

# Jones aims to get UC off to faster start

Not underestimating high-powered Toledo

By Bill Koch  
bkoch@enquirer.com

After two straight weeks in which the University of Cincinnati Bearcats started slowly and then rallied in the second half to produce a blowout victory, UC coach Butch Jones plans to focus this week on getting out of the gate a little more quickly.

"I can guarantee it will be emphasized every way, shape and form," Jones said Monday. "It starts with the way we get dressed for practice, the way we approach the day. I'm going to rely on our seniors and some of our leaders to really educate some of our younger players about what it takes to perform at a very high level."

UC, ranked No. 21 this week in both the AP media poll and in the first BCS standings of the season, will take its 5-0 record and its eight-game winning streak to Toledo to play one of the best teams the Mid-American Conference has to offer. The Rockets (6-1) have won six



## UC AT TOLEDO

7 p.m. Saturday, Glass Bowl  
Webcast: ESPN3  
Radio: WLW-AM (700)

straight and have scored 50 or more points in each of their last two games.

They also have a history of beating BCS-conference opponents, having knocked off one every year from 2006 to 2010.

This is the Rockets' second of two games against BCS competition this year. They lost 24-17 in overtime to Arizona in their season opener.

Toledo, which is coming off a 52-47 defeat of Eastern Michigan last Saturday, has averaged 44.3 points and 503 yards in its last four games, but will be facing a UC defense this week that ranks 10<sup>th</sup> nationally in points allowed at 14.4 per game.

The Rockets are led on offense by junior quarterback Terrance Owens, who ranks second in MAC history in completion percentage (66.5 per-

cent). Owens was drafted as a pitcher last June in the 40<sup>th</sup> round of the Major League Baseball draft by the San Diego Padres.

Junior wide receiver Bernard Reedy caught 11 passes against EMU for a school-record 237 yards and set another school record with 407 all-purpose yards – 237 on receptions and 170 on kickoff returns. He returned one kickoff 89 yards for a touchdown.

"Their skill level is very, very good," Jones said. "They do a great job of creating space for their playmakers. They're a very, very fast team. You're playing a very high-level team and then you have to go into their own stadium. It's a very difficult place to play. We need to start much faster. Everyone has to have a greater sense of urgency."

Toledo head coach Matt Campbell, at 32, is the youngest coach in the Football Bowl Sub-division.

He was hired Dec. 12 and coached the Rockets in their 42-41 victory over Air Force in the Military Bowl.

He said Monday he's looking forward to this game to see how



UC head coach Butch Jones slaps hands with his players during the Fordham game Saturday night. AP/JAL BEHRMAN

far the Toledo program has come in recent years.

"They deserve to be in the Top 25 in the country," Campbell said of UC. "I really love what Cincinnati has done over the last four or five years to build their program. It's exciting for us to see where we've come in the last four or five years when you get a chance to play against an opponent like that."

UC will be the third-highest ranked team ever to play Toledo at the Glass Bowl. The Rockets

will return the game at Nippert Stadium on Sept. 13, 2014.

**LOCAL CONNECTIONS:** Toledo has six local players on its roster: defensive back Chris Dukes (Colerain), defensive back Cameron Cole (La Salle), linebacker Drake Fletcher (Roger Bacon), center Greg Mancz (Anderson), tight end Justin Morrow (Colerain) and defensive end Keenen Gibbs (La Salle).

Dukes is listed at No. 2 on the depth chart for this game.

## Amé

Continued from Page C1

You spiraled out of control until a teacher and coach changed your life. Your anger still simmered and your regret remained, but you finally saw your future beyond high school, and you were just so tired of being unhappy.

So you straightened out your academics and went to a junior college and on to Xavier, and in the spring you'll be the first of your siblings to graduate from college.

You're Amé White. And you're a fighter.

### 'I was just a menace'

Now you're back to being you and Amé is Amé, which is to say she has an infectious smile, freckled cheeks and a life story so compelling that her teammate, Alex Smith, is filming a 30-minute documentary about her. Smith plans to pitch it to PBS.

"I think her story is one that everybody should hear because it's so inspiring," Smith said. "It shows Amé's spirit and how she's a great person and a great friend and leader, even though she's been through things that are pretty intense and tragic."

In 15 years of playing volleyball, Smith has never met a more explosive fighter on the court – or anyone so thankful. Amé is the first to express gratitude for gear the players receive in their lockers before the season, an event dubbed "Christmas." When the team loses a match at Cintas Center, Amé reminds players how lucky they are to compete in such a fine arena.

"I'm grateful because I never had all these opportunities, all these things given to me," Amé said.

Money was scarce growing up. Amé's mother, Penina White, worked two jobs to make ends meet and was gone from 3:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m. When a layoff left the family in dire straits, Amé said her mother dealt drugs to put food on the table.

