

Battle Ready

Ricky Santos '07 steps in to helm UNH football for an ailing Coach Mac

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PHOTO CREDIT: JEREMY GASOWSKI / UNH

In August, the football team did something it hadn't done in the last two decades: The Wildcats practiced under the watchful eyes of a head coach other than Sean McDonnell '78.

On Aug. 26, McDonnell announced to his team that he was taking a leave of absence to deal with health issues. Ricky Santos '07, a four-year starting quarterback and one of

the greatest Wildcat players ever under McDonnell's tutelage, took over the program on an interim basis.

"I think it went well," Santos said after his first practice. "I think the guys responded. The message beforehand was that this is all about leaving this place better than it was before and having a place Coach Mac wants to come back to. That's everybody's goal, his goal included, to make sure he can come back and coach and finish this thing on his terms."

Director of athletics Marty Scarano has great confidence in the ability of Santos and the rest of the coaching staff to lead the team forward. He expects McDonnell to return to coaching the team, but it's unclear when that might be.

An intense, passionate, engaging and fearless leader respected throughout the Colonial Athletic Association and all of college football, McDonnell has been the face of the program and has built it into one of the nation's best since taking over for his own mentor and coach, Bill Bowes, for the 1999 season. Between them, Bowes and McDonnell have led the program for nearly half a century (McDonnell was in his 21st year, Bowes coached 27).



WILDCATS AS AN UNDERGRAD.

It's not the first time Santos has been called upon to step up for the UNH football team. As a redshirt freshman in 2004, he was tapped as play caller midway through the team's first game of the season — at defending FCS national champion Delaware. The young quarterback led the team to a win in that game, kickstarting his standout career, and led the Wildcats into the national playoffs, too, beginning a string of 14 straight appearances in the tournament.

That streak ended last fall and the goal since then has been to start another.

After an earlier stint as wide receivers coach at UNH, Santos returned to the team last winter as associate head coach and quarterbacks coach. He had spent the previous three seasons as an assistant coach at Columbia University.

Now, with his coach's lessons to guide him, Santos will carry on McDonnell's mission.

"You come in and you're young and you're a kid and you think you know everything, and you realize you don't know anything, and he instills all these morals and values in you," Santos says. "Ultimately those are the same things that we're leaning on right now

SANTOS CARRYING THE BALL FOR THE

to get us through this tough time. We talk about it all the time. We train for adversity so when you get to real-life situations that are hard, you're ready for it. Because of McDonnell, we're ready to battle through a situation like this."

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