

A Heisman divided

Picking best Red Raiders splitting hairs.

Never before has the Heisman Trophy race been this wide open, this vacant of a clear, definitive frontrunner.

Darren McFadden is obviously the best football player in college football, but the running back's Arkansas team has faded from BCS contention with two losses, possibly damaging his individual hopes.

Quarterback John David Booty, another early frontrunner, doesn't even have a firm grip on his position any more at Southern Cal. Hard to win the game's premier award from the sideline.

Similarly, dazzling Steve Slaton's West Virginia team, Tim Tebow's Gators and Mike Hart's Michigan bunch have all stumbled. Texas' Colt McCoy has vanished from national mention. Hawaii's Colt Brennan is fighting injury and interceptions.

So we offer a ready alternative. Or two.

Given their assault on the record books, Texas Tech's deadly tandem of quarterback Graham Harrell and receiver Michael Crabtree could well become 1 and 1A on the Heisman ballots. I stuck Harrell at No. 5 on the latest Rocky Mountain News poll of 10 voters nationwide who share their leanings every week.

Of the 14 players who received votes, Harrell got four, ranking a promising eighth overall.

Crabtree got one fifth-place vote to rank tied for 13th, far behind the three leaders: McFadden, Boston College quarterback Matt Ryan and Tebow. Top-ranked Louisiana State is the only other school represented by two players in the mock balloting, with defensive tackle Glenn Dorsey and linebacker Ali Highsmith splitting up six points.

But Harrell and Crabtree are both strong candidates. In sheer numbers, they're arguably the best at their positions. Harrell is No. 1 in total offense, Crabtree is No. 1 in receptions, yardage and scoring.

So which Red Raider scoring machine is better?

And whom would their own coach choose for the Heisman?

"What are you, Solomon?" Mike Leach said with a laugh Wednesday night. "You want me to cut one of the kids in half? They both belong in the consideration, Graham in particular."

OK, a slight edge to his quarterback then. And why not? Harrell is flirting with becoming Leach's first flinger to complete more than 70 percent of his passes. He's up to 73.5 percent right now after six games following his school-record 83.7 percent completion rate against Iowa State last week.

In truth, either could become Tech's first Heisman Trophy winner, and both are deserving. The school has never had a player finish higher than tremendous halfback Donny Anderson's fourth-place slot in 1965. Four others have showed up in the balloting, including two of Leach's quarterbacks, Kliff Kingsbury (ninth in 2002) and B.J. Symons (10th in 2003).

Asked if Harrell could be the best of all his quarterbacks, Leach paused and said, "That's a tough question. It's hard to say, but he's a really good leader and a real smart guy. He reminds me the most of Kliff because both of their fathers are coaches, their mentalities and mannerisms are the same, and both are very accurate."

If Tech is to knock off Texas A&M today — and I'm expecting a 42-35 Tech win — the burden will rest upon Harrell. The Red Raider defense will also have to keep the Aggie clock-eating, run-oriented offense from playing keepaway with the ball. Aggie running back Jorvorskie Lane doesn't like Tech's chances and went so far as to guarantee an A&M victory.

Leach's reaction?

"Who cares?" Leach said. "I don't know if he's trying to be the Michigan running back (Hart guaranteed a win over Notre Dame). But we coaches spend a long time getting our players to be confident and believe in the cause. Maybe Lane's comments are a byproduct of great coaching. We want 'em to feel that way. I just don't know if we want 'em to say it."

Harrell and Crabtree probably feel as strongly as Lane does but have bitten their tongue and only promise another wild contest in what has become one of college football's most underrated rivalries. They'll need to produce big numbers to keep Tech's chances of its first Big 12 title alive as well as remain in Heisman consideration.

Harrell might have to outperform Missouri quarterback Chase Daniel, who is playing superbly and is drawing serious consideration in the Rocky Mountain News poll. The two will face off in Columbia next week.

I'd probably lean toward Harrell because he receives less help from his defense, which Leach curiously calls "very possibly the most important part of the ball." Neither team has a stout defense although

Tech has improved since Lyle Setencich stepped down as coordinator in favor of Ruffin McNeill.

"We had a level of complacency on defense," Leach said. "That needed to change. We're better now, but we need to keep getting better."

Otherwise, Harrell and Crabtree will have to keep outscoring folks.

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