

## RUSSO ON FOOTBALL: Leinart, Bush and Young eye Heisman

By RALPH D. RUSSO / AP Sports Writer

AUSTIN, Texas — Matt Leinart and Reggie Bush should already have hotel rooms booked in New York for the weekend of Dec. 10, when the Heisman Trophy is handed out.

Vince Young of Texas, you'll need to be there, too.

UCLA running back Maurice Drew and Notre Dame quarterback Brady Quinn would also be wise to leave that weekend open. Marcus Vick, you might want to give your big brother a call. He can tell you what you need to do.

The front-runners are set in the race for college football's biggest individual prize and something drastic would have to happen over the next six weeks for that to change.

In recent years the Heisman Trophy has evolved into something of a college football MVP. The contenders almost always come from the teams vying for a national title.

Last season, Southern California and Oklahoma played for the championship and had four of the five Heisman finalists.

With USC and Texas on track for a date in Rose Bowl, with the title on the line, Leinart, Bush and Young have turned the Heisman chase into a three-man contest.

Leinart and Bush went through all this Heisman stuff last season and were among the favorites before a game was played this season.

Leinart won the bronze statue in 2004, making him the second USC quarterback (Carson Palmer) to take the award in the last three years and the fifth straight QB winner overall.

He could become just the second player to win the Heisman twice, joining Ohio State's Archie Griffin, who won it in 1974-75.

Leinart is on pace to put up similar numbers to last season. Through seven wins, he's thrown for 2,148 yards and 16 touchdowns. The big left-hander added another record to his resume on Saturday, tossing four touchdown passes in a 51-24 victory over Washington to give him a Pac-10 best 87 in his career.

"I didn't even think about it. But it's cool," Leinart said about the record, but he's taken a similar approach with the Heisman.

Bush, the USC tailback with the spine-tingling moves, had to settle for fifth in the Heisman voting last season. But he appears to have inched ahead of his teammate this season to become the Trojans' leading man.

Bigger and stronger, Bush is averaging 116 yards rushing and he's scored 13 touchdowns. And no player in the country has more awe-inspiring moments. The latest example came Saturday on a spinning, spectacular 84-yard punt return TD, his first this season after turning the trick twice last year.

"I think I'm overdue for a punt return," Bush said after the game. "We wanted to really focus on putting fear back in people's hearts of kicking deep to us."

And in USC's epic win over Notre Dame, it was Bush who carried the Trojans with three touchdown runs while Leinart was having an off day. In the end though, Leinart had the game in his hands. It was Leinart who audibled to a risky fade pattern on fourth-and-9 and then made a perfect throw to Dwayne Jarrett for 61 yards.

And it was Leinart who ultimately decided — with Bush's encouragement — to blow off a game-tying field goal attempt and try the touchdown-or-bust quarterback sneak that beat the Fighting Irish 34-31. Of course, Bush got an assist on that play, too — shoving Leinart across the goal line.

Young threw two touchdown passes and ran for another score in helping Texas keep pace with USC on Saturday, improving to 7-0 with a 52-17 victory over previously unbeaten Texas Tech.

The most dangerous running quarterback in the country has been on target in the pocket this season. His passer rating is 169.5, second best in the country and even better than Leinart's 164.4. Young has 14 touchdown passes to go along with his six rushing scores.

The biggest difference in Young this season is a self-confidence the rest of the Longhorns feed off.

After tossing two early interceptions against the Red Raiders, Young didn't allow himself to show frustration.

"It was important for me to show poise and be ready to make plays when we got the ball back," he said.

As long as USC and Texas continue their winning ways, you can count on Leinart, Bush or Young walking away with the trophy.

If the upset bug bites the Trojans and/or the Longhorns, Drew, Quinn and Vick are on deck.

Drew has been overshadowed by Bush in Los Angeles, but is just as versatile and explosive. Drew is second in the nation with 16 touchdowns and fourth in all-purpose yards (185.57 ypg), and the Bruins are 7-0 with a game against USC to finish the regular season.

Quinn set a Notre Dame record with six TD passes against BYU on Saturday, giving him 20 on the season to go with 2,352 yards. Playing for the Fighting Irish never hurts when it comes to the Heisman. Seven Notre Dame players have won the award, more than any other school.

Vick has Virginia Tech unbeaten and chasing Texas and USC in the BCS standings. He hasn't been as flashy on the run as his brother, Michael, was with the Hokies, but he's sixth in the nation in passer rating at 165.6.

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