

It's almost Miller time for the NFL

By Darren Foss
Of the Emerald

One week from today, the suspense will end. Oregon quarterback Chris Miller's dream of becoming a professional football player will come one step closer to reality when he finds out which team has drafted him.

This is the date of the National Football League's draft of top college players. Based just on Miller's performance this season, he was projected to be selected anywhere from a second to fifth-round pick.

But after great performances in two of three post-season all-star games, Miller has attracted the attention of many of the top teams in search of a quarterback including the Atlanta Falcons, San Diego Chargers, Los Angeles Raiders, San Francisco 49ers and Dallas Cowboys. The New Orleans Saints, Pittsburgh Steelers and Seattle Seahawks also have shown interest in him.

Miller is projected now to be the second quarterback selected behind Heisman Trophy winner Vinny Testaverde of the University of Miami, who has already been selected and signed a multi-million dollar contract with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers — owner of the first pick.

"My goal is to be drafted somewhere in the first round," Miller said. And with the high need for quarterbacks his wish most definitely will come true.

According to Mel Kiper, a Maryland analyst for Entertainment Sports Programming Network (ESPN), the Atlanta Falcons are the best bet to select Miller. The Falcons control the 13th pick in the first round.

On the other hand, analyst J. David Miller in Sport Magazine's draft preview thinks Miller will still be around at the 15th pick and will be selected by the Los Angeles Raiders.

But according to a Raiders scout, "We don't draft through Sport Magazine. He (Miller) sure shows a lot of ability and is going to help whoever takes him. At this point, Rusty Hilger is listed as our number-one quarterback," he said.

Miller could go as high as the fifth pick in the draft to San Diego and join former Oregon quarterback record-holder Dan Fouts. The Chargers, however, are looking for defensive help and will probably select a cornerback or linebacker. "But if he's the best guy available at the fifth pick we'll take him," said Roger Theder, San Diego's Offensive Coordinator.

According to Miller, if he had his choice of NFL teams to play for, "I'd like to stay on the West Coast and play for the 49ers, Raiders or Chargers. I guess the Seahawks wouldn't be too bad either," he added.

The 49ers are showing interest in Miller because of their uncertainty about veteran quarterback Joe Montana's health. Even though the 49ers have two first round picks (22nd and 25th), the chances of getting Miller appear slim since they are late in the first round.

Since his all-star performances, the Dallas Cowboys have recognized Miller's ability and could sneak in with the 12th pick and snatch Miller from Atlanta.

Atlanta scout Bob Riddle sums up the draft pretty well: "You can't predict who's going to be available. Our priority right now is for a pass-rush, defensive type of guy, but we're not counting out Miller."

The all-star games that made Miller a sure-fire first round pick took place in December and January.

"I was real pleased with my overall performance in the all-star games," Miller said. "Going into the Blue-Gray game I just had to get used to playing around different people, a different system and different terminology."

Miller got off to a shaky start in his first all-star game on Christmas Day in Montgomery, Ala., completing only six of 16 passes for 67 yards, with one interception and one touchdown pass. His Blue

squad went on to win 31-7.

Following his first-game flop, Miller caught the eyes of the scouts in his last two all-star appearances putting on amazing performances.

Miller's resurgence began in the Honolulu sunshine in the Hula Bowl on Jan. 10. He completed 10 of 16 passes for 214 yards and one touchdown as he led the West all-stars to a 16-14 victory. Miller was selected the Outstanding Offensive Player of the Game for the West squad.

In this game Miller showed the pro scouts his deep pass ability with completions of 55, 48 and 47 yards.

Then the following week Miller returned to Alabama, this time Mobile, to give the scouts and pro coaches their last chance to see him in action in the Senior Bowl.

"The Senior Bowl is the most important because pro scouts are there observing everything you do," Miller said.

Once again Miller put up impressive numbers for the pro scouts, completing 10 of 20 passes for 174 yards, three touchdowns and one interception. But it wasn't enough as his North squad lost a wild 42-38 game. It was the highest-scoring game in Senior Bowl history.

The Senior Bowl was coached and organized by pro coaches to showcase the best college seniors. It was also Miller's first pro football experience as he received \$1,500 for being a member of the losing squad and an extra \$1,000 for being selected most valuable player of the North squad.