"I'm never, ever proud of it," Penina White affirmed. "I would never tell you that would be an option for anyone."

Amé stayed away from drugs, but couldn't dodge trouble. She was a smart girl, a trait that became her saving grace when appearing before juvenile court judges, but she said she was kicked out of three elementary schools, a junior high and a high school for "fighting or getting caught doing bad things."

Here's how Amé explained it: She was respectful at home to her mother and her mother's boyfriend, Alvin Itula, but she became someone else when she left. She said she lived in an area infiltrated by gangs and it was cool to be tough and important to be strong.

Mrs. White said Amé was also angry about her limited relationship with her dad, Dave White, who lived about an hour away with her two brothers and sister.

Amé sullied the elementary school she was attending with graffiti. She lit her homework on fire near an open field and created a blaze that forced the cancellation of a kids' carnival. She made her first trip to juvenile court in fourth grade after punching a boy who'd insulted her sister.

Amé's dad accompanied her to court, where, he said, there was a mass arraignment of juveniles in trouble for things like shoplifting. There were 15- and



Outside hitter Amé White overcame a troubled childhood in Salt Lake City to become an inspirational leader of the Xavier volleyball team, and now hopes to represent Tonga at the 2016 Olympics. PROVIDED

16-year-olds and then there was 9-year-old Amé, who didn't even know the definition of assault.

White, an investigator for the Utah Attorney General's Office, tried to reason with Amé and steer her in the right direction, but she tangled with a lot more trouble before finding her way. She and her friends stole bikes when they didn't want to walk home from school. They stole shoes for athletics. When she was 15, they stole a car, bought a paintball gun, and drove around "shooting out the window" until police converged on them at a four-way stop, Amé said, guns pointing.

"There was a time I thought, 'This is going to be a long road for her.' I didn't know how she was ever going to succeed," Dave White said.

Penina White called it a struggle and said Amé was a handful, but Amé herself probably put it best: "I was just a menace. I was the worst. I was such a troublemaker."

### Living with loss

If there was one person Amé adored, it was Itula. She regarded him as her father for the decade he was in her life, and said he was perfect in her eyes despite his checkered past, which included a history of fighting with police.

Amé was sitting on the porch with the 35-year-old Itula in 2006, sharing good news – she was eligible to play volleyball her sophomore season – when two Salt Lake City police officers approached. They mistakenly believed Itula was wanted on a warrant, according to a report in the Salt Lake Tribune.

Penina White was inside, sleeping. She quickly awoke.

"My mom came up and was like, 'No, check your system again. We just got the warrant cleared.' They said, 'No, he has a warrant. We've got to take him in,'" Amé said.

Itula bolted. He ran toward the back of the house and into an alley, Penina White said.

"Growing up, he always got in trouble. His first instinct was to run. I think he was just so used to getting in trouble all the time that when he wasn't in trouble, he thought he was," Mrs. White said.

The officers chased Itula around the block and caught up with him near the residence. They told Itula to get to the ground. He resisted, Amé said.

Penina White implored her daughter to talk to Itula so he would comply with the officers, but Amé froze. She tearfully described it as being "in stuck mode."

"I just watched the whole thing and my mom was screaming at me, over and over: 'Amé, do something! Tell him to get on the ground! He'll listen to you!' But I couldn't say one thing," Amé said. "I just watched it all

happen."

The Salt Lake Tribune said officers sprayed Itula with pepper spray, struck his leg with a baton and shot him multiple times with a Taser when he continued to act aggressively.

Two more officers arrived to help subdue Itula, who said he couldn't breathe after being handcuffed.

His pulse weakened. He was pronounced dead at a hospital.

Three months later the newspaper revealed that Itula had been under the influence of cocaine and methamphetamine. A medical examiner determined Itula died from "excited delirium," a drug-induced condition that can "spur pulmonary arrest, especially after being restrained," the paper said.

Amé was consumed with anger and grief and guilt over Itula's death. She lost trust in authority. She vowed never to be on "stuck mode" again, which led to her expulsion from Highland High.

A boy picked a fight with two of her male cousins, flashing gang signs before hitting them both, Amé said. She thought she was next. She delivered a preemptive punch and didn't stop there.

"He's on the ground and I'm on top of him just (hitting him). And then it clicked in my head: 'What are you doing? You're in (volleyball) season right now.' I freaked out and jumped off and I grabbed my backpack and tried to walk away," Amé said.

"(Administrators) called me in and asked why I was in a fight. I was like, 'What are you talking about? I was trying to break it up.' They were like, 'Really? Kicking the kid in his head ain't breaking it up, Amé.'"

