FOOTBALL

ON THE TEXANS

Shutdown brings to mind 2011

Assistant coach Yates draws parallels between NFL lockout his rookie season, virus' disturbance



JOHN McCLAIN



Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

When the Texans' players were locked out by the owners in 2011, they conducted practices on their own at Rice.

In his second season as an assistant coach with the Texans, T.J. Yates is doing his job from home – virtual coaching – and he sees similarities to 2011, his rookie season when owners locked out the players until they agreed on a new collective bargaining agreement.

Yates and guard Wade Smith, an eight-year veteran entering his second season with the Texans in 2011, spoke recently about the lockout 10 years ago and how it compares to what players are experiencing today during the coronavirus pandemic.

Players are unable to report to their facilities for the offseason program, but during the week, they meet with coaches on Zoom and Discord teleconference calls. They're expected to stay in shape by working out on their own and being ready physically and mentally when they're finally allowed to report.

When Yates was a rookie quarterback, a fifth-round pick from North Carolina, players couldn't communicate with their coaches or work out at their facilities during the 132-day lockout that ended July 25 with a 10-year agreement.

"There are definite parallels," said Yates, who's the assistant quarterbacks coach under Bill O'Brien. "During the lockout, we couldn't be at the facility, either, but the advantage was we had player-led OTAs."

Led by quarterback Matt Schaub and center Chris Myers, the players organized their own workouts at Rice Stadium. As a rookie who moved to Houston a couple weeks after the draft that also brought first-round pick J.J. Watt to the Texans, Yates' head was spinning.

During their workouts at Rice Stadium, Yates was in a group of veteran quarterbacks that included Schaub, Matt Leinart and Dan Orlovsky. Yates got to know his teammates, including receivers like Andre Johnson and Kevin Walter and tight end Owen Daniels.

"It was a great group of guys," Yates said. "We spent a lot of time together. We worked out, played golf, ran, and I learned so much from them.

"After I got drafted, one of the coaches told me he didn't know when he'd be able to talk to me again because of the lockout. I came down here as soon as I could and started working with the guys. Being able to do that was huge for me."

During the current lockdown, in which players meet virtually with coaches and teammates from home, they're making progress mentally, but nothing substitutes for on-field instructions.

"It's amazing how much progress we're making virtually," Yates said. "Some guys are home in different parts of the country, but they're all learning, and I think we're doing a great job communicating with them. Our IT department has been awesome.

"Even though they're doing a great job of learning virtually, it's harder to learn if you're just doing it mentally. You can't replace learning in the (meeting room) and then going on the field and learning it from your coaches."

When the restrictions are limited and players can get on the field for the first time since last season, rookies will be behind. Yates remembers what it was like for him in 2011, when players reported for camp 10 days after the new CBA was agreed to.

After the longest work stoppage since 1987, when the players went on strike and the owners played three games with replacement players, the only game lost in 2011 was the annual Hall of Fame Game in Canton, Ohio.

"When the lockout ended right before camp, I was thrown into the fire," Yates said. "I got my playbook, and I got a ton of reps right away."

The Texans released Orlovsky, and it took some time under the new agreement to start the league year, so Leinart couldn't sign right away.

Teams reported 15 days before their first preseason game. Since players are unable to have organized workouts now because of restrictions like social distancing, they'll get more time than 15 days to prepare for their first game, whether it's preseason or regular season.

It'll be tougher for rookies because they don't have the advantage of working with their coaches and teammates at practice.

"The way we communicate with the players and the way they communicate with each other is really going to help us when we're able to get on the field," Yates said. "Even though the rookies are doing a great job of learning virtually, there'll still be a transition for them once we're able to get back on the field.

"The veterans are professionals. They know what it takes to be a pro and to get ready physically and mentally for the season."

Smith was on his way to a 12-year career in 2011 when he was a trusted veteran who participated in the workouts at Rice Stadium. Smith and the veterans were more prepared than rookies like Yates, Watt and outside linebacker Brooks Reed, the second-round pick, for the unknown of a lockout.

"During the lockout, we didn't know if there would be a season," said Smith, a guest host at Sports Radio 610 who works tirelessly in the Houston community. "Like today, there was so much uncertainty.

"Before our workouts at Rice Stadium, guys would run and do exercises to get ready. We might lift weights at a fitness center. When we got together, we'd go through our regular workouts, but we'd also do something to build camaraderie like play flag football. The offseason is a good time to build the camaraderie you need for the season. During the lockout, we'd feed off each other.

"One advantage they have today is they can communicate with their coaches. We couldn't. We didn't have stay-at-home orders when it came to working out with each other, but we couldn't have contact with our coaches, either."

The Texans' offense had the same system coach Gary Kubiak installed in 2006. The defense had a new coordinator in Wade Phillips, rookies like Watt and Reid and free agents like Johnathan Joseph and Danieal Manning.

Of the utmost importance during the lockout was players being ready mentally and physically when they were able to report. Nothing gets a player in a coach's doghouse more than being out of shape.

