



Dawn Of The Information Age:

VIGEN ERA BEGINS

New Head Coach Values Intelligence, Communication

BY CYNTHIA LOGAN

“It’s Not Like I Wouldn’t Have Taken The Job, But Having Great Facilities Is A Sign Of Commitment From The University And Supporters.”

At 6’4,” Brent Vigen cuts an imposing figure—but Montana State University’s new head football coach’s demeanor is anything but imposing. Perhaps innate, his character was certainly shaped by growing up in the small (400 people small) farming community of Buxton, North Dakota, between Fargo and Grand Forks, where his mother was a nurse and his father a teacher and coach. “I went to school out in the country, in the Red River Valley,” says Vigen, who has one brother and one sister, and has chosen to follow in his father’s footsteps. “I grew

up around my dad’s teams’ practices and went to a lot of college games,” he remarks.

When he played football himself, he started at tight end during his junior and senior seasons at NDSU. Graduating with a bachelor’s degree in physical education in 1998, Vigen earned his Masters’ two years later. His coaching career began with the Bison as a graduate assistant under Bob Babich; he was promoted to tight ends coach in 2001 and to QBs’ coach the following year. When Craig Bohl took over, Vigen was appointed running backs’ coach for the 2003 season, and was passing game coordinator and quarterbacks’ coach from 2004-08. He was then promoted to offensive coordinator, where he remained through 2013. When Bohl accepted the position as head coach at Wyoming, Vigen went with him as offensive coordinator and QBs’ coach. In spring 2017, he took on the position of associate head coach. With Jeff Choate’s departure this year, Vigen jumped at the

opportunity to become the Bobcats’ 33rd head coach, and the enthusiasm was mutual.

MSU Athletic Director Leon Costello is impressed with Vigen’s pedigree, one that has led to national championships in the FCS and to great success at Wyoming the past eighteen seasons. Known nationally for helping identify and mentor successful quarterbacks, Vigen helped guide the Cowboys to bowl games in three of the last four full seasons. He was the primary coach in recruiting Buffalo Bills’ Josh Allen to Wyoming, and Philadelphia Eagles Carson Wentz and Easton Stick of the L.A. Chargers to NDSU. With characteristic humility, Vigen simply says; “I’m proud to be part of their path.” Costello points out that during Vigen’s time as a player or coach, his teams won six conference or division championships and advanced to the post-season 11 times, including three straight FCS National Championships at North Dakota State. Clearly, he brings a championship mentality to Bobcat football. Since the ‘Cats



were just a win away from making the 2019 FCS championship, Costello appreciated hearing then-candidate Vigen's top goals: defeating the Griz, winning a Big Sky championship and attaining a national title.

That means beating the Bison, who have won eight of the last

ten FCS playoffs, and a team the MSU lost to (42-14) in the 2019 semifinals. Interestingly, the Bobcats' season opener will be against Wyoming in a non-conference challenge. Coach Vigen is anticipating the game against Weber State, also a 2019 semi-finalist. "We were supposed to play Weber in Wyoming,"

he notes. And, of course, the Brawl of the Wild will be a big contest, especially since it will be held on Griz turf this year.

After asking about the elephant in the room (Will Montana State play football this fall?), the operative question is what the Vigen Era will look like. Will it continue as

a run-first team—former head coach Jeff Choate's strategy? Both Vigen and OC Taylor Housewright have intimated it could be. "For me, the most important thing is that our team is disciplined, willing to finish games," says Vigen when asked directly. "From a schematic perspective we play complimentary football—the offense helps the defense. I'm not concerned about how many yards we put up." He's big on the mental side of the strategic equation, part of which is being willing to finish. "You want a team that wants to be in the fourth quarter and believes in themselves... never fold in the towel. Football is a hard game—discipline is not allowing what's hard about it to come into your mind."

A fan of strong rushing attacks, Coach Vigen believes a winning

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strategy starts with blocking and tackling. He doesn't take the inherited strength of many offensive returners for granted. "We need to solidify the starting unit and develop the depth. Some of these guys were ready to take the program to the next level in 2020; it's an unfinished business perspective and they're geared up. I'm pleased with 2019, but we need to take it forward.

We have an intelligent group, a group that can communicate,

an athletic group," he states. "The OL, that's where it starts. If you're good up front, you have a chance to be good across the board and be strong in the fourth quarters. Some of our competitors have had the chance to play against each other; we have to replicate that by being physical with each other without resorting to cheap shots."

Starting in spring from what he terms 'a non-padded perspective,'



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Vigen intended to 'push the envelope and cross your fingers at the same time.' "Iron sharpens iron; we've got to live by that. Go as hard as possible against each other and not have injuries that could mount if you're not smart about it. We've got a mature group that hasn't had a lot of physical play in the last 16 months. Being physical is definitely a huge point of emphasis and needs to be our calling card each Saturday. The guys are working hard in the weight room and fully understand what our expectations are. So far we are really pleased with how the team is working and coming

together—a lot of credit goes to Sean Herrin and the strength and conditioning staff."