And that was it, her last chance at the school. She left behind the college volleyball coaches slated to scout her at an upcoming tournament, as well as the adults who'd shaken their heads and said she was wasting her talent.

Amé and her mother moved



Amé White transferred to Xavier after her mother wanted her to get far away from her past in Utah. THE ENQUIRER/LEIGH TAYLOR

into a five-bedroom house filled with 16 relatives in a different school district, where Amé enrolled and excelled and found a way to feel, for the first time in a long time, alive.

### A new influence

Wendy Sanders knew a thing or two about Murray High's newest junior. Murray and Highland were rivals, and Sanders, Murray's volleyball coach, had had her hands full trying to prepare for Amé when she was on Highland's team.

"Athletically, she was just so dominant. We always tried to come up with a game plan to at least slow her down," Sanders said.

Sanders also knew Amé's reputation. It wasn't good. Highland was one of the toughest schools in the area, and "she was definitely the toughest kid on the toughest team," Sanders said.

But Sanders saw a lot of herself in Amé and understood why Amé felt compelled to fight her way through life. They had a heart-to-heart about pain and loss and making better decisions, and they sorted out Amé's academics as part of the credit recovery class Sanders taught.

Amé repaid Sanders with respect.

"She was the only person I could kind of feel comfortable talking to. She sat me down and said, 'Look, these are your grades. If you want to play for me, you need to go to class, you need to do this.' She introduced me to all these tutors that would talk to my teachers for me. She put me in a class to express my feelings. She gave me all this help, which I really needed," Amé said.

It was the beginning of Amé's transformation, which was enhanced by a renewed relationship with her dad and popularity among classmates. She was Homecoming queen runner-up her senior year.

About the same time, a juvenile court judge gave Amé a huge opportunity. He saw her potential, she said, and promised to clear all charges against her if she never returned to court.

She didn't. Amé went on to lead Murray's volleyball team to a third-place finish at the state tournament and earn her high school diploma. She played basketball and volleyball at Salt Lake Community College, all the while planning a transfer to a bigger college to play volleyball.

"She said, 'Well, Mom, I think I'll stay at the (University of Utah) or play somewhere near here.' I said, 'Oh, hell no. You're not staying here. In order for you to get stability in your life, you're going to have to leave,'" Penina White said.

Xavier coach Mike Johnson accidentally stumbled upon

Amé – it was "dumb luck," he said – while reviewing footage of another player. He later learned Dave White played football for two years at the University of Cincinnati, which provided a connection to the city.

Johnson also recruited Amé to play her natural position when other schools wanted her as a libero, or defensive specialist. She committed to XU soon after her visit.

At 5-foot-7, Amé was and is small for an outside hitter, but she has an astounding 30-inch vertical leap. Because it took time for her to adjust to the Division I game, Johnson said, she became a consummate teammate while working to be her best.

"In some ways she's one of our leaders in terms of how hard people compete," Johnson said. "We actually hold her responsible for the level of competitiveness in practice. She's probably one of the best competitors we have."

### Finding peace

Being inked hurt, oh yes, Amé said, but she couldn't imagine a better tribute to her family than via the seven tattoos on her body. The first one, on her calf, says "Tonga." The second is her mother's name.

She has a big musical note on her left thigh, representing her family's musical gifts, and a sleeve of tattoos on her right arm all the way to her elbow. Her inner arm says "I am my family's keeper."

It's the truth. Amé has steadfast bonds with her parents and her older siblings, whom she talks to regularly.

On separate occasions Penina White, who is working on her own degree, and Dave White, who has remarried, have made cross-country trips to see Amé play. They both plan to return to Cintas Center before Amé's greatest achievement: College graduation.

"I want to get my degree because I know it'll set the bar higher for my nieces and nephews and the younger generation," Amé said, tears rolling down her face. "That's a really big important thing."

Her big-picture plan is to play volleyball overseas, represent Tonga in beach volleyball in the 2016 Olympics, and eventually help teens from similar walks of life.

Amé's evolution from troubled child to adjusted 21-year-old college student and athlete has, at times, left Dave White pinching himself.

He credits Sanders for sparking the change and his daughter for being responsible and accountable.

"She definitely isn't the person she was five or six years ago," he said. "You just can't help but get that tear in your eye, knowing that she's really turned it around."

Amé carries memories with her, thoughts of Itula. She wishes he could see her now.

She has found a certain peace, too.

For years she waited to be asked one question: What would she say now to the people who didn't believe in her, those who thought she was wasting her talent?

When the query was finally posed, she thought for a moment. Then she laughed.

"I still don't know," she said.

Does it matter?  
"No. It doesn't. They never did matter," Amé said. "I'm really happy now, but I feel like I'm not done yet. I want to be a person that makes history, that changes lives."