

# Birnbaum replaces Leaf at WSU

Teammates say the quarterback is eager to get out of his predecessor's shadow

By Nicholas K. Geranios  
The Associated Press

PULLMAN, Wash. — You can scratch one goal off Washington State quarterback Steve Birnbaum's quest to replace the irreplaceable Ryan Leaf.

Birnbaum recently tied Leaf's team quarterback record with a 320-pound bench press, and then waited for the inevitable phone call from San Diego.

"Hey, buddy, I hear you're tying some records," Birnbaum said, in his best Leaf imitation. "What's going on?"

What's going on is that Leaf is gone to the San Diego Chargers of the NFL after shredding the record books in leading Washington State to the Rose Bowl last season.

Birnbaum, a little-used understudy, has been handed the starting job by coach Mike Price.

At 6-foot-4 and 223 pounds, the junior is shorter and lighter than Leaf, claims to have a weaker arm and admits he lacks the fiery rhetoric that made Leaf a field

general. "He could throw it off his back foot into the end zone," the 21-year-old Birnbaum said. "I'm physically not able to do what he did, the 60-yard bombs.

"My game's a little different. I will not try to do what Ryan did," Birnbaum added.

Leaf set school records last season with 3,968 passing yards, 34 touchdown passes, 330 passing yards per game and 5,922 total offensive yards, among others.

He took the 10-2 Cougars to the Rose Bowl for the first time in 67 years.

By contrast, Birnbaum completed just 11 of 19 passes for 142 yards last season, with one touchdown and one interception, in five games.

Birnbaum was little seen after mid-season. The team revealed after the Rose Bowl that Birnbaum had torn the anterior cruciate ligament of one knee midway through the season. He had surgery in January and missed spring drills.

But he contends he is 100 percent recovered.

"Health permitting, it will be a great two years," Birnbaum said.

He got off to a rocky start in Monday's first scrimmage, com-

pleting just 6 of 15 passes for 34 yards, with one interception.

Offensive lineman Rob Rainville, one of only two returning starters on offense, said the team has confidence in Birnbaum, despite his lack of game experience.

"Leaf was a guy you wanted on the field," Rainville said. "But when Birnbaum came in, no one's confidence came down.

"He's anxious to get out of Ryan Leaf's shadow," Rainville said.

Birnbaum, from Chino Hills, Calif., expects the Cougars to throw more short passes to running backs this season, since four of the Fab Five receivers from 1997 were lost to graduation.

After spending the past couple of seasons as Leaf's roommate, where they shared marathon video game battles, Birnbaum got his chance to start a year early when Leaf decided to forsake his senior season for the NFL.

"He was a very good friend on and off the field. The guy was the second pick in the NFL draft," Birnbaum said. "I've set myself some high standards."

Among the things Birnbaum learned from Leaf was the danger of trying to win a game single-handed.

# Blazers lower ticket prices by 14%

Officials were afraid of pricing some fans out of coming to games

By Landon Hall  
The Associated Press

PORTLAND — The Portland Trail Blazers, worried that fans would be put off by a scheduled increase in ticket prices, announced Tuesday that seat prices at the Rose Garden would be reduced by an average of 14 percent.

The average ticket at the 19,980-seat arena last season cost \$39.40, according to the team. At the reduced price, the average ticket will cost \$34.71 this season.

Some seats in the upper level will cost as little as \$10. Tickets in the upper levels have been reduced by 57 percent.

With the new price plan, the team eliminated a 7.5-percent increase that had been scheduled for this fall because of a contract implemented when the Rose Garden opened in 1995.

"I think eventually, we could have reached the point where we would have priced some people out of coming to a Blazers game," said Harry Hutt, the team's senior vice president of marketing operations. "We wanted to prevent that.

"Ticket pricing was just too aggressive. We just wanted to make it more affordable."

The move also comes as part of owner Paul Allen's goal of selling out more games. The Blazers had 10

sellouts in 1997-98.

The price cuts come at a time when many NBA teams face the threat of losing money and fan loyalty because of a lockout. The owners locked out players July 1 after they were unable to reach an agreement with players on several issues, mostly how much of the league's annual revenue should go to player salaries.

Last week the league said that refunds will be given to season ticket holders, with interest, for any games canceled because of the lockout.

"Lockout or no lockout, we would have done this anyway," Hutt said. "We started planning this back in February or March."

The Rose Garden also will lose 1,600 seats after settling a federal lawsuit with advocates for the disabled over the number of wheelchair-accessible seats should be in the arena, and where they will be placed. A judge ruled that the Rose Garden's wheelchair areas were located in areas less desirable for game viewing, and that the ticketing system made it difficult for disabled fans to obtain prime seats.

The \$10 upper-level seats had been scheduled to increase to \$15 for the 1998-99 season. The most expensive tickets, lower-level seats that were to go up to \$116.50, will cost \$96.05 next season.

Hutt noted that the Blazers' \$34.71 average ticket price is less than the league average in the NFL (\$38.09) and NHL (\$40.64).

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