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# The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by Mars - 2008/05/28 18:25

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<http://deseretnews.com/photos/midres/5560334.jpg>

If you don't know who Riley Nelson is, read this post.

<http://utahstate.scout.com/a.z?s=208&p=8&c=1&nid=2401166>

Coming out of high school in 2006, college football coaches knew him as the 6'1" 195 pound Quarterback from Logan high school in Logan, Utah. You know, the All-State / Parade All-American / Deseret Morning News Mr. Football Utah / Gatorade Utah Football Player of the Year kid that set a new national high school football record for touchdowns (84--53 passing and 31 rushing), averaging six TDs per game. He also set nine Utah state records, including career total touchdowns (130), career passing touchdowns (79), season completions (277), season passing yards (4,041), season passing touchdowns (53), season total touchdowns (84), season total yards (5,815), single-game completions (38), and single-game touchdown passes (7). His senior year Nelson led Logan High Grizzlies to the 3A state championship game, which they won in a massive blow-out.

Unfortunately, the QB of the losing team (Pineview HS of St. George, UT) was also a 4-star record-setting high school football leader in the state of Utah (3800 passing yards, 41 passing touchdowns, 650 rushing yards, 7 rushing TDs), James Lark (6'3", 200 lbs.). Lark was taller, bigger, had been more visible for longer on the recruiting scene, and was one of three quarterbacks who had already accepted a scholarship that year to play at BYU (choosing the Cougars over Arizona State, Oregon, and Utah), along with fellow QBs Max Hall (a 6'2" 201 lb. transfer from Arizona State) and Sam Doman (a 6'4", 200 pounder from Oregon).

Riley Nelson was offered a chance to walk-on at BYU to try to earn a scholarship later down the road. Utah State, where his father had played football and his grandpa had been the athletic director (back when it was USAC, or "Utah State Agricultural College" ), offered him a full-ride, tuition and everything. The Utah Utes came late to the table and tried to match USU's offer, along with Stanford and Washington. Nelson committed to play for his hometown Utah State Aggies of Logan, Utah. One news article declared "USU Lands Local Hero!" <http://utahstate.scout.com/2/492903.html>

Nelson was supposed to redshirt his freshman year. He made it about half the season, but after his team had played 5 games without a single offensive touchdown among them, his coaches got desperate. His first start came as a true freshman against Fresno State, one of the strongest football programs in the WAC (Western Athletic Conference, former conference home of BYU). And in one of the greatest upsets of the year, Nelson threw a 30-yard touchdown in the final minutes to lead Utah State to a 13-12 victory over the FSU Bulldogs. That made Riley the first USU QB to win his 1st career start since 1992! He continued to trade time at QB with the original starter for the rest of the season, experiencing very minimal success on a team that seriously lacked talent (925 yards passing, 7 passing TDs, 55.4% completion rate, 277 yards rushing on the partial season). He did manage to set another record though, completing 84% of his passes (21-of-24) against San Jose State. Not bad for a true freshman on a very poor team!

And this is where the story begins to go a different route. You see, Riley Nelson is LDS, and he wanted to go on a Mormon mission. He left after one year at Utah State to serve in Barcelona, Spain full-time for two years. Unfortunately for Latter-day Saint football players, this doesn't always work out well for them in the college football world. Many coaches don't appreciate missions interrupting their football plans. When the missionary get back, they may no longer have a scholarship waiting for them. They might not have the same head coach or assistant coaches in the program, due to firings or better offers. Their team may have gone downhill in their absence, or the team may have brought on additional players for their position who have taken over their spot on the starting roster. No matter what happens the returned Mormon missionary will be two-years out of shape (two years away from football entirely), rusty and older and more easily injured, and sometimes even lacking that same competitive fire.

It doesn't always work out well for their original college of choice either. The usual college football player who decides to leave their school of choice and transfer to another must sit out one year, unless they transfer down to a lower division school (from I-A or FBS to I-AA/FCS). That means they either use their redshirt or lose a whole year of eligibility. BUT, the LDS missionary is released from their contract after 18 months away from school (the same as with a military man, a Peace Core member, etc.). This makes them completely recruitable again, with no negative repercussions. In other words, they can transfer schools when they get back home without having to sit out a year. It happens all the time, and the NCAA is just fine with it. That's how BYU lost 5-star QB Ben Olsen, and it's how they gained Max Hall.

While Riley Nelson has been gone, a lot happened with the quarterbacks at BYU. James Lark broke his leg and left for a mission of his own, along with 4-star QB Jason Munns (6'5.5", 226 lbs.). Max Hall replaced John Beck as the Cougar QB. Sam Doman, 4-star Cade Cooper, and 3-star Jacob Bower all transferred out of the program. 3-star Brenden Gaskins (6'5", 220 lbs.), Kurt McEuen (6'2", 213 lbs.), and Stephen Covey (5'11", 185 lbs.), a recently returned missionary, remain.

