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sports

Ducks shock Houston

Ball finally bounces Oregon's direction; fake punt, fourth down play key victory

By Doug Levy
Of the Emerald

So often in the past, Oregon's football team has been in position to win games, only to have bad luck rear its ugly head in crucial situations and turn wins into losses.

Saturday at Autzen Stadium, things were different. A miscue turned into a big play that helped the Ducks defeat a run-happy Houston club 15-14 and improve their record to 1-2 on the season.

Oregon trailed 14-9 when the play occurred. The Ducks had stopped the Cougars on fourth and one at the Oregon 17, thanks to Don Pellum's solo tackle of Houston tailback Donald Jordan with 9:30 remaining in the fourth quarter.

The Ducks had 83 yards to cover, but quarterback Mike Jorgensen led a drive to Houston's 43, spurred by a 17-yard run by fullback Ladarja Johnson on a fake punt.

Then, on third and nine, Jorgensen spotted flanker Lew Barnes at the Houston 25. Barnes caught the pass, got hit and fumbled. A freak bounce and an attempted scoop by tailback Kevin McCall carried the ball to the two-yard line, where tight end Doug Herman fell on it. Following a Houston holding penalty, McCall scored from one yard out to put Oregon ahead to stay.

"I was going out for my pattern, turned around after the ball was loose, and saw it rolling around," said Herman, relegated to second-string after missing a mid-week scrimmage.

"I saw the fumble, and it was shades of 'oh no,'" said linebacker Lerry Wilson, who paced the Duck defense with 22 tackles, three unassisted.

But this time, it was Oregon, not the opponent, which pounced on the fumble. Last year, with an opportunity to upset Notre Dame, the Ducks failed to recover a late fumble and allowed the Irish to rally for a 13-13 tie.

In a jubilant Oregon dressing room, coach Rich Brooks said "guts and determination" led to a Duck victory.

"This team showed a lot of character and guts to make the big play when it had to," said Brooks.

Certainly, the big play was the catalyst for Oregon's win, because Houston, 2-2, controlled the Ducks for most of the game.

On offense, the Cougars rolled up 251 yards rushing, 127 of it from Jordan. Houston marched up and down the field against the Ducks, but when it came time for touchdowns, Oregon's defense and Houston mistakes frustrated the nation's seventh-ranked rushing offense.

The biggest Houston blunder may have been recorded by Cougar coach Bill Yeoman. First, Yeoman disdained attempting a field goal on fourth and one at the Duck 17. That would have put Houston ahead 17-9 and forced Oregon into getting a touchdown and two-point conversion just to tie the game.

Next, the coach called for quarterback Lionel Wilson to pitch wide to Jordan for first-down yardage, instead of running up the middle, which the Cougars had done rather successfully.

"I was told (by coaches in the press box) that we had two and one-half or three yards to go," said Yeoman. "If I would've known it was one, I would've said to rear back and go straight ahead." Yeoman added, "but let me remind you that play (the outside

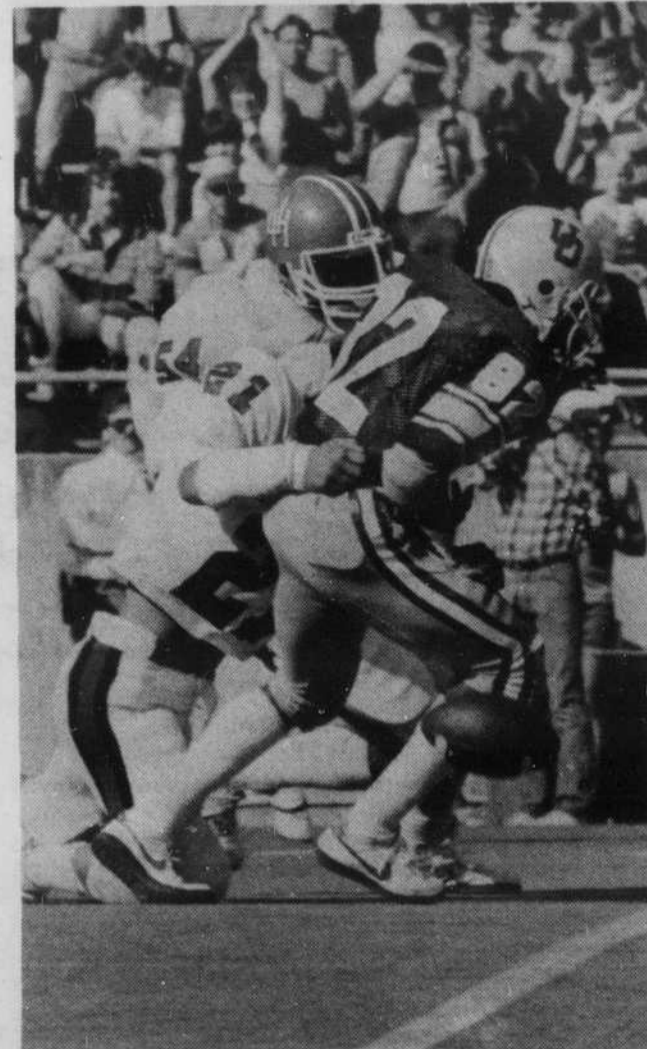


Photo by Dave Kao

Lew Barnes fumbles after catching this pass, but Oregon recovered it on one-yard line enroute to 15-14 win.

(pitch) had worked six times before."

Conversely, a fourth-down gamble by Brooks worked to perfection. Johnson, the up man on the Oregon punting unit, took a quick snap and galloped 17 yards into Houston territory with 7:33 remaining.

"We watched films during the week, and we knew it was going to work," said Johnson, who topped the Ducks with 46 yards rushing on seven carries. In the other locker room, Yeoman noted that the Cougars were in a "punt safe" formation designed to stop fakes.

On top of Johnson's heroics, Barnes fired up the Ducks with a 53-yard TD reception from Jorgensen and a sterling 50-yard punt return. And Herman and Pellum emerged from the dark as heroes.

Yeoman called it a game his Cougars should have won, and his players weren't exactly full of post-game conversation.

Jordan, the gifted tailback, waved off reporters. Quarterback Wilson moaned that it was "the toughest game I ever lost." Yeoman, asked if he was surprised by Oregon's performance, sarcastically replied, "they give scholarships, don't they? They pay their coaches, they recruit big kids."

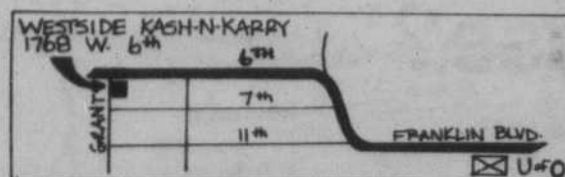
Jorgensen, propped against his locker, looked too tired to offer a lengthy explanation for the victory. "It was nice to get a win for a change," he said. Rich Brooks couldn't have agreed more.

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