Brothers set to meet when SEC rivals do battle

Chris and C.J. Leak will meet on the field when Tennessee and Florida play

By Randall Mell
South Florida Sun-Sentinel (KRT)

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Quarterbacks, brothers, rivals.

While this week is delightfully awkward for the Leak family with University of Florida freshman quarterback Chris Leak preparing to meet his brother, C.J., and the Tennessee Volunteers at Florida Field on Saturday, there's no delight in the sibling buildup for Vols fans.

Back in Knoxville, there's nothing worse than a football fanatic scorned.

The Leaks have a unique insight into the bitter undertones that fuel this Southeastern Conference rivalry with the 33rd meeting looming. With half its heart in Knoxville and the other half in Gainesville, the Leak family's allegiance is divided. The game is further complicated by some simmering discontent over the controversy that led to and followed UT's failed bid to woo Chris to Knoxville.

Vols fans felt scorned when Chris decided not to follow C.J. to Tennessee. They thought he added insult to injury by signing with the Gators. Vols coach Phillip Fulmer insists he decided to quit recruiting Chris, not the other way around.

Chris, the hottest quarterback prospect in the nation at Charlotte (N.C.) Independence High, was believed to be all but signed with the Vols when a storm broke out over C.J.'s playing time last season.

When UT starter Casey Clausen injured his collarbone, C.J., then a sophomore, got the starting call against Georgia. But C.J. failed to move the team, appeared unfamiliar with the signals from the sideline, and was benched after only two series. Third-stringer James Banks took over for the rest of the game.

Chris, who was writing a recruiting diary last fall for ESPN.com, was brutally frank in asserting his belief that Fulmer didn't live up to his promises or give his brother a fair chance. UT fans knew Chris likely wasn't headed to Knoxville after what he wrote, and they didn't like him questioning their coach's integrity.

"What I'm trying to do is figure out which schools tell the truth and which schools don't," Chris wrote. "And I'd be an idiot to not try and learn from my brother's experiences in this process just a few years ago."

Chris downplayed the furor his diary caused after Monday's practice.

"I always believe things happen for a reason," Chris said. "I'm proud to be a Gator. There are issues we didn't agree with, but I put that behind me."

Apparently, some Vols haven't. UT players were not available for telephone interviews after Monday's practice, but safety Gibril Wilson told the (Nashville) Tennessean that the Vols are eager to face Chris.

"Back in the summer, I used to always tell [C.J.] that he needed to tell his brother that I was going to get him," Wilson said. "Really, C.J. was put in a weird position with that whole situation. Here and there, some guys were angry, but I don't think it's a big deal."

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>
> **Chris Leak**
> Florida freshman quarterback

Chris said he talks to C.J. "every day" via telephone. Their father bought them a special telephone package just so they could call each other any time they wanted. That they are so close explains Chris' strong reaction to C.J.'s benching.

"We love each other to death," Chris said.

So much so that C.J. flew from Knoxville to Gainesville last weekend to sit with his parents, Curtis and Karen, and watch the Gators rout Florida A&M at The Swamp. C.J. hugged his brother before the game, and the entire family ate at Denny's after the game. C.J. even hung out with Chris and some Gator teammates before Chris drove him to the airport to fly home Sunday night.

"C.J. flew down with Coach Fulmer's blessing," Curtis said.

This bit of information is necessary because the most rabid of Volunteer fans don't like the fact that the brothers fraternize so much. Football secrets, you know, might be spilled, even accidentally. Some of the most devoted UT fans didn't approve when Chris showed up in Knoxville with his father to watch C.J. at a spring practice six months ago.

The father assures fans of both teams that his boys are innocently enjoying the best of brotherhood and don't share information on game plans.

"There are going to be fanatics about secrets in football," Curtis said. "But here is my answer: Don't worry. This is Division I-A football. It isn't like these teams have been playing on a street corner somewhere. These teams watch so much film, study each other so much, they know everything about each other."

Curtis wants his boys to enjoy their unique view of one of the game's best rivalries.

Brothers have squared off against each other many times before in college games. UTEP guard Ben Graniello and Arizona tackle Peter Graniello did so in their season openers this year. BYU defensive end Brady Poppinga actually took on his brother at the line of scrimmage when the Cougars met Utah State and tight end Casey Poppinga last year.

The occurrence, however, is rare when the two brothers are QBs. It happened two years ago when UCLA quarterback Cory Paus led his Bruins against Washington. Casey Paus was a Huskies backup QB in that game.

"It's going to be fun for our family," Curtis said. "C.J. mentored Chris growing up. Chris started wearing No. 12 because that is the number his brother wore. C.J. has helped Chris adjust to college life, telling him what to expect along the way. As parents, it's almost a dream come true to have two sons as close as they are to each other."

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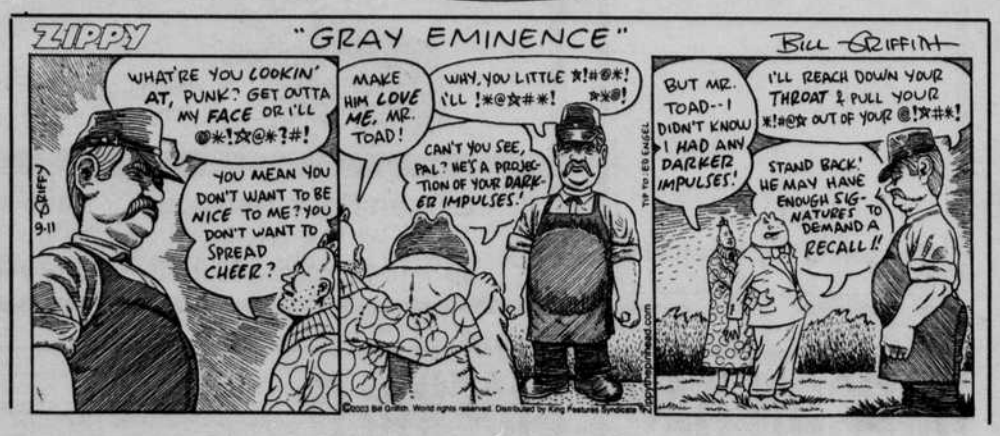
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