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So now we're finally getting to the point of the story- This week, 15 months after Nelson left on his mission to Spain, his father Keith announced that Riley has accepted a scholarship offer to play for BYU and will transfer to the Cougars in March of 2009. And boy did that set off a firestorm of public opinion!!

<http://deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,5143,700229358,00.html>

[http://www.sltrib.com/ci\\_9389982?source=rss](http://www.sltrib.com/ci_9389982?source=rss)

[http://hjnews.townnews.com/articles/2008/05/26/breaking\\_news/breakingnews01.txt](http://hjnews.townnews.com/articles/2008/05/26/breaking_news/breakingnews01.txt)

<http://newsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/68681>

This is how it all went down: <http://www.thefansports.com/blog/1/2008/05/BYU-Football-Nelsons-Dad-Explains-Transfer-Timeline.cfm>

BYU quarterback coach Brandon Doman and BYU wide receivers coach Patrick Higgins are friendly with Riley's ex-high school head football coach, Logan's Mike Favero, who they talk with casually from time to time. Favero asked if BYU was still interested in Nelson, and he was told that they were. Favero then contacted Riley's father and passed on the interest. Keith Nelson emailed his son on a preparation day and asked if he was open to transferring to a different school when he gets back, and the answer was yes. Mr. Nelson then emailed his son's Mission President to ask if it was okay for BYU to email Elder Nelson. BYU sent an email offering a scholarship which Riley quickly accepted, informing Utah State coaches of his decision at the same time. Listen to Keith Nelson tell the story himself!

<http://www.thefansports.com/blog/1/custom/0527%20-%20Keith%20Nelson.mp3>

BYU's head football coach Bronco Mendenhall is strongly against actively recruiting missionaries away from other schools, but at the same time he isn't going to ignore a player with interest in the Cougar program if they are dissatisfied with their own. But when they make a commitment to Brigham Young University, he expects them to act like men and not boys, and for their word to him to be their bond.

Now, Utah State fans are NOT happy about the transfer, for obvious reasons (though many saw this coming). The Aggies have always been in BYU's shadow, so this incident is just adding insult to injury for them. You can read some of their comments at THIS blog <http://www.thefansports.com/blog/1/2008/05/Scott-Garrard-Aggie-Fans-Respond-To-Nelsons-Transfer.cfm> , including: "Shame on Riley... Now, he'll just be one of a thousand nameless Zoobies" and "Someone should really get the NCAA to investigate BYU. Let's be honest here, they are using the mission field as their recruiting grounds... prey on the poor twenty year old with all of their religious mumbo jumbo". The reality is that USU's football program has gone 3-21 over the past two years, while BYU has gone 22-4, including two bowl wins to cap two Top 15 ranked seasons. BYU has won 18 of the last 19 games against Utah State.

The reaction of Utah Ute fans to this story is harder to explain. Yes, they also have to live in the wide shadow of BYU's storied football program. But this doesn't directly involve them. Yeah, they offered him a schollie when he was in high school. Yeah, they've offered him again while he's been gone on his mission. But he's leaving Utah State to go to BYU, leaving the Utes to their lonely selves. With Utah fans, though, that doesn't matter- BYU has always been their primary concern, not their own school. Read THIS Utah blog for an example <http://blogs.sltrib.com/utes/2008/05/weighing-in-on-nelson.htm> . The author states "The immediate concern now, rather than worrying about how the Utes are going to stop the guy when the teams play, is how the recruitment of Riley happened... Were the Cougars wrong in recruiting Nelson? ...I'd say Mendenhall wasn't thinking things all the way through... Coaches need to be concerned with is how the church is going to handle such recruitings. Supposedly, Nelson's mission president approved the contact between BYU and Nelson. I have to wonder if such permission would be granted to BYU's biggest rival, Utah? ...Is the church going to treat all schools equally or give BYU, its private institution, favored access? ...We can't be naive to think athletes haven't been recruited while on missions by BYU coaches or others, but how much is the church going to get involved in approving such matters?" Like Utah's main concern should be the LDS Church, instead of going 10-6 in conference play the last two seasons, while BYU went 16-0.

