

'Air Oregon'

Ducks' new air attack brings back memories of Dan Fouts

Their speed and grace sets them apart from the other players on offense. They must be able to float downfield, yet be certain that their hands will work like glue.

They are the wide receiver.

On teams such as Oklahoma and Nebraska, which are run oriented, wide receivers are not as prominent as they are on pass-happy teams like Brigham Young and Stanford.

At Oregon, where the passing game hasn't been a big part of the game plan, wide receivers have tended to end up as nothing more than downfield blockers for the rushing game.

But this season, footballs are routinely flying through the air on Saturday afternoons.

Oregon coach Rich Brooks, for the first time in his seven-year stint in Eugene, has used the run as a means of setting up the pass instead of vice versa, as in years past. Brooks has done so with the expertise of offensive coordinator Bob Toledo, shipped in from the University of the Pacific to run "Air Oregon."

This fall, Brooks has assembled possibly the finest corps of wide receivers Oregon fans have seen during his tenure in Eugene. For starters, there is returning three-year letterman Osborn Thomas, who caught a team-leading 30 passes last season, including a game-winner against Oregon State.

There is sophomore Kwante Hampton, who has 13 receptions this season; and finally there's Lew Barnes, perhaps one of the biggest finds Brooks has made in the junior college ranks. Barnes leads the Ducks with 15 catches this season, including three which have gone for scores.

Barnes, in particular, has given the Ducks some things they have desperately longed for in recent years:

- Speed on the outside. For years the Ducks have had wide receivers with mediocre speed, but with Barnes, Oregon has a viable outside speedster.

- A threat from a wide receiver to run with the ball. Against California, Barnes proved that he can take a pitch from the quarterback and run for big yards.

- A punt and kickoff returner who is a viable threat to break a long touchdown run on nearly every return.

"It's great to have someone with the talents of a Lew Barnes on your team," says Brooks. "He can do a lot of big things with the football."

Through five games this season, Barnes has latched onto two Mike Jorgensen aeriels for long scores and one from tight end Dave Christensen. The first bomb came in the Houston game from 53 yards out; the second against San Jose State from 67 yards; and the third, from Christensen, a 48-yarder against California.

"We (Barnes and Jorgensen) worked over the spring," says Barnes. "At first I was wondering how I would fit in. Now, we're getting used to each other and we are pretty settled and sure of what we are doing."

Hampton, who spent a year of learning last season with the Ducks, has finally fit into the role of an Oregon wide receiver.

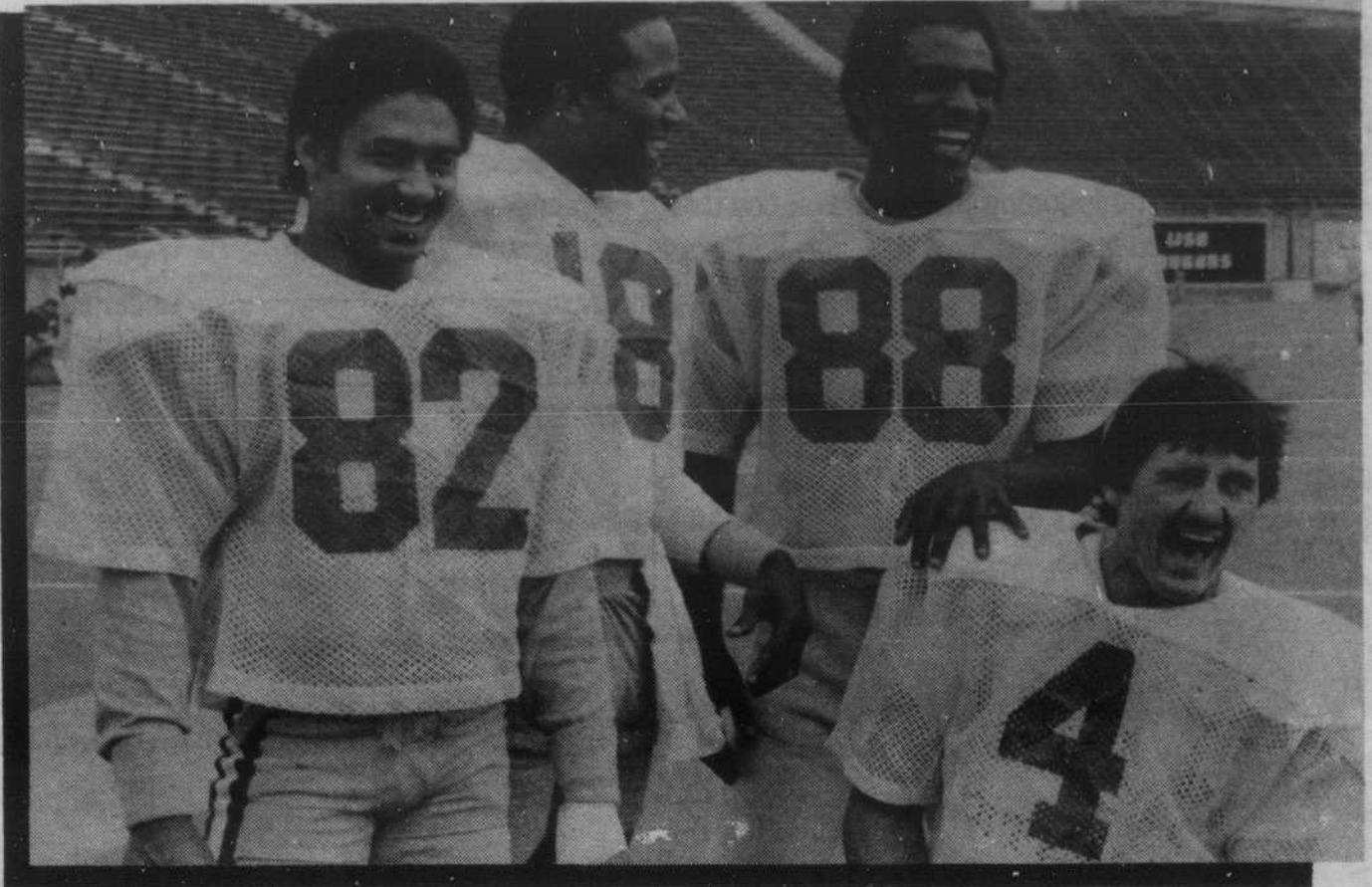
"Last year was really frustrating for me," admits Hampton. "I wasn't used to being used as a blocker."