"You can't get in good football shape without playing football," Smith said. "But you can get in good enough condition where you don't get hurt when you're finally able to report. If you can do that, then you did a good job preparing under those circumstances."

The players, including the rookies, did a good job preparing during the lockout. The Texans finished 10-6 and won their first AFC South title. They clinched the division with a victory at Cincinnati, then defeated the Bengals in the wild card game.

The quarterback in those two victories? Taylor Jonathan Yates, who had replaced the injured Schaub and Leinart in what turned out to be a season to remember.

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TEXAS A&M

Do you eat your veggies, Kellen Mond?

How a 4-year-old superfan ended up in a Zoom meeting with Aggies QBs

By Brent Zwerneman
STAFF WRITER

COLLEGE STATION – In the past year, Texas A&M quarterback Kellen Mond has been peppered with questions about the zone read, his touch on the long ball, and trying to beat Bama.

Those lobs had not prepared Mond, however, for the high heat from budding correspondent Auggie Failor on Monday.

"Do you eat your vegetables?" Auggie inquired.

"I do," a grinning Mond replied, "but I don't like them."

A few days before that memorable grilling, 4-year-old Auggie had watched intently as his father, Jonathan Failor, took part in yet another virtual work meeting via Daddy's laptop, a result of the pandemic.

"I wonder today if kids are playing 'work,' just like their parents are from home," Jonathan said with a chuckle.

It seemed so with Auggie, who abruptly (albeit briefly) entered the workforce roughly 18 years before most of his peers.

"Auggie stood at my computer and told me, 'I have a meeting, too,' " Jonathan said.

Naturally, Dad wondered with whom.

"I'm meeting with Kellen Mond," the miniature Aggies fan declared.

Jonathan appreciated Auggie's earnestness, and for kicks posted his son's declaration to Twitter, tagging @TheKellenMond along the way. An amused Mond retweeted Auggie's bold claim, and A&M offensive coordinator Darrell Dickey picked up on the fun.

Dickey reached out to Jonathan with an offer for Auggie to join the A&M quarterbacks' Zoom meeting online last Monday, and Jonathan cautioned the coach that Auggie likely would not ask Mond to break down the LSU defense or discuss opening the season with Abilene Christian, for instance.

"Coach, he might ask the guys about dinosaurs and superheroes," Jonathan told Dickey.

An appreciative Dickey responded, "It'll be fun, and the guys need to know these kids look up to them."

Auggie and Jonathan suddenly were one of the squares of a Brady Bunch-looking ensemble on Pop's laptop via Zoom, with the A&M quarterbacks pleasantly surprised by the wide-eyed, pint-sized addition to their regular meeting with Dickey.

Mond, as he's done throughout his career, adjusted on the fly and fielded a handful of questions from young Auggie, including whether Mond lives at Kyle Field (he does not).



Courtesy Failor family

A&M offensive coordinator Darrell Dickey invited Auggie Failor, 4, to a recent online call with his quarterbacks. "It's created a lifetime memory for him," Auggie's dad says.

Dickey wrapped up the meeting by inviting Auggie and his dad, a 2017 A&M graduate, to an Aggies practice this summer or fall, and in doing so made two dreams come true.

"The whole experience was really special," said Jonathan, who's had trouble wiping a smile from his face since. "I love that Auggie is excited about what excites me, and just the fact that these guys took a moment to give this kind of opportunity to a 4-year-old. ... It's created a lifetime memory for him."

The dad's Texas A&M tale is nearly as cool as the kid's. Jonathan, 40, was born and raised in Ohio and attended Ohio State as a freshman in the late 1990s. He dropped out and began working for museums, first in Ohio, later South Carolina (where he met his wife, Danielle) and then North Carolina.

Eight years ago Jonathan was offered the opportunity to work at Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site, where Texas' declaration of independence from Mexico was signed on March 2, 1836. Jonathan and Danielle knew little about Texas, but gathered their belongings and headed southwest in pursuit of a dream.

"Similar to the people who came here in the 19th century," Jonathan said with a smile. "We packed up and moved to Texas for a better life."

The couple found a home in Bryan-College Station, and soon were engulfed in "howdys" across town – the signature greeting of A&M.

"I thought, 'This is the place for me to finish school.' I had finally found where I was meant to be," said Jonathan, who added that he appreciates a combination of agriculture and amiability.

After working hard to just get enrolled at A&M in the fall of 2013 in the recreation, park and tourism department – Jonathan said his grades from Ohio State weren't exactly stellar – he graduated three years ago at the ripe age of 37.

A&M degree in hand, Jonathan was promoted in March 2018 to assistant superintendent at Washington-on-the-Brazos, about 50 miles northwest of Houston, and a few months later he became the storied site's superintendent when his boss retired. Not bad for an Ohio State dropout.

"Moving to Texas was the greatest risk we've ever taken," Jonathan said. "And it's been the greatest reward."

Auggie, whose given name is August, was born in College Station in 2015 with his dad still enrolled at A&M, and nearly five years later the youngster found himself face-to-face, virtually, with one of his Aggie heroes.

"Hey," a probing Auggie asked, "what is your favorite dinosaur, Kellen Mond?"

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