

QB Gerry Bohanon once thought he'd never play again. Now, he is the risk worth taking for BYU.

South Florida transfer is competing for starting role with Cougars.

By KEVIN REYNOLDS

Provo — The Florida football field was essentially vacant last December when BYU's top decision makers arrived to gauge their future.

Gerry Bohanon, the star prospect turned major project, was on the field with a few receivers. A month before, Bohanon lay awake at night thinking he'd never play again. He couldn't even throw a football more than a few dozen times a day without debilitating soreness in his shoulder.

Yet here he was, further removed from the once-bright Sugar Bowl spotlight than he'd ever thought, trying to salvage his career with an improbable tryout.

BYU's top offensive analyst, Matt Mitchell, had asked asking if he wanted to join the Cougars quarterback competition. They needed a jolt after a 5-7 season. Mitchell and offensive coordinator Aaron Roderick could be on a plane to watch Bohanon throw.

Bohanon pushed his recovery to be ready. He worked up to 60 throws a day, even if it hurt, and can throw every play he used, and can throw every play he used, and can throw every play he used.

When BYU's staff left the Florida field, they'd seen enough to make a bet on the former Big 12 star.

Roderick signed off on Bohanon competing with incumbent starter Jake Retzlaff. One of the two would be his leader going into a critical second year in the Big 12.

And now Bohanon has his shot. The quarterback who won New Year's Six bowl game over Ole Miss, then fell from grace and transferred to USC, then tore his labrum and was out of the sport, is back. And BYU might need him more than ever.

"I wanted an opportunity," Bohanon said. "I had the game taken away from me for a year. I have a lot to prove to myself."

The way back

Bohanon didn't fully understand why he was the one watching



Former South Florida quarterback Gerry Bohanon looks for a receiver against Florida on Saturday, Sept. 17, 2022, in Gainesville, Fla. Bohanon is in the running for BYU's starting job this fall.

from the sidelines in 2023. For the majority of his career, Bohanon was billed as a can't-miss prospect.

Coming out of Earle, Arkansas, in 2017, he was an Elite 11 finalist — a collection of the best young signal callers in the country. He was right there alongside future NFL stars like Justin Fields and Trevor Lawrence. Back then, Bohanon could rip a ball 60 yards without blinking.

But at South Florida last year, he struggled to grip a tennis ball. It stemmed from a torn labrum he suffered in Week 7 of the 2022 season. He was going for an extra yard against Tulane when his shoulder caved in. It was an awful end to a terrible season, where the Bulls went 1-11 and cheered house on the coaching staff.

Bohanon had surgery in November. His career was put on life support months later. "I didn't throw a ball for six months," he said.

When fall camp rolled around, his days looked like a roller coaster to walk again. His first day back, he couldn't throw a tennis ball more than 10 yards. "It was dying," he said of the ball

flight. "I couldn't do it." Doctors put him on a plan to go from throwing a tennis ball to eventually a weighted ball. Some days, he was told to stand in front of a wall just feet away and throw at maximum velocity into the surface. It built his strength without trying to push the ball down field.

By November 2023, Bohanon wasn't convinced his shoulder would ever come back. He waited a year and he was still struggling to throw a football 70 times a week without extreme pain. And USC moved on without him, surprising everyone with a 7-6 season and a bowl game win.

"I didn't think I had enough," he said. "I got sore, fatigued. You try to increase those [throwing] numbers and after that you're like, 'I don't feel good. Can I do this?'"

Even in his lowest moments prior, Bohanon never questioned if he had the physical tools. When he went to a four-star recruit, he was used almost immediately as a runner. He appeared in 10 games as a sophomore and accounted for five touchdowns in the Bears 11-win campaign. By his fourth year, head coach Dave Aranda handed him the keys and

he won a Big 12 title. When Aranda came to him a year later and said he was giving the job to freshman quarterback Blake Shapen, it stung. But it wasn't for a lack of talent. USC gobbled him up and was ready to win.

But after his injury, all of that felt like it was over. "In the moment, you don't really see it. You're like, 'Why does this feel this way?'" he said. "I just wanted to feel normal after this much time."

Why would BYU take a risk?

Roderick and the offensive staff didn't go into the last transfer window dead set on taking a quarterback.

Whereas in 2022, when Roderick went through at least 25 names in the portal before landing on former starter Kedon Slovis, this time it was only a couple.

"It wasn't a lot," Roderick said. "We were looking for the right fit." And while Bohanon's health was a risk, it makes more sense in context.

BYU's offense wasn't Big 12 ready in 2023. The running game

“He understood nothing was going to be handed to him. This was going to be a battle. You have to win the spot.”

KALANI SITAKE

BYU head coach on QB Gerry Bohanon

was atrocious and the quarterback play for the most part, under struggled. Slovis struggled to move the ball before he got hurt. Retzlaff came in for the final four games and showed flashes, but was turnover prone. Against Oklahoma, he threw a 99-yard pick-six that cost BYU a program-altering win and a shot at the postseason.

This offseason, BYU couldn't gift Retzlaff the job and expect to get better.

And Bohanon checked plenty of boxes. He'd taken care of the ball. He had Big 12 experience. He ran a similar offense at Baylor. The Bears offensive coordinator, Jeff Grimes, used to work at BYU with Roderick.

"It's similar," Roderick said. "Some verbiage stuff that is different."

