

OC TAYLOR HOUSEWRIGHT

HOPES TO SHORE UP CATS' WEAK LINK

“With The Passing Game, Keep It Simple And Find Green Grass. You’re Always Trying To Find Green Grass And Get The Ball There.”

BY PAUL BURNS

There are two ways to look at what Taylor Housewright brings to Montana State's coaching staff this season. He could be viewed cynically as the sixth offensive coordinator in the past seven years and by next season there will be yet another name filling that role. Or, as the Bobcat faithful hope, he could be just what the team's quarterbacks need to perform at the level that's been promised for years but is seemingly always out of reach. After all, as a player at Division II Ashland University, Housewright became a household name while playing for four different coordinators each season he was there, which included a new guy during his record-



setting senior season when he was named an All-American.

“It stunk as a player,” Housewright says of the revolving door at Ashland during his playing days at the small Ohio school in the same small Ohio town where he grew up. “But knowing I was going to go into coaching was great; I was able to pick everyone’s brains. You’re always a product of your experiences.” The thing is, Housewright became an All-American as a senior precisely because of the coaching he received prior to that 2012 season. Combining the guidance he received earlier in his days at Ashland with that season’s new coordinator, who recognized Housewright’s skills and let him blossom as a senior, helped spark Ashland to an 11-1 season. The team didn’t lose until the quarterfinals of the Division II playoffs.

That’s the same magic the Bobcats do hope Housewright brings to MSU this fall. During Jeff Choate’s four-year campaign as head coach,

the Bobcats were known for their running ability behind powerful offensive lines and strong tailbacks who often lined up at quarterback. But the passing game usually left fans unimpressed, as often happens when the guy throwing passes is really a runner. Before Choate, coach Rob Ash had two exceptional quarterbacks in DeNarius McGhee and Dakota Prukop, but Choate could never duplicate Ash’s success at the position, despite bringing in many promising quarterback recruits and well-respected coordinators.

Housewright isn’t looking to reinvent the wheel and he’s confident the Bobcats have an already established ball carrier in Isaiah Ifanse, who will be running through holes created by the big boys up front: namely, Zach Redd, Lewis Kidd and Taylor Tuiasopopo. As an aside, Housewright says with a smirk, “I would sure as heck love to have (linebacker) Troy Andersen on offense. All the other teams out there need to worry about him.” However, in the past it’s the guy who flings

the ball—and that includes Andersen, an All-American in 2018—who has been the weak spot for an otherwise strong Bobcat offense. “Maybe the best player is a dropback quarterback, maybe the best player is an athletic quarterback,” Housewright suggests, without committing to either style. “Whatever that is, you fit the system to their skill set.”

The favorite to call the signals on the field this fall is North Carolina State transfer Matt McKay, who arrived on campus early in 2020 thinking he would throw passes that year under the guidance of Justin Udy. Several events occurred since McKay landed in Bozeman: Covid canceled the 2020 season, Choate left for Texas, Brent Vigen was hired to replace Choate and Housewright was hired to replace Udy and has yet to coach a game for the Bobcats. Actually, Udy wasn’t replaced; he was repositioned, moving from offensive coordinator under Choate to wide receivers’ coach under Vigen. Meanwhile, in two seasons at NC State, McKay played in a handful of games and seemed to be more of a thrower than a runner.

Housewright says there’s no tension in the coaching offices



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between him and Udy. In fact, since this year will be Housewright's first as a play caller, he's happy Udy decided to remain at MSU. Brian Armstrong (who was one of Choate's four coordinators), Vigen and Udy have all called plays in the past—now it's Housewright's turn. "We've got an experienced offensive staff," Housewright says. "When you talk about calling plays, it's not just one guy. I'm just the guy who gets the title and am first to blame if things don't go well." Housewright and Vigen have both talked about being a run-first team, which was the Bobcats' method under Choate. Except under Choate, the Bobcats were often run first, run second, run third — which wasn't a bad formula until the team was forced to throw. The system may not change too much this fall. "First and foremost, you've got to be able to run the ball. However you do that, whether it's running the quarterback, running the tailback, or doing whatever your O-line can do," Housewright says. "With the passing game, keep

it simple and find green grass. You're always trying to find green grass and get the ball there."

For the Bobcats' offense to improve year after year, Housewright says he'll need to stay put for a while. "As the next guy, you've got to earn (the players') trust a little bit," he says. "If you can make it through that first year and you're back again, that means a lot to the players. They're just college kids who enjoy playing football, trying to figure out their life." When the coaching carousel slowed to a halt after Vigen put his key assistants into position, Housewright noted those new faces running practices have to be willing to adjust to the players, not necessarily the other way around. "Good coaches can do that," he says. "You have to be able to see what the players can be. You have to give them confidence that they can be good."

Except for watching film, Housewright has not seen these Bobcats perform during a game, yet he's confident the team will meet his expectations. It all starts with what is being described as MSU's main area of strength, the offensive line. "When you look at the amount of snaps that group has played and how long those guys have been on campus, they're the most talented," he says. "They left 2019 pretty good, and I think they want to be pretty good again." That was the year the Bobcats led the Big Sky Conference in rushing, but were next to last in passing. That's where Housewright's touch should make the biggest difference. "The beautiful thing about college coaching is you get a little piece of everybody to see how you can blend that together," he says. "The best part, just like an artist, is to piece that together in your own style."

Housewright created his own style by watching others, including

Vigen, with whom he coached at Wyoming in 2018 when Vigen was the Cowboys' offensive coordinator. But long before that, Housewright got into coaching almost by chance. Following his playing days at Ashland, he took a job in Charlotte, NC as a bar manager, liking the money, but not the hours. One Sunday morning, after a long shift the night before, he got a call from Mike Bath, then the head coach at Miami of Ohio and one of Housewright's offensive coordinators at Ashland. Miami was 0-6 at the time, on its way to 0-12, when Bath fired his quarterback coach and called Housewright at 8 a.m. that Sunday morning. "I'm like, is this a dream?" Housewright remembers. "I had to wake up, walk around, get a glass of water." He then called his dad, who told him there was no point in not doing it. So he made the 10-hour drive to Miami and the following Saturday he was on the sidelines at Massachusetts. "I was trying to make substitutions and I didn't know anybody's name."

He's been moving up ever since. This is his seventh coaching stop since that fateful phone call. Surprisingly he enjoys small locations the most. By contrast, MSU is somewhere in between, smaller than Mississippi State and Oregon, his previous two coaching gigs, respectively, but bigger than Wittenberg (another small school in Ohio) and Ashland, where he returned in 2016. "Small town football is the best ever, especially when you're good," he says. Still, to get where he wants to go, big towns are necessary. "I think a lot of guys are chasing all this money. It's hard to get there, it's a long road. Some guys get lucky. You've just got to enjoy football; you don't know where it's going to take you. You've got to be ready to travel." And be ready to answer that early-morning phone call that one day leads you to Montana State.

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