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Brandstater top Dog

Turlock High grad will start operat QB for Bulldogs

By BRYANT-JON ANTEOLA THE FRESNO BEE
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FRESNO — Turlock High graduate Tom Brandstater will be the starting quarterback for Fresno State's season opener Friday.

Coach Pat Hill announced his decision Monday, choosing Brandstater over fellow sophomore Sean Norton in what was the Bulldogs' first quarterback tryout since 1998 but hardly a heated competition.

Hill cited Brandstater's knowledge of the offense and game management skills — ability to read a defense, call the correct blocking schemes and route changes — as reasons for his decision.

Hill, however, wouldn't commit to Brandstater beyond this week or rule out the possibility of a change later.

"Tommy Brandstater is our starting quarterback



Fresno State coach Pat Hill has seen enough out of former Turlock High standout Tom Brandstater to name him his starting quarterback. The Bulldogs open the season Friday at home against Nevada.

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for this game," Hill said. "Right now, we feel very comfortable about Brandstater as our quarterback. But we also feel really good to run the same offense with Sean.

"I just don't have a crystal ball to see the future ... and (see) how it plays out in a game."

Brandstater couldn't be reached for comment Monday — the first day of classes at Fresno State — with players given the day off from practice.

Perhaps holding back Hill from making a full endorsement is that neither Brandstater nor Norton have taken a hit during practice or a meaningful snap during a game.

A backup to four-year starter Paul Pinegar last season, Brandstater played in eight games, all during the end of blowout victories. He completed 6 of 13 passes for 48 yards and one touchdown with one interception.

Norton, last year's fourth-string and scout-team quarterback, has yet to suit up for a game in his two years.

"This one is a unique situation, because neither one has a start under his belt," Hill said.

Though both are sophomores athletically, Brandstater has been at Fresno State a year longer than Norton after grayshirting in 2003.



Brandstater



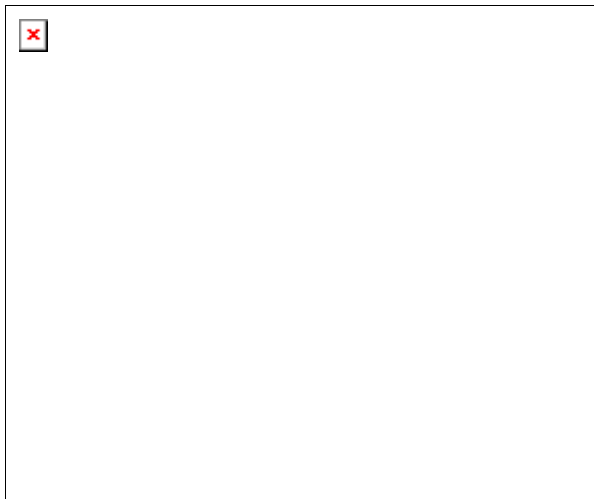
Tom Brandstater will start at QB for Fresno State's opener Friday. **CRAIG KOHLRUSS/THE FRESNO BEE**

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Brandstater spent that fall semester as a nonmember of the team learning the Bulldogs' playbook while enrolled as a part-time student. The following spring, he received a scholarship and began practicing as a redshirt, a member of the team who can't participate in games.

Norton, a Parade All-American in high school, arrived at Fresno State a year after Brandstater, redshirting in 2004. Norton's progression was slowed by two knee surgeries since joining the Bulldogs.

Hill said Brandstater led throughout the quarterback competition because of his knowledge of the schemes and practice experience — he took all snaps with the second team last season. Norton initially was slow at learning the schemes and managing aspects, which put him behind.

Despite a change in offensive coordinators this offseason, Fresno State's playbook has remained the same under new assistant Steve Hagen.

It became evident during fall camp that Brandstater was the leading candidate and merely waiting for official anointment, as he received almost all of the first-team snaps.

But Hill said Norton "made great strides" in learning the offense and managing a game as training camp progressed.

"Going into camp, the biggest separation was knowledge of the scheme," Hill said. "And Sean now has good knowledge of the scheme. That's a comfort to have. If I have to make a change, we don't have to change the game plan."

Still, Hill would prefer to stick with one quarterback.

In Brandstater, Fresno State enters the Nevada game with a strong-armed quarterback who can attack downfield and take advantage of one-on-one matchups.

Receivers have raved about Brandstater's deep-ball accuracy since last season. But it will be his pre-snap ability to line the Bulldogs in the correct formation and set up the running game that likely will keep him on the field.

With running back Dwayne Wright appearing to be healthy after a knee injury suffered two years ago, Fresno State is expected to rely heavily on the run.

The Bulldogs also might throw more screen passes to take advantage of their experience and agility on the offensive line, where four of five starters return from last season. Such plays could make it easier on Brandstater to distribute the ball to playmakers Wright and receiver Paul Williams.

"We're not cutting down anything," Hill said. "There's no spot on the field that we can't get to. (Brandstater) just needs to go out and do his job, manage the team, play within the game plan, understand the situations.

"He has unlimited potential, but potential means you haven't done it yet. We'll start finding out."

Friday marks the first time in school history the Bulldogs begin their season





against a Western Athletic Conference opponent.

After Fresno State agreed to play at Louisiana State on Oct. 21, the Bulldogs needed to play a WAC game early in the season.

ESPN, which has a contract with the WAC to show its games, wanted to televise a Friday game on Labor Day weekend and came up with the Fresno State-Nevada matchup.

Hill and Nevada coach Chris Ault said they'd prefer to open with a nonconference opponent but were more intrigued by having the game nationally televised.

"It's certainly a great opportunity," Ault said. "Any time you can get national exposure, it's good. It's a heck of an opportunity. The team that loses has to fight its way back up."

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