

UA Sports

Tuitama avoids injury

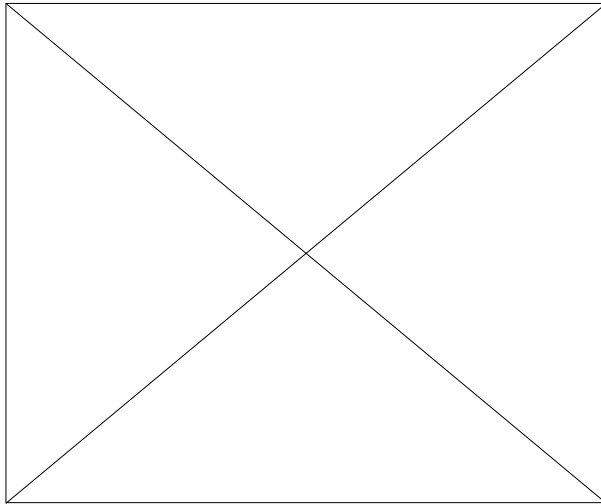
QB withstands hits, but offense still lacks punch

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PROVO, Utah — Willie Tuitama stumbled off the field following his latest medical scare and looked to the sidelines. He found his mother, Nancy, sitting in the front row, and gave her a quick signal.

"To let her know I was OK," Tuitama said. In an opener marred by disappointment, at least Tuitama has his health.

The Wildcats junior quarterback made it through Saturday's 20-7 loss to BYU without suffering a recurrence of the head injuries that ruined his sophomore season and had put his future in doubt. Tuitama was sacked twice, but he generally avoided the Cougars' blitzing defenders. At the end, Tuitama even thrived in the pass-first offense that was installed with him in mind.

Tuitama completed 26 of 36 passes for 216 yards and a touchdown in his first action since being knocked out of last November's season finale against ASU.

Following the game, Tuitama said he was relieved to be relevant again. Tuitama missed parts of six games last season with post-concussion symptoms. He was cleared during the off-season by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, the nation's foremost head injury experts.

"It was definitely good to be out there," Tuitama said. "I just love to be on the field with my teammates. It's great to go out there and play the game I love."

For a while, Tuitama — and the Wildcats' offense — acted as if they'd rather be anywhere else. Arizona accounted for just 41 yards of offense during Saturday's first half. Tuitama completed eight passes, but gained only 22 yards. The Wildcats had one first down, a 3-yard pass from Tuitama to Mike Thomas on the first drive.

"We didn't execute," Tuitama said. "We kept our defense on the field way too much."

Tuitama's afternoon turned for the better just as things seemed to be at their worst.

Tuitama was knocked to the turf by a BYU defender after completing a first-down pass to Thomas with 14 minutes remaining in the game. Tuitama lay motionless on the field for nearly a minute. UA trainer Randy Cohen treated Tuitama and eased the oft-injured quarterback off the field. Tuitama looked dazed, but he simply had the wind knocked out of him.

"Yeah, I was scared, to say the least," Arizona coach Mike Stoops said. Center Blake Kerley feared the worst until he heard Tuitama gasping for air. "When he finally rolled over and said, 'I can't breathe,' I knew he was fine," Kerley said.

Tuitama missed two plays while recovering on the sidelines. Once he returned, Tuitama completed a 34-yard pass to Delashaun Dean that stood as the Wildcats' longest play of the game. Tuitama looked better as the quarter wore on. He completed 7 of 10 passes on Arizona's final drive, including a 7-yarder to Earl Mitchell that accounted for the Wildcats' only points.

Following the game, UA offensive coordinator Sonny Dykes gave Tuitama mixed reviews. Although he started slowly, the UA quarterback showed good decision-making skills and solid leadership later in the game.

"He completed a high percentage of his passes, and he didn't turn it over," Dykes said. "But he didn't — and we didn't — execute enough tonight."