys are a whole lot of fun," Jeske said. "So many memories: road trips, hanging out in SUB at school, just goofing off—that's what a football team does. You come in, you make a lot of good friends and you'll keep those friends for the rest of your life. Running into these guys at a reunion will just be great; I can't wait."

QBs football team's weakest Linke



ROSS PRUSAKOWSKI

Sports
Commentary

As soon as the last down was finished and their playoff hopes dashed for the first time in three years, players and coaches from the Golden Bears football team were already counselling fans to wait for next year.

Yet, after four seasons of being a good, but not great, Canada West team, it's beginning to look like mediocrity is what the immediate future has in store for the Golden Bears. This is a symptom not of the calibre of players wearing the Green and Gold on the field, but of head coach Jerry Friesen's poor recruiting of the quarterback position—where struggles from both pivots prevented the Bears from making the playoffs and killed the team's chances to win games all year.

While some may dispute how much the skill-deficiency at the quarterbacking affected the team given that the Bears finished 4-4, it's only thanks to a stellar offensive line and running game that Alberta's offence wasn't completely horrid. In a seven team conference, they managed to finish with the fifth overall offence, averaging just over 371-yards per game. However, only the putrid Simon Fraser Clan and an inexperienced Calgary Dinos squad averaged fewer yards; every other team racked

up at least 440-yards per game.

Because of the team's poor quarterback situation, there was no one to fill the massive void left by the departure of Daryl Salmon. On its own, the passing offence ranked dead last in the conference and the Bears backfield threw the most interceptions in the league. These sins could at least be excused if the Bears were breaking in a promising talent at quarterback like Calgary was with talented rookie Dalin Tollestrup, but it's fairly obvious that neither Cam Linke nor Quade Armstrong are—or ever will be—in the top tier of quarterbacking talents in Canada West.

Armstrong may eventually turn out to be a serviceable back-field leader, but after red-shirting and being around the offence for two years he still looked out of place all season long. His tendency to throw interceptions, rather than throw the ball into the stands, when facing a sack was backbreaking for the Bears and doesn't exactly inspire confidence for the future.

Friesen and the team have been promoting him as the successor to Salmon, but where Salmon had a track record of success in high school, Armstrong only played a single year as quarterback in high school. By anointing him as the future of the Bears, Friesen has taken a big gamble—one that, after this season, he appears to be losing—that Armstrong will ultimately learn how to effectively run an offence and develop a strong enough mental side to match his cannon of an arm.

While there's still a chance that Armstrong will become a decent

starter—though the early returns haven't been good—it's astounding and mind-boggling that Friesen has held onto Cam Linke. Aside from one magical performance in a playoff game in 2003, Linke has never provided any reason to believe that he could be a serviceable quarterback at the CIS level. Lacking the arm strength necessary to stretch the field and no scrambling ability to threaten defences on the ground, Linke was always a questionable choice by Friesen to carry the mantle between the departure of Salmon and the arrival of Armstrong.

Despite his faults, Friesen has stood by Linke, only to be repaid with the worst quarterbacking performance from a regular starter in Canada West. Not only did he average a paltry 46.9 completion percentage, but Linke also earned the dubious distinction of being the only starting quarterback to average fewer yards of offence per game than his running back. His 108 yards were four fewer than Tendayi Jozzy.

There's no debating that during his tenure Friesen has pulled the Alberta football program out of the basement and into the thick of competition in Canada West; however, no matter how strong a defence or offensive line that he manages to cobble together, until Friesen can once again find or develop a reliable starting quarterback, the Bears are always going to be struggling for their playoff lives. Because, no matter how hard you sugarcoat it, no one's likely believe that Cam Linke or Quade Armstrong will ever get the Bears very far into the post-season.



PETE YEE

TOO LITTLE TOO LATE Quade Armstrong isn't the Bears' answer at QB.