"Now what we are doing on offense is similar to what we did in high school."

A year ago, Hampton was used sparingly as he caught five passes. But this season, his role is more defined. He has latched onto a starting job through hard work in spring and fall drills and has no desire to give it up.

"I would like to think I came here to catch the ball," says Hampton. "With the offense we have now, it keeps me very involved. And that's what I like to do."

Brooks likes Hampton's style, but like with all young receivers, indicates there is still work to do.



Life on the offense is fun again at Oregon, thanks to the likes of wide receivers Lew Barnes (82), Osborn Thomas (18), Kwante Hampton (88), and Mike Jorgensen. The quartet have combined to provide Oregon with its most potent passing attack since then-future NFL star Dan Fouts blitzed the conference with his passing in the early 1970's.

"He still has to work on his routes," says Brooks. "But he is a good receiver over the middle."

With the presence of two young receivers, Thomas lends an aura of experience. Thomas, who has proven over the years he is one of the Pac-10's better receivers, hasn't seen a lot of passes come his way this year — he has caught just a pair so far, with one going for a touchdown against San Jose State.

"Things change," says Thomas. "It is a different role for me this year because of Barnes. He has the speed and has earned his shot. I'll just have to take what they give me."

But Thomas is a team player. If he can't be the one to catch the big scoring passes, he would like to see one of his stablemates do the honors.

"It's really fun for us all," Thomas says. "We all want to see each other catch the passes. It also gives me a lot of joy to see the younger players do well."

Brooks isn't about to phase out the sure-handed Thomas.

"I'm sure he will be a major factor for us as the season goes on," says the Oregon mentor.

The league may not see a bet-

ter trio of receivers on one team. Barnes, Hampton and Thomas all have the hands and speed which go into the making of a good receiver.

"I would think that we are one of the better receiving crews in the league," says Hampton. "We have Oz with his experience and Lew with his speed."

"I feel we are good but it is just a matter of proving it," says Thomas. "I feel we are a very solid and consistent group."

The camaraderie between the three and Jorgensen is good. It has to be. Once that goes, the connection most likely will fizzle and so will the Ducks passing game. But so far, it has not, and the statistics bear that out.

This season the Ducks have thrown for 994 yards, which translates to 198.8 yards per game. As evidence of the Ducks improved passing game, here's passing statistics for the past couple of years:

- In 1982, the Ducks threw for just 1,036 yards — 94 yards an outing.

- Two years ago, Oregon threw for 1,561 yards — about 142 yards a game.

- In 1980, the year Reggie Ogburn led Oregon to a 6-3-2 record, Oregon passed for 1,830 yards — 166.3 a game.

If the Ducks can keep up the 1983 passing pace, it will be the best throwing team at Oregon since the Dan Fouts days in the early 1970s.

At the helm of "Air Oregon" is Mike Jorgensen, who has undergone numerous injuries and criticisms about his arm in three years at Oregon. Even though he hasn't thrown at a staggering percentage this season (.454, 55-121), he has shown, when given time to throw, that he can complete both long bombs and short tosses.

"Jorgensen is doing an excellent job," says Hampton. "He has been rushed a bit but has been able to get the ball away when he has to."

Toledo, who has seen great quarterbacks and receivers come and go at Pacific, indicates the Ducks have the ingredients to be a successful passing team.

"Speed is what gives you the ability to make the big play," says Toledo. "It's the difference between getting tackled from behind and making a touchdown. You can't coach it and you can't recruit without it."


By Steve Turcotte
Photo by Mark Pynes

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