Some recent transfers that BYU has lost:

DL Isley Filiaga

QB Cade Cooper

QB Sam Doman

QB Jacob Bower

WR Ryan Kessman

DL Matangi Tonga

RB Ray Hudson

WR Joe Griffin

DL Michael Marquardt

TE Antwaun Harris

OL Ofa Moheatau

DB Greg Lovely

DB Billy Skinner

QB Ben Olsen

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Other suspended players:

RB Manase Tonga

DL David Angilau

DL Kyle Luekenga

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by Cougfan84 - 2008/05/28 18:37

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Sounds legit. People transfer all the time (Mission or not). BYU didnt break any rules. Welcome to BYU dude! My cousin is serving in Barcelona Spain..I wonder if he knows him?

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by Cougy\_Monster - 2008/05/28 18:38

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Great consolidation of information. Your karma is now less negative than before. :silly:

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by Polycougar - 2008/05/28 19:12

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He's still my favorite player I've ever watched in real life (just barely passing Luke Staley)... I hope his drive and game translate to success at BYU, because watching him was just plain fun.

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by gmj81 - 2008/05/28 19:22

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Nice summary Mars. It's a shame that all the "sports heads" seem to ignore the truth here trying to make BYU out to be a hypocritical and rule-breaking team. I hate people who have jobs that I would kill for and don't take them seriously or make up fabrications when they wouldn't need to if they just did a little research in stead of writing an opinion piece.

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by southendzone - 2008/05/28 19:36

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One of the things that bothers me is the time period everyone is counting. They say Riley has only been on his mission for 15 months. I think the time starts from the end of the fall semester when he left school. I'm sure he didn't participate in spring ball so you need to add those three months and it adds up to 18 months.

And he is not going to accept the scholarship until his mission is over. Hey there is a lot of water to go under the bridge yet. Who knows maybe he will chang his mind and become a yewt. Wouldn't that include a lot of hard swallows from the accusers.

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by cszjr - 2008/05/28 19:38

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Excellent work Mars. Thanks for the info.

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by ammoncougar1 - 2008/05/28 22:20

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Mars wrote:

Some recent transfers that BYU has lost:

DL Isley Filiaga  
QB Cade Cooper  
QB Sam Doman  
QB Jacob Bower  
RB Ray Hudson  
WR Joe Griffin  
DL Michael Marquardt  
TE Antwaun Harris  
OL Ofa Moheatau  
DB Greg Lovely  
DB Billy Skinner  
QB Ben Olsen

Other suspended players:

RB Manase Tonga  
DL David Angilau  
DL Kyle Luekenga  
DL Russell Tialavea?

You forgot capuccino-gate Ryan Kessman ;)

Go Cougs!!!

Nice summary Mars!

J. Child  
Ammon, ID

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by Florwood - 2008/05/28 23:43

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southendzone wrote:

One of the things that bothers me is the time period everyone is counting. They say Riley has only been on his mission for 15 months. I think the time starts from the end of the fall semester when he left school. I'm sure he didn't participate in spring ball so you need to add those three months and it adds up to 18 months.

Thanks, southendzone. I was confused by the 18 month rule, 15 months on a mission disconnect, now resolved by your explanation.

Maybe, just maybe, BYU isn't as 'dirty and filthy' as David Locke would want us to believe...

And thanks, Mars, for the extended explanation.

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by stgeorgefan - 2008/05/29 02:13

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Great info Mars. I have had the pleasure and displeasure of watching riley play( i'm a Pine View High Grad.) James Lark IMHO is more of a prototypical qb while Riley reminds me of Brandon Doman. Both are great talents and it will be fun to see these two old rivals battle it out for the starting job come 2010. I am assuming Riley might NOT use his redshirt year since he played his freshman yr, and then Lark and Munns return in 2010.

I wonder IF Riley gets the starting job in the future if they will run the option like Riley did so well at Logan. He is kinda short, esp. with Byu O-line being tall. I can see it now - Riley rolls out and pitches it to Adam Timo who blows past his

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defender all the way to the endzone.. I love James Lark, He's a great talent, and he went to my high school and I know him so I kinda favor the guy, But I would LOVE TO SEE THE 2001 OFFENSE AGAIN....

Rileys strengths are not a powerful arm ala lark but he is a gamer and the short range game Byu uses now days added with his running ability could be a giant upside...

So are we gonna recruit a Qb next year then. Josh Nunes is almost to good to pass up...<http://byu.scout.com/a.z?s=338&p=8&c=1&nid=2818326> Of course Nunes could go straight on a mission and then all would be good n Cougartown...

Things are looking good for BYU football.  
(sorry for the ramblings, this was just great news to get at 2am!)

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by JUSTBYU - 2008/05/29 07:05

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Mars, do you really know for sure that the yewts have offered Riley while he has been on his mission?

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by oompabluepaw05 - 2008/05/29 09:21

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Really nice work Mars! Very good info! Sorry to go off topic a little but where did you hear Russel Tialavea was possibly suspended? Did I miss something?