Going into the all-star games, Miller was considered the third best quarterback in the draft behind Testaverde and University of Michigan's Jim Harbaugh. But Miller outplayed Harbaugh in front of the pro scouts to earn his number two position according to scouting reports.

Miller will leave a giant imprint on the Ducks' record book as he tied, or broke, 13 Oregon passing records in his four years at Oregon. Most were held by Dan Fouts, who has gone on to set over a dozen NFL passing records and currently ranks third on the all-time yards gained passing list with 40,287 total yards through the 1986 season. Could Chris Miller follow in his footsteps?

"Miller had a great career at Oregon and provided exciting football for the fans of Oregon to watch," commented head football coach Rich Brooks. "A quarterback of his talent comes to us about once every decade."

Miller says he admires Fouts, Joe Montana and Dan Marino's game and tries to pattern his game to theirs as much as he can.

"Fouts is a good drop back passer and can read the field well. That's something I need to get better at. Even though I've come a long way, and become better at that, I can always improve," admits Miller.

Miller's record-breaking performances and college career did not go unnoticed. He became the first quarterback since Jim Plunkett at Stanford to be selected to the Pacific 10 Conference First Team two years in a row.

Then at the 39th annual Oregonian newspaper Banquet of Champions in Portland, Miller won the Hayward Award, the most prestigious award given to an athlete from Oregon.

According to both coach Brooks and offensive coordinator Bob Toledo, Miller is the best quarterback they have had the chance to work with.

"Miller has great vision, great instinct and has made an awful lot of great plays. He's a Joe Montana-type quarterback with the ability to scramble, throw on the run and move the pocket," Brooks

said.

"When I first started working with Miller I knew he had the potential to be a great quarterback if he worked hard at it," Toledo said. "He's going to be a very rich young man."

Miller has already selected his agents — Frank Bauer and Mike Blatt of Stockton, Calif. — to handle his contract negotiations and the business side of his professional career. Both have experience working with Oregon athletes, having worked with ex-Duck linemen Mike Walters and Steve Baack.

"He'll do very well in the NFL," commented Toledo. "He's a good passer, and understands the game very well. He's a real talent."

Miller attributes much of his improvement as a quarterback to Toledo. "He's done an incredible amount for me as far as teaching goes. He taught me many defensive strategies, like how to read coverages, and has strengthened my fundamentals," Miller said.

Before becoming a strong football prospect, Miller was a major league baseball prospect at shortstop and was drafted by the Seattle Mariners in the fifth round of the 1984 draft.

Due to this, the Mariners' Professional Baseball Scholarship Plan paid for Miller's first two years at Oregon until his junior year when his football scholarship paid for the rest.

Last summer Miller played three games for the Mariners Class A minor league team in Bellingham, Wash., batting over .300. Then he was moved up to Class AA in Salinas, Calif., and in 27 games Miller hit only .101, but had an impressive .933 fielding percentage.

"As far as batting, I was in over my head since I hadn't played since high school, but defensively I did well," Miller said.

According to Miller, the Mariners sent him a contract and asked him to report to spring training in Arizona, but Miller said, "I know I won't sign the contract now, because I don't want to be committed to the Mariners. I'm going to wait until the NFL draft."

So based on his summer experience with the Mariners it wasn't hard for Miller to choose football over baseball.

"Unless something goes haywire in football, I want to play football over baseball. I've had the most immediate success in football and feel good about what I am doing. I'm also getting good feedback from the pro scouts," Miller said. "I love playing both, but I can't play both."

Miller is very close to his family and his parents, Jess and Jane Miller who live in Eugene. They have followed his progress over the years and given him the support he deserves.

"I'm not suprised at his success in football. It's just what he loves to do," said his mother, Jane. "But his recent success hasn't changed him, it's just a progress from one level to the next."

"His goal has always been to become a professional athlete. I'm proud to see he is finally achieving it."

The day of the draft Miller will be at home with his parents and his closest friends, gathered around the television set watching ESPN's live coverage from New York starting at 9 a.m. Pacific time.

The suspense will finally end, and he will know where his pro football career will start.

All of the questions will be answered: Will Miller be able to stay on the West Coast? Will he follow in Fout's footsteps? ... stay tuned.

