

# New attitude, wins lead to great year

Grizz ride momentum from early successes and hope for more

By Bruce Smith  
Matchup

Coming into the 2011 season, the Copper Hills football team had won just one game over the previous two years.

Worse yet, in most games the Grizzlies weren't even competitive. As the team prepared to enter a new, even more difficult region, wholesale changes had to be made. Coach Kai Kapele introduced a new offense, but that's not what turned things around.

Simply, a new attitude developed.

"It really started right at the end of last season when the kids decided they needed to work hard to achieve what they wanted," Kapele said. "They put a lot of work in the weight room and showed a lot of heart and drive."

The Grizzlies won their season opener – at Taylorsville – and captured three of their first five games. That created a euphoric feeling that caught on, not just with the players but the students and fans, too. Copper Hills didn't win a region game and finished 3-7 overall, but achievements were clearly made.

"I definitely feel like we made improvement," Kapele



Henry Kemp's speed helped him make dozens of big plays during the season.

said. "Our coaching staff focused on what schemes worked better here. We've gotten closer to what works with the kinds of kids we have."

Seniors Christian Rixe, Tommy Ligman, Zach Smith, Henry Kemp and several others led the way. There were great memories made, like when the team set a school record with 27 points in the first quarter in a 50-21 decision over Hillcrest, but had just five first downs but still claimed an improbable

21-14 win against American Fork that will be remembered forever.

After the American Fork win, the fans flooded the field to congratulate the players.

"It was awesome," said Ligman, who was the team's leading rusher during the season. "When the fans rushed the field, it was the greatest feeling ever. It brought me to tears."

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# COPPER HILLS FOOTBALL: 2011 season recap



## 2011 results (3-7, 0-5)

<u>Date</u>	<u>Opponent</u>	<u>W/L</u>	<u>Score</u>
Aug. 19	at Taylorsville	W	27-18
Aug. 26	at Kearns	L	0-31
Sept. 2	HILLCREST	W	50-21
Sept. 9	at Herriman	L	21-40
Sept. 16	AMERICAN FORK	W	21-14
Sept. 23	WEST JORDAN*	L	19-49
Sept. 30	JORDAN*	L	10-41
Oct. 7	ALTA*	L	0-51
Oct. 14	at Cottonwood*	L	20-44
Oct. 19	at Brighton*	L	14-43

\* - Region 3 games. Home games in CAPS

**LEFT: QB Aaron Khan** learned a new offense and led the Grizz to wins in three of their five games.

**RIGHT: Bryson Allen** caught a 70-yard TD pass for the first score of the season.



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“That was our best defensive game,” added Zach Smith. “When it was over, I looked up and wondered, “Did we just do that?”

They did. It wasn’t a total turnaround, but the coaches viewed it as a stepping stone toward success. Since the school opened in 1995, it has never finished with a winning record. However, the improvement made was one of the best by any Utah high school team this year.

“The whole school was happy,” said Kapele. “American Fork was one game where the kids put everything into it. We knew region was going to be tough and we had to capitalize on the preseason games.”

Ligman and Rixe made the all-region team. They made plays on both sides of the ball and avoided injuries. Even when Copper Hills’ success faded as the region season progressed, they never quit and inspired their teammates to do the same.

The team’s offense was more conservative than the “spread” offense from years past, but it resulted in more success rushing the football. Ligman and Kemp were the leading ground-gainers as the Grizzlies also set a school mark in that area.

The passing attack didn’t provide much. When it did, however, it often resulted in big plays. Smith and Bryson Allen averaged over 20 yards per reception. Kapele called Allen one of the team’s most improved players.

“I always knew that Rixe and Ligman could play,” he said. “Bryson was a real surprise. This was his first year on varsity and it blew me away how much he improved.”

Overall, there was improvement everywhere.

“Wins will do that,” said Ligman. “We worked hard all year and played well at (7-on-7) tournaments during the summer. Those were team-building events and helped us play for each other during the season.”

The five consecutive region losses didn’t dampen the team’s motivation when the season ended. The coaches and players learned a lot. Will it lead to more success?

“This year, we felt like we had a chance in every game,” said Kapele. “We turned a few heads, but we still need to focus on getting the kids stronger.”