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by jhw5 - 2008/05/29 10:15

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I think the suspension he's referring to has already been served. Before he hurt his knee, in fact.

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by Yndian - 2008/05/29 11:03

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oompabluepaw05 wrote:

Really nice work Mars! Very good info! Sorry to go off topic a little but where did you hear Russel Tialavea was possibly suspended? Did I miss something?

He was suspended for the 2006 Arizona game.

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by Mars - 2008/05/29 14:47

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southendzone wrote: I'm sure he didn't participate in spring ball so you need to add those three months and it adds up to 18 months. Now I'm having a brain fart. Is it 18 months or just the 12 that you would have to sit out if you transferred the usual way? Either way, a full-time mission is 22-26 months, so that won't be an issue and Riley knows it.

As for Utah offering Nelson again during his mission, that has been what I have heard, though I might have a hard time finding a link or an article as official proof. I certainly believe that info, but take it for what you will yourself.

Russell Tialavea was suspended way back in 2006. <http://www.byucougars.com/Filing.jsp?ID=7694> I had forgotten how

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long ago that was and that he had since been reinstated (unlike Matangi Tonga). Crazy the luck our D-linemen have.

Dick Harmon adds to my list of past BYU transfers:  
Brock Stratton (to Texas Tech)  
Jordan Hill (to Arizona State)

Harmon also adds to the "Max Hall, Kelly Poppinga, Harvey Unga, Riley Nelson" list of possible incoming RMs from other programs:

RB Malosi Te'o (UNLV, currently serving in New York)  
<http://deseretnews.com/article/1,5143,700229902,00.html?pg=2>

The "height issue" with Riley as a QB is pretty interesting to me. Nelson is 6-1, McEuen (who I just realized I know very little about) 6-2, Lark 6-3, Gaskins 6-5, and Munns 6-5.5. But Max Hall is only 6-2, as is John Beck. And of course Stephen Covey is 5-11. :lol:

Other QBs BYU is recruiting and has offered:

2009: Upland, CA- Josh Nunes (6-4) <http://recruiting.scout.com/a.z?s=73&p=8&c=1&nid=2818326>  
2009: Pocatello (Highland), ID- Taysom Hill (6-2) <http://hsidaho.scout.com/a.z?s=388&p=8&c=1&nid=3439339>  
2009: San Diego (Scripps Ranch), CA- Tate Forcier (6-1) <http://www.qbforce.com/tate/offers/Offers.htm> BYU Offers  
2010: Issaquah (Skyline), WA- Jake Heaps (6-2) <http://byu.scout.com/a.z?s=338&p=8&c=1&nid=2750323>

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by x\_rugger - 2008/05/29 15:28

stgeorgefan wrote:

So are we gonna recruit a Qb next year then. Josh Nunes is almost too good to pass up...<http://byu.scout.com/a.z?s=338&p=8&c=1&nid=2818326> Of course Nunes could go straight on a mission and then all would be good in Cougartown...

nunes is not LDS, and if you believe Jay Drew, even though BYU is in his final 8, the odds are against him coming here. He certainly has his pick. My gut feeling is that BYU wouldn't have gone after Nelson if they felt they had a chance with Nunes.

<http://blogs.sltrib.com/recruiting/2008/05/spurned-recently-by-ucla-which-offered.htm>

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by mountaincougar - 2008/05/29 16:02

McEuen has the biggest arm of the group and is now the #2 QB. He seems to have been lost in all the shuffle the past couple of seasons but has broken out this spring. In watching Max quite often at practice and comparing him to other QB's, I think he is right at 6'1". I would have to see the tape to believe that Covey is 5'11". But no matter what the height, Max gets the job done. With some work on ball protection, he should have quite a year. I am looking forward to fall practice and seeing them ratchet things up.

Go Cougars!!!

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by Hawkwing - 2008/05/29 16:46

mountaincougar wrote:

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couple of seasons but has broken out this spring. In watching Max quite often at practice and comparing him to other QB's, I think he is right at 6'1". I would have to see the tape to believe that Covey is 5'11". But no matter what the height, Max gets the job done. With some work on ball protection, he should have quite a year. I am looking forward to fall practice and seeing them ratchet things up.

Dude, I appreciate your man-crush on McEuen, but not every topic has to have his name brought up.

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## Re:The Whole Riley Nelson Story (Long)

Posted by Mars - 2008/05/31 02:43

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Hawkwing wrote: Dude, I appreciate your man-crush on McEuen, but not every topic has to have his name brought up. At 6-foot-5-inches, McEuen is 4 inches taller than Riley Nelson. So at the very least he has that going on for him.

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