

0-4

The perplexing search for reasons



In the aftermath of Oregon's 12th straight loss Saturday, the scenes were painfully repetitious of games past.

Don Read, his answers delivered softly between sniffles, talked about recovering from mistakes, about "the greatest kids I've ever coached," about positive things he saw in Oregon's 27-12 Pac-8 loss to Washington.

Washington coach Don James said the Ducks were tough, they'd certainly win some games this year.

And everybody not wearing purple and gold and not lost in a bourbon or a Blitz was asking why.

Why can't Oregon win a football game?

Man has walked on the moon, split the atom and traveled faster than the speed of sound. So why can't Oregon's football team do something simple, like score more points than an opponent?

Jim Murray, the jocular LA sports columnist, will tell you football games are not won in the trenches or anywhere else on the football field. They're won, he says, in the living rooms of 250-pound fullbacks where recruiters make their offers.

While Murray's assessment isn't too far-fetched, it is too simplistic. Just as blaming Oregon's 0-4 record on Don Read is.

In the perplexing search for reasons, you could take the "if" route. If Jack Henderson hadn't fumbled on the one against San Jose State...If only Oregon hadn't had that punt blocked last week against Minnesota...If only the Ducks hadn't been called for delay of the game against Washington...

Then the Ducks would be 3-1, right?

Wrong. If you want to talk about what could have happened, what should have happened, remember that it'll work against you as much as it'll work for you.

For example, if one Washington player hadn't been offside on the Huskie's kick-off when the score was 17-0, UW would have had possession deep in Oregon territory. With momentum. And probably a 24-0 halftime lead instead of 17-10.

Nope, "ifs" just won't work.

To be sure, the Ducks haven't been plagued by a lack of desire. If anything, that's been their forte.

"I've never worked with such a battling group before," said Read. "They played hard. I mean hard."

So why isn't Oregon winning?

The reasons, especially for those who keep up on statistics, are not earth-shaking revelations. Nor are they particularly original. They're simply hard, cold facts that indicate what's killing the Ducks.

•First, and perhaps most costly, 53 of the 104 points scored against Oregon in four games have been set up by offensive miscues. Three fumbles were transformed into 17 points Saturday against the Huskies. Seventeen out of the 20 points given up against San Jose State and Minnesota were direct results of fumbles or punt mishaps.

"We haven't mastered what all good teams do," said Read, "and that's the ability to overcome our mistakes."

•Second, the offense has lacked consistency in sustaining drives. The Duck's 66-yard march Saturday was their longest touchdown drive of the year, the others being 44, 35 and 20 yards.

Turnovers aren't the only problems in this area. While George Bennett has bulled his way for a respectable 277 yards, nobody has emerged as a wide complement to Bennett's up-the-gut stuff.

Eugene Brown and Teddy Farmer have picked up but 79 yards between them. Without the wide threat, the veer's power is diluted and the defense has one less worry.

•Third, the Ducks have yet to come up with a breakaway threat. The longest rush has been 21 yards, the longest pass play 28. Against Washington, Henderson fired 12 completions, but none netted more than ten yards.

Isn't the veer supposed to be the "big play" offense?

•The offense's hang-ups, of course, lead directly to the defense's hang-ups. You can't expect a defense to be flawless when it's on the field without sufficient rest.

Oregon's offense has clicked off 215 plays. The defense has had to defend on 307 plays.

"When the defense is on the field too long, it can't help but break down both physically and mentally," said Read.

Which is exactly what happened Saturday as Robin Earl and James Anderson bullied over the Ducks on that last agonizing touchdown drive.

"I've got a lot of respect for their defense," said Earl.

"A lot of other teams would have given up when it was 17-0," said Anderson. "Oregon didn't."

It's a worn-out, almost pathetic statement in the wake of 12 straight losses, but the Ducks are improving. "We're getting better each game," said Read. "Today we just got beat by a better football team."

But how many times can a team pick itself up, brush itself off and try again?

On one hand, you wish they'd cancel the rest of the season, save everybody some pain. Then you hear George Bennett, a man who can't remember when Oregon last won, saying:

"The loss today hurt, it hurt bad. But I know we'll all be ready to go Monday. We're going to get it together. We aren't giv'n up."

How about the rest of us?

