

Sports

Fumbling Ducks lose futility bowl

Displaying all the ferociousness of a sleeping cub, the Washington State Cougars managed to sneak out of Autzen Stadium Saturday with a 10-3 Pac-10 Conference football win courtesy of Oregon's fumbling Ducks.

The question before the game wasn't which team would win the game, but rather which team would lose it. With an offense which appeared as lost as ever through most of the game, and a lot of help from an ill-timed bumbled punt, the Ducks managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory again.

The loss dropped the Ducks to 0-8-1 overall and strengthened their hold on last place in the Pac-10 by dropping them to 0-6 in conference play. The Cougars improved their record to 2-6-1 overall, and 1-3-1 in conference.

"We continue to self-destruct," said a worn Oregon coach Rich Brooks. "We're just inept at this point on offense."

The Duck offense played like a disaster waiting to happen throughout the game. They fumbled the ball seven times, losing three of them, and threw in an interception. And with 3:35 to play in the third quarter,

disaster finally struck.

On fourth down and seven from their own 17, punt snapper Steve Johnson skidded the ball toward punter Kevin Hicks on the two. Hicks couldn't handle the wet ball, tried to pick it up, then watched it slide across the end zone and into the arms of WSU's Cedrick Brown. Presto — the game's only touchdown.

"When you win a football game with the kicking game based on something that they do wrong — you still won," said WSU coach Jim Walden. "That's a very simple fact."

The Ducks made it very simple.

The Cougar TD made the score 7-3, erasing the advantage the Ducks built when Todd Lee booted a 24-yard field goal with 10:11 to go in the third quarter. But even that field goal displayed the inability of the Oregon offense to get the job done when the opportunity presented itself.

Freshman tailback Eugene King put the Ducks on the doorstep when he rambled 37 yards to the Cougar five on a trap play off the right side. It was Oregon's longest rushing play of the season, and appeared to be even longer when King



Oregon punter Kevin Hicks tries to handle the snap on a third quarter punt attempt, but he couldn't and the Washington State Cougars fell on the ball in the Oregon end zone for the game's only touchdown. WSU won 10-3 Saturday at Autzen Stadium.



The Ducks were turned on their heads again Saturday, but Oregon middle linebacker Chris Cosgrove (58) had a big day with 16 tackles including this acrobatic effort.

danced into the end zone. But he was ruled out-of-bounds at the five.

From there the Ducks went the wrong way. First, Terrance Jones was dropped for a six-yard loss on an option pitch which didn't fool anyone. On second down, Jones got four yards back on another trap play, leaving Oregon with third-and-goal on the seven.

This time it was King, Oregon's leading rusher filling in for Dwight Robertson who reinjured his knee, who came up with the mistake in the clutch. Oregon called an option left. But King, who was sent to the hospital with a concussion in the fourth quarter, went right, leaving quarterback Kevin Lusk facing a pack of Cougars at the line of scrimmage.

While the offense was bumbling along, the Oregon defense "did some marvelous things," according to Brooks.

Leading the defensive charge for the Ducks was an inspired

middle linebacker, Chris Cosgrove, who finished the game with 16 tackles, 10 unassisted.

"I was hungry," said Cosgrove, who missed the two previous games with a pinched nerve.

Lusk and company made things fun for the Cougars, when another promising drive turned sour late in the fourth quarter. Lusk had moved the Ducks to the Cougar 21 from the Oregon 46, completing back to back 14 yard passes to Osborne Thomas and Rourke Lowe along the way. But, as usual, the Ducks found a way to stop themselves.

First, Lusk was nearly intercepted when he was hit as he threw on second down and one at the 21. Then Lusk let Ryan Zinke's snap go through his legs on third and one, forcing Harry Billups to fall on the ball at the 24. "He was ready to take off, and I wanted to get the ball and go," Lusk said of the

attempted sneak.

Lastly, on fourth-and-four the Ducks attempted a fake field goal. Kicker Lee took the handoff from holder Hicks and was greeted by four Cougars six yards behind the line of scrimmage. With 5:11 to play WSU took control of the ball, ran it for three first downs, and ran out the clock.

"Coaches tend to think alike," said Walden. "We were thinking that we would probably do the same thing in that situation."

"In retrospect, it's probably a dumb call on my part," said Brooks of the attempted fake. "We probably should have just lined up and gone for it."

Hindsight is often better than foresight. But for the Ducks, the only thing hindsight provides is a painful view of another game that got away.

Story by Paul Danzer
Photos by Mark Pynes

A bright, brisk little musical.

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