Duck teams blow weekend leads

By Don Peters

CHOKE v. 1. To blow a large lead in the closing moments, to lose a game you should have won. See also Oregon Ducks.

New entry in the Peters Unabridged Dictionary.

Please tell me it was just a nightmare. A bad dream. The

Commentary

Ducks *really* didn't blow a 17-0 lead with under eight minutes to play, did they?

In a space of 24 hours, punchdrunk Oregon fans twice watched Duck teams snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Before the football team did their swan dive, the volleyball team Friday had Washington down 0-2 in a best-of-five match, but let the Huskies come back and win.

In both cases, what happened?

The volleyball match is easier to explain. Until the Ducks beat Washington State Saturday, Oregon had lost 16 straight Pac-10 games.

Not fun to watch, but understandable. A team down in morale will lose games like that.

But the football team's performance is puzzling. Here was a Duck team that was coming off two good wins, one of them a 44-6 stunner over Iowa. National ranking. Heisman murmurs for Bill Musgrave.

Fans were restless. Finally, here was an Oregon team to put the school on the map, they said. They'll get a bowl bid, no problem. Some, in lighthearted moments of fantasy, even dreamed of New Year's Day in Pasadena, roses and parades.

No more.

Oregon was on a high, coming in to play a Stanford team that had an 0-2 record, 0-2 in conference. Heck, the Cardinal even lost to Oregon State. Badly.

No way the Ducks could lose. Easy game. Go out, beat up a few opponents, run over some cornerbacks and go home. Piece of cake.

Nobody listened to Rich Brooks. He warned everybody that Stanford was a tough team. Duck-Cardinal games are always close, he said. Don't underestimate Stanford.

After listening to the game, I came to the blunt conclusion that Oregon didn't deserve to win the game anyway. Stanford outran the Ducks, outhustled the Ducks, and generally outplayed the Ducks. As defensive coordinator Denny Schuler said, Oregon would have won ugly. Instead, they lost ugly.

There were omens that Oregon was going to have it tough. The team had not lost a game in which Musgrave started and went the whole way since Oct. 24, 1987.

Who beat 'em last? Take a guess.

Last year, Stanford held a 3-0 lead at Autzen Stadium until the last few minutes, when Musgrave engineered a drive to win the game 7-3.

Live by the last-second win, die by the last-second loss.

Starting center Scot Boatright is probably out for the season, and fullback Latin Berry will be out for three to four weeks. People found out Saturday just how important these two are to the Ducks running attack. Extremely important.

Listening to the last eight minutes of the game was like listening to a horror flick. Something Stephen King would come up with. Revenge of the Cardinal.

For those who missed it, a brief recap. First came the 21-yard touchdown pass from Brian Johnson to Gary Taylor. There went the shutout. Oregon 17 Stanford 7.

Oregon could do nothing on their next possession. Punt. Ball on Oregon 39. Nine plays later, Steve Smith went in from the 1. Two-point conversion good. There went the point spread. Oregon 17 Stanford 15.

Onside kick. They're not supposed to work. It worked. Couple of plays, Brian Hopkins bangs home a 37-yard field goal with no time on the clock.

There went the ball game.

Brooks and company are surely hoping this was just an isolated incident. No more repeats guys. Football games are 60 minutes long.

Losing might even help the team. Coming up this Saturday is a home game against Arizona. No over-dramatization intended, but the Arizona game will probably be the key to the season.

Win this one and the Ducks are right back in the Rose Bowl hunt, lose it and expect Oregon to slip into their familiar routine of .500 mediocrity.

Let's hope they win. A quarter of a century is a long time to wait for a bowl bid.

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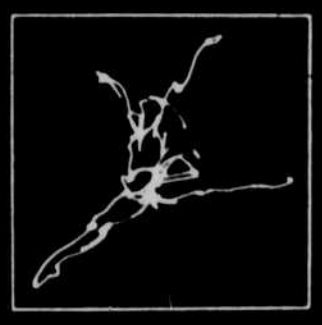

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