Plus, head coach Kalani Sitake liked the culture fit. He saw a player with a "different perspective" now that he'd been away. This was a more mature quarterback than the one BYU recruited two years before when he left Baylor.

At one of BYU's final spring practices, Bohanon stepped into a throw in the indoor practice facility and it sailed over the receivers' head. It was incomplete by a few feet but it flew 60 yards in the air. Internally, Bohanon couldn't have been happier.

Five months before, maybe even a few weeks before, he wouldn't have had the arm strength to make that throw. Now, it is starting to come back.

As to whether he will get to show it in a game next year, that is still to be determined.

"He understood nothing was going to be handed to him," Sitake said in February. "This was going to be a battle. You have to win the spot. I don't know who is going to be our starting quarterback. I have no idea who that is going to be right now."

That is fine with Bohanon. He's just happy to have the opportunity.



Brooklyn Nets forward Mikal Bridges is a two-time NBA All-Star.



Chicago Bulls guard Zach LaVine is a two-time NBA All-Star.



Atlanta Hawks guard Trae Young is a three-time NBA All-Star.



New Orleans Pelicans forward Brandon Ingram is a versatile scorer.

Jazz

ever again, was moved for two first-round picks, two second-round picks, and a pick swap. Keeping the pick swap identical across the 11 picks allows us to compare apples to apples.

About 5,500 fans voted in each poll. Fans were allowed to vote yes, no, or that "it depends" — perhaps on the exact salary ballast or picks used.

What did Jazz fans say?

Jazz fans said yes just four of the proposed trades. Luka Doncic, Devin Booker, Joel Embiid and Jaylen Brown. That being said, Doncic was the only player that Jazz fans were overwhelmingly in support of making a deal for. For the others, Kevin Durant, Trae Young, Zach LaVine, Zion Williamson, Brandon Ingram, Mikal Bridges, and Dejean Murray, Jazz fans largely said "thanks, but no thanks."

Some fans argued for an extremely conservative approach, saying the team was too far away

to make any trades for a star. "Jazz still need several starters before they get a star. One star player would not make them a championship team, or even close. Hence, all the reservations," Twitter user kdelaney wrote.

User RobRidgely said "You have to be realistic about when your window is. The West is a murderers row over the next 3-5 years — the Nuggets, T-Wolves, and Thunder will continue to get better, with Wemby's Spurs lurking. Do any of those players (besides Luka) put you past the first round of the playoffs?"

Others, though, were full-blown in favor of nearly any trade, recognizing the value available on the market.

"No brainer to me... any of these are worth three firsts... think of it as trading our three rookies recently for one of these top players in the league... You would do it in a heartbeat," Uthajazz wrote. Uthajazz, a music fan, concurred, writing, "I'm very glad Jazz didn't get to make the decision. Absolutely shocking results on some of these. If you only had to give up 5 picks you do almost all of these instantly without a second thought."

There was a third group of fans — and perhaps the most sizable, given the disparate results above — who wanted to acquire some of the players, but not others. For one example, some saw Zion Williamson as an intriguing target because of his age and prodigious talent, while others point to his injury history and off-court difficulties as reasons to stay away. Jaylen Brown is a quality player, but just signed a five-year, \$300 million extension. Is he good enough to earn that salary? Reasonable minds disagree.

A shrinking market

We have to acknowledge: These polls are not reality. NBA GMs don't simply get to go to a super-market full of NBA stars and pay sticker price, offering their three first-round picks and matching salaries to get a star. The Jazz's options are going to be significantly more limited — and more competitive.

For one, there's no real indication that Doncic is on the market, or even especially close. Rumors have spread since the Mitchell/Goleet trades that the Jazz were

positioning themselves to acquire him, but the Mavericks are still a playoff-contending franchise that has no real reason to move on from the 25-year-old. If he were on the market, though, he'd surely command more than three picks — probably more than double that.

There was hope that the Phoenix Suns might want to be sellers after a disappointing season where they were swept in the first round by the Timberwolves. But at a news conference on Thursday, Suns owner Mat Ishbia said that he had no intention of making any selling moves, instead looking to add pieces to his core around Booker and Durant. "Ask the other 29 GMs — 26 of them would trade their whole team for our whole team, our draft picks, and everything as is. The house is not on fire. We're in a great position. It's not hard to fix," he argued, albeit unconvincingly.

The same is true of the New Orleans Pelicans, who also on paper seem stuck in the middle in the Western Conference. They also probably need to make changes to where they want to go. But their team's basketball decision maker, David Griffin, said that they were

"moving in the right direction" in a press conference once their team was eliminated. Brandon Ingram and Zion Williamson look likely to stay at this point.

There are some brighter spots. Trae Young and Dejean Murray have clashed in a disappointing backcourt for the Atlanta Hawks, and indications are that their leadership wants to move one of those players. Zach LaVine was available at the deadline for the Chicago Bulls, and nothing since then points to a change. The Nets have looked to hang on to Mikal Bridges so far, but have been non-committal about their future this offseason.

But even 25% of Jazz fans want to give up the assets it would likely require to get those players in Utah. For his part, Ainge said that the Jazz are "not really interested in disposals," but instead are "interested in good 6-7 year players." He continued, "I'm not saying that we wouldn't get some veteran player for a short-term fix to buy us some time, but that's not likely."

He may well have different preferences than the fanbase does. But they do have in common: a reluctance to take on just any star.