Vigen is also pleased with the chemistry on his coaching staff. "The guys I brought in have to be able to lead and still take

suggestions, communicate. Guys chosen to be retained were invested in this program; I could sense that allowing them to move forward [would be beneficial]. While change is difficult, you have adaptability. You bring all that together. You respect each

"EVERYBODY'S A LITTLE ON EDGE AND THAT'S A GOOD THING, BECAUSE WHEN YOU'RE NOT YOU TEND TO BE COMPLACENT. OUR CULTURE IS IN A GOOD PLACE."

other even if you have different strategies. You articulate your thoughts, then run with our decision. Everybody is buying in and I think we're moving in the right direction," says Vigen, who chose to retain the team's captains. "As a leader, getting to know the captains and what that whole group wants from this final season is key. Lewis Kidd is focused on making the most of his last year. This program matters a lot to him and he's a shining example across the team as well as on the OL," remarks Vigen, who nonetheless is forming an extended leadership group. "Everybody's a little on edge and that's a good thing, because when you're not you tend to be complacent. Our culture is in a good place, he affirms. "We're not starting from scratch, even with having players going through 'we're playing—no—

we're not, coach is here, coach is not"—the players are resilient."

In keeping with his motto that champions are built in the summer, Vigen released the depth chart shortly after spring training. "I think the depth chart is more about our guys knowing where they're at, and for our fans it's fair to get a sense for where we're at. I hope it's a motivator to show guys that aren't where they want to be and for those who've earned a spot to keep the spot," he explains, adding that he feels "we have a talented and relatively experienced starting group on both sides of the football, but we need to continue to bring along several young players to fortify our depth. Some position groups are deeper than others and we will need to leverage those groups, in particular our skill positions of RB, WR & DB."

Running back Demareus Hosey, a redshirt freshman majoring in business, says he notices an elevated expectation for both individual and collective accountability under Coach Vigen. "He truly believes in us working as a team, as a unit." Noting that the 'Cats now have more player-led practices, Hosey says; "If you get in good fundamental practices without coaches on the field, that develops leadership and accountability." Vigen is encouraged by what he calls an eager QB group, citing the amount of time they've come in to watch film. "There's wide variety of skills between the five guys. Ultimately, we'll highlight whoever comes out as best for the team—offering the most production through leadership, running the ball, and decision-making. We'll build an offense

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around what the QB does best.” As of June, Matt McKay seems to have earned the starting spot, but he’ll need to stay on his toes. “It’s not a clear cut deal,” says Vigen. “We’ll keep working with the whole group.”

Vigen and his wife Molly (who played basketball at North Dakota State and was on the 1996 NCAA Division II National Championship team) have three sons: Jake, Grant, and Luke. The two met when Vigen was a graduate assistant coach. “She had a year left to play, so for her dating a coach wasn’t a big leap,” he says. “When you enter in it’s a big deal... the way of life. It’s a busy profession with emotional

highs and lows.” With their sons ranging in age from 10-17, Vigen says he’s ‘smack dab’ in dad mode. “They become the center; I enjoy watching them play sports,” he says, noting that all three are ‘pretty sports-driven.’ “In Laramie we were surrounded by mountains we hadn’t had in North Dakota, so we enjoy hiking, camping and skiing. Coming here it’s all that and then some.” All the Vigen boys started tackle football in fourth grade, a crucial time, according to their dad, for teaching good technique to prevent brain injuries. “The biggest challenge is between fourth and eighth grade,” says Vigen. “The rules have changed to eliminate kids’

tendency to drop their heads, to instead keep ‘face up, eyes up.’ Most educated teachers are top down and reinforce those rules.”

Acknowledging that the ‘concussion discussion’ was an important issue that had been pushed to the side, Vigen notes it’s now been out front for about 10 years. “Prior to that there wasn’t a great way to address it; players were usually advised to get back in and shake out the cobwebs. Athletes now know when they don’t feel right. Now it’s tough to slip something through the cracks. The issue is seen differently within the game, though the outside world is still dealing with it. We have all the tech from helmet; it’s a serious, serious deal.” According to Vigen, the ability for trainers to monitor blows is now at the forefront. “In Wyoming there were monitors within the helmet to detect the intensity and multiplicity of each blow,” he says.

Another issue gaining attention is nutrition. “That was one of my first questions of Leon,” notes Vigen. “The nutritional piece came to the forefront in the last 5-10 years. It became apparent that what you put in your body is as important as training. Kids now are more conscious, even at a young age.” The anticipated completion of Bobcat Stadium and new facilities was certainly a draw for the new coach. “It’s not like I wouldn’t have taken the job, but having great facilities is a sign of commitment from the university and supporters,” he comments, pointing out that for student athletes it will mean comfort and efficiency in both training and academics. And, after a year of virtually no one in the stands, coaches, players, fans and foes are waiting with baited breath to walk into that stadium and start cheering on the ‘Cats. Bring on the cowbells.



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