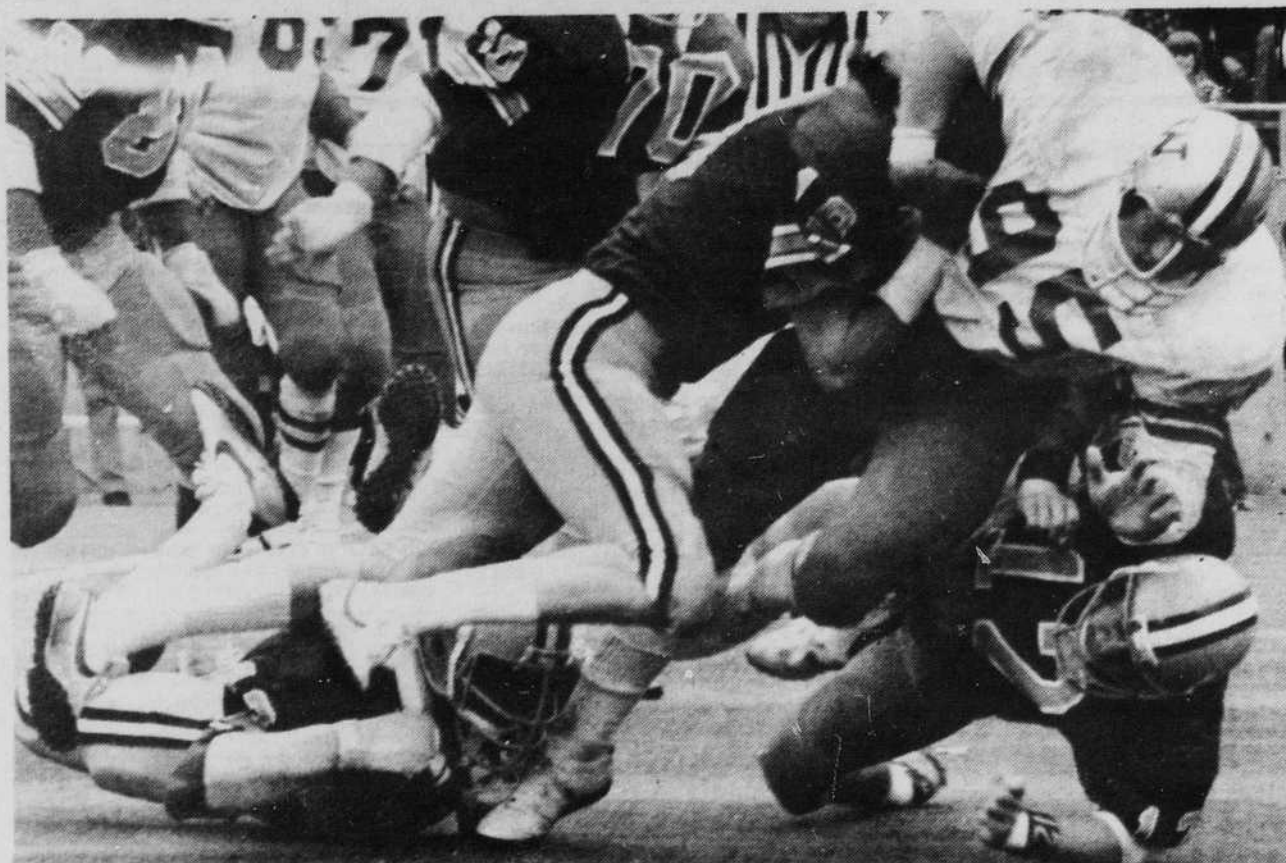


Photo by Greg Clark

Washington's Robin Earl pounded the Duck line for 112 yards

Read after 27-17 loss: 'We're getting closer...'

By JOHN HENDERSON
Of the Emerald

Oregon football coach Don Read leaned up against a cement wall in the Autzen Stadium locker room, fighting back the tears welled up through the Duck's longest losing streak in history. The string was increased to 12 Saturday as Oregon fumbled their way to a 27-17 loss to Washington in the Pacific-8 opener for both teams.

"You can't improve your situation unless you're good enough to overcome your mistakes," he said. "We're getting closer, but we're just not there yet."

Fumbles by running back George Bennett on the third play from scrimmage, Kim Nutting on a quick kick attempt and Jack Henderson on a roll out provided

Washington with enough opportunities to jump out to a 17-0 lead.

"The fumbles are pretty much due to hits rather than execution," said Read. "Early in the year against Oklahoma it wasn't that way and I bet our opponents have had more penalties and fumbles than us."

The only consolation Read had in the game was that it marked Oregon's first comeback of the year. After Washington quarterback Warren Moon snuck in from the one to reach the 17-0 score, Duck signal caller Jack Henderson got the Ducks moving. With Henderson hitting four straight passes, the Ducks drove 66 yards in 10 plays, Henderson sneaking in from the one to get on the scoreboard.

A 28-yard field goal by Stan Woodfill later in the second quarter closed the margin to 17-10 at intermission, the momentum

swaying to Oregon.

But it didn't last long enough.

After Bennett bowled over from the two following a Husky fumble to tie the score midway through the third quarter, the Huskies pulled themselves together and sustained two long scoring drives to preserve the win.

"Washington is a good football team," said Read. "If anybody doesn't see that, they aren't looking very close."

"They're real physical. They gave us a lot of problems because we had to stop them inside, outside and passing."

Oregon couldn't stop them at all in the second half as Washington's bruising offensive line helped plow 209 yards for fullback Robin Earl and James Anderson.

Oregon defensive tackle Dave Morgan was especially impressed.

"Most offensive lines look big to us but these guys came off the ball as well as anybody. They're as good as any offensive line we've played against, including Oklahoma."

Mixing short passes with bruising runs by Earl and Anderson, Washington marched 79 yards in 16 plays, Moon sneaking in from the one for the score.

The drive burst the Duck's only bubble of the season. Oregon provided a brief scare in the fourth quarter, pounding 53 yards to the Husky 20 before another mistake gave the Ducks another loss — their fourth straight of the season.

On third and one, Oregon was charged with a five yard delay of game penalty and Henderson's four-yard pass to flanker Wayne Johnson was two yards short of the first down. Washington took over, and marched for a game-capping field goal.

For Read, he keeps seeing improvements, but only on the statistic sheet and not in the record.

"We played real hard," he said. "I'm real proud of our offense, I really am. We continue to make improvements but we're making too many mistakes."

"Inconsistency is still our problem," said Bauer, "just like last week at Minnesota. It's all mental. It could be confidence, it could be inexperience."

"I just don't know."



Photo by Greg Clark

For Don Read close was not enough