

Horton performing with strength at free safety

Brilliant in games against BYU, UCLA

By Ashley Conklin
Emerald Sports Reporter

The emergence of the Oregon defense and the emergence of Derek Horton has played a big role in the Ducks' rise to being a football power in the Pacific-10 Conference.

When Horton first came to Oregon in 1985 and appearing in 1986 as a redshirt freshman, the Ducks were anything but good on defense. Oregon has climbed back to respectability with its play and defensively thanks to an attitude change among the group.

"In the past it was always an 'us or them' thing," the senior starting free safety said. "Everybody would always blame somebody else. It was always the linebackers unit's fault or the defensive front's fault, or it was the secondary's fault. Now we're playing together as a unit."

The 5-foot-11, 184-pound Horton has played just about everything in his career. In high school he played cornerback, but moved to free safety and started the first game of his sophomore season. An ankle injury forced him out of the line-up though and he lost his starting job to junior college transfer Thom Kaumeyer.

After strong safety Anthony Newman graduated to the NFL in 1987, Horton was inserted at that position so that defensive coordinator Denny Schuler could utilize the talents of both Kaumeyer and Horton.

"He's a natural free safety and that's where he started out at," Schuler said. "He played strong safety last year so we could get he and Kaumeyer in the line-up at the same time, but he's much more comfortable at free safety."

Horton intercepted three

passes last season and was a strong defender against the run. He finished the season with 56 tackles and was third among defensive players in total plays.

As good as Horton was last season, one look at his play this season shows why he's more adept at free safety where he can play centerfield instead of playing close to the line as all strong safeties do.



Derek Horton

"I feel a lot more comfortable at free safety," Horton said. "Strong safety just wasn't for me and I didn't feel comfortable playing it."

Horton is second on the team with four interceptions behind cornerback Chris Oldham, not including a fumble he picked out of the air at Brigham Young. He also has one other fumble recovery, is fourth on the squad with 64 tackles and leads all defensive players in total plays.

Schuler, for one, has been pleased with the play of Horton and thinks he has been more impressive than Kaumeyer.

"He's much better than Kaumeyer stopping the run and equally as good as Kaumeyer

covering the pass," Schuler said. "Derek has really blossomed into a top caliber, all-conference player."

Although Horton has developed into one of the top defensive backs in the Pac-10, he hasn't received a lot of recognition for his outstanding play which might be do in part to the play of Oldham, widely considered one of the top defensive backs in the nation.

"Chris has got most of the attention, but Derek has played just as well," Schuler said. "He's had 10 good games in a row and he's improved in every one. I couldn't be happier with how he's played."

Horton has been very impressive in the Ducks last two games against Brigham Young and UCLA.

Despite a 45-41 loss to the Cougars, Horton had the one fumble he picked off, in a day where it was hard to "point fingers at anybody."

"Usually it's one person who does something wrong that gets blamed for the loss, but that day the whole defense had a bad game. We knew we were a better defensive team than that."

The Ducks showed that last week in a 38-20 win over the Bruins in which the Oregon defense couldn't stop UCLA in the first half and the Bruins couldn't move the ball in the second half.

Horton made two key plays to help the cause by breaking up a touchdown pass on UCLA's opening drive of the second half and later intercepting a pass and returning it 34 yards to set up a Duck score. Horton also had 11 tackles and was instrumental in shutting down the Bruin running attack in the second half.

Head coach Rich Brooks has also been impressed with Hor-



Photo by Andre Raniere

Derek Horton has been described as a "natural" free safety since his return to that position this year.

ton's play and said the NFL scouts are recognizing Horton's recent success.

"Derek Horton has played outstanding football," Brooks said. "He doesn't get the ink or the credit or anything because most of that has been going to Chris Oldham."

"The last two weeks he has clearly played better than any player on our defense," Brooks added. "Against BYU and UCLA he was outstanding. He's come up with some turnovers and made some key tackles. He's just done a super job."

"One group of people that his play hasn't gone unnoticed

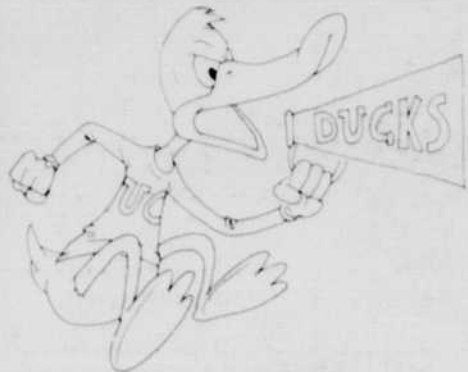
to is the (NFL) scouts who have been asking for a lot of film on him," he said. "They're very high on him."

While it's hard to evaluate who will or will not make it in the NFL, Schuler likes Horton's chances.

"I think he has the ability to play in the NFL under the right circumstances," Schuler said. "You can't say somebody is a can't miss player because very few people are."

"He's as close an athlete to Anthony as anybody I've had," he added, "so I think he definitely has a shot."

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