

Ducks should fight for bowl bid again next year

By Ashley Conklin
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ANAHEIM, Calif. — With two straight bowl appearances, the Oregon football team has established itself as a legitimate bowl contender.

Now, the next step for the Ducks is to continue their upward climb in making it to bigger and better bowl games each year. Steps one and two are in place with back-to-back appearances in the Independence and Freedom Bowls.

Step three is to make another bowl game next year, one with more national recognition and exposure than the Freedom Bowl.

In the moments following the disappointing Freedom Bowl loss to Colorado State, it was hard for Coach Rich Brooks and the players to reflect on what was an otherwise great season

for the Ducks.

But despite the 32-31 setback, Oregon still had a great season, in fact better than a year ago when it also finished 8-4 after beating Tulsa in Shreveport, La.

The one thing the Ducks have done the past two seasons is show they can replace key players lost to graduation or injury and not "fall off the face of the earth" as Brooks often says.

Considering the Ducks lost such stars as Derek Loville, Latin Berry, Chris Oldham, David Cusano and Mark Kearns after last season, players like Sean Burwell, Ngalu Kelemeni, Daryle Smith, Marcus Woods and James Bautista showed they were more than adequate replacements.

The key for Brooks and his staff during spring drills and fall camp next year is to find players to replace the likes of

Bill Musgrave, Scot Boatright, Joe Reitzug, Peter Brantley and Rory Dairy.

Analysis

For starters, the defense should be even better next year as eight starters return and although the Ducks are losing two outstanding players from that unit, they can definitely fill those positions.

Up front, few teams should be able to run against Oregon next season. The entire front three of Matt LaBounty, Woods and Jeff Cummins are returning. LaBounty, a junior, is already Oregon's career sack leader and Woods and Cummins are also excellent pass rushers.

Not only are the front three back, so are all the key back-

ups. Joe Baguio and Romeo Bandison return at the end spots and at nose tackle, the Ducks have back Gary Williams and Silila Malepeai, who played as true freshman this season.

Oregon is also stocked at inside and outside linebacker. Joe Farwell and Bautista return inside and Conner is back at outside linebacker. The Ducks do have to replace Brantley, but should be able to with junior Doug Douglass, who started for the injured Brantley in the Freedom Bowl, and redshirt freshman Terrell Edwards and Ernest Jones who are emerging stars.

Two starters, Smith (cornerback) and Eric Castle (free safety), return to the secondary, and a third, cornerback Muhammad Oliver, was a starter before he got hurt.

On offense, the biggest ques-

tion for Brooks and coordinator Mike Bellotti is who is going to replace Musgrave.

With the signing of junior college all-American Brett Salisbury from Palomar Junior College in California, the Ducks should have a legitimate replacement for Musgrave if veteran Bob Brothers and newcomers Danny O'Neil and Musgrave's brother Doug don't prove to be the answer.

Most likely Salisbury will be the starter from the opening of spring drills. Salisbury will be eligible for spring practice and the signing of a first team all-American JC means Brooks doesn't plan to sit him on the bench.

Oregon does have five returning starters on offense in Burwell and Kelemeni in the backfield, Bud Bowie and David Collinworth at guard and tackle, respectively, and tight end Jeff Thomason.

The Ducks are very deep when it comes to running backs as fullbacks Juan Shedrick and Brandon Jumper, who should be back from knee surgery, return as does Howard Blackwell.

Tight end is another strong area with Thomason, Vince Ferry, who took over when Thomason missed the last three games with a fractured ankle, and Dan Mitchell.

The key concerns are finding a center to replace Boatright and somebody to fill Reitzug and Michael McClellan's shoes at wide receiver.

If the Ducks fill those areas, and find a quarterback to replace Musgrave, they very likely will be back in a bowl, and probably a better and bigger bowl than the Independence or Freedom Bowls.

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