

O'Neil shows running talent in debut

QB performs well with help of line

By Jake Berg
Emerald Sports Editor

Oregon's Danny O'Neil looked down the field, spotted receiver Ronnie Harris springing along the sideline and lofted the ball to his target.

Finally, after four very incomplete passes and two series of downs that led nowhere, O'Neil's 10-yard pass landed in Harris' arms for the redshirt freshman quarterback's first completion ever in a college football game.

Relief, O'Neil got that King Kong of a monkey off of his ailing back, and instead of worrying about living up to the looming ghost of Bill Musgrave, the 20-year-old O'Neil could now concentrate on catching up to Washington State, which then led 7-0 near the end of the opening quarter.

Forget it, the referees said, we're going to throw our yellow hankies in the air and put you back to the Cougars' 28-yard line for a clipping infraction. Officially, you still have no completions.

Forgotten, said O'Neil, who responded by throwing a touchdown strike to flanker Anthony Jones, the first completion of the quarterback's very-green career at Oregon.

"That's a good feeling to go back 10 yards and then come back and score," an elated O'Neil said after winning in his first game as a Duck. "I'm pretty happy with my performance, but I've got a lot of room for improvement."

Oregon coach Rich Brooks wasn't arguing with the 40-14 win on Sep. 7, but improvement is definitely on his mind, too.

"More complete passes," Brooks said.

No argument there, either. Oregon's air attack took second bill on offense to a career day by sophomore tailback Sean Burwell but was no less effective.

The 6-foot-2, 175-pound O'Neil connected on 10 of 23 passes for 129 yards and a pair



Photo by Jeff Paslay
Redshirt freshman Danny O'Neil, who passed for two touchdowns and ran for another in Oregon's 40-14 rout of Washington State Sept. 7, impressed head coach Rich Brooks.

of touchdowns. The Cougars did not take advantage of his one interception, a throwaway to avoid being sacked.

"By his own admission, Danny feels somewhat unfulfilled because he wants to play better than that," offensive coordinator Mike Bellotti said. "And I think that's good. I want to keep him a little hungry that way."

"I think early on he looked a little nervous and a little antsy on some of his throws. He made the one interception throw he would like to have back, but he didn't see the defender."

Brooks was wincing at O'Neil's only major error but was happy his team could get away with it.

"I'm glad we can still do those things, make those mistakes, and still win a football game," Brooks said. "Danny O'Neil had a pretty good first game, but I think he needs to settle down a little more."

"He had a lot of fine plays in there."

And many of those fine plays came on the Ducks' 95-yard touchdown drive in the third quarter. An interception by the Ducks' Daryle Smith on the Oregon five-yard line may have been spectacular, but it is hardly where any sane offense wants to begin a drive.

Sane or not, O'Neil bid farewell to his opening half butterflies by capping off a 95-yard romp down the field with his second touchdown pass of the day, a three-yard pass to a wide open Jones. O'Neil's longest pass of the game, a 34-yarder to Jones, also came on the drive.

"That just gives you so much confidence, starting on your five and being able to come back and score," O'Neil said.

Sound like somebody else of recent memory? Remember Bill Musgrave, that guy who led Oregon to two straight bowl appearances and broke nearly every school passing record?

"I'm sure I'll always be the guy that followed Bill," O'Neil said. "Bill was a great quarterback."

Undoubtedly, Musgrave was great, but rarely did he run the ball like O'Neil did in the Washington State game. O'Neil showed off his scrambling ability to the Autzen Stadium crowd by rushing seven times for 50 yards and a touchdown.

"Danny did a great job," Burwell said. "He ran hard and took a lot of hits."

Not a bad compliment from a guy who had just gained 189 yards rushing, and both O'Neil and Bellotti were equally impressed by the quarterback's

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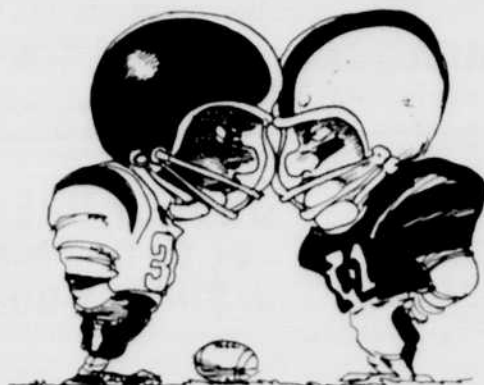
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