

NFL draft looks hopeful for Ducks

By Jayson Jacoby and Dave Charbonneau
Emerald Sports Reporters

The NFL will hold its annual college draft this Sunday, and a few ex-Ducks will be keeping their fingers crossed in hopes of continuing their football careers.

Although it is unlikely any Oregon player will be selected in the earlier rounds, it is possible a few players will be picked later in the draft.

"There's really not a 'for sure' guy from our team this year," said Oregon defensive coordinator Denny Schuler.

The players that seem to have the best chance of getting a shot at the pros are tight end Jeff Thomason, cornerback Muhammad Oliver, nose tackle Marcus Woods, defensive end Matt LaBounty and linebacker Andy Conner, said Joe Schaffeld, the Ducks' defensive line coach.

Of those players, Oliver has been given the most positive signs. The Cincinnati Bengals went as far as flying Oliver to Ohio to take a physical and visit the city.

But Cincinnati is not the only team that has shown interest in Oliver. Oliver said the Cleveland Browns, New York Giants and Washington Redskins have also expressed an interest in him.

Even with all those teams interested in him, Oliver is not anticipating an early round pick and really doesn't care who drafts him, as long as he gets drafted.

"I'm probably a middle-to-late-round pick," he said. "I'll basically take whatever I can get. I'm really not in a position to be picky."

Oliver said he feels he will make it in the NFL if he is drafted, and Schuler seems to feel the same.

"Oliver's best days are definitely down the road," Schuler said.

Oliver began to consider the NFL as a career option when Schuler brought it up during Oliver's junior year.

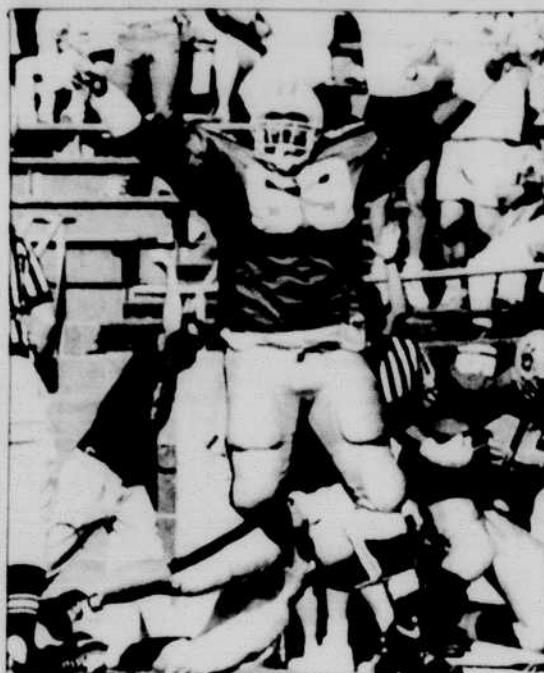
"Coach Schuler told me I had the ability to play pro football," Oliver said, "and I knew I had a chance when scouts started showing up at practices to watch me."

Besides Oliver, Thomason and Woods seem to be the other Ducks with the best chance of getting their names called on draft day.

Oregon offensive coordinator Mike Bellotti thinks a lot of teams could benefit from Thomason's ability at the tight end position, especially teams that use multiple tight ends.

"There are several teams that use two or three tight ends," Bellotti said. "I think those teams could really use Jeff."

Bellotti added that although Thomason needs work in areas, he no doubt has what it takes to play in the NFL.



Former Duck nose tackle Marcus Woods will be crossing his fingers come draft day.

"He may need a little more weight and work on his blocking," he said. "But as a receiver, he could really help some teams. I think Jeff's best football is ahead of him."

Thomason, along with Woods, was invited to the latest NFL combine, where scouts get a look at all of the top prospects in the nation.

Oregon head coach Rich Brooks said an invitation to a combine is usually a good sign.

"Normally that means they have a good chance to be drafted," he said, "but where is hard to say."

Conner and LaBounty are long shots to get drafted, and both are realistic about their chances.

"I just wish for the best," LaBounty said. "I've been contacted by three teams. I think my chances are pretty slim. I've been running to keep in shape in case I am drafted."

Conner, who has talked with Cincinnati, the Giants, Cleveland, the Seattle Seahawks and the Phoenix Cardinals, was a little more optimistic.

"Some guys who never expect to get drafted are drafted," he said. "I'm just hoping for the best."

Schuler thinks LaBounty's biggest setback could be his lack of size.

"Matt's a little undersized NFL-wise," Schuler said. "But he is a good, solid football player."

Conner said if he isn't drafted, he would con-

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NFL scouts like look of Thomason, Woods

By Jake Berg
Emerald Sports Editor

Joe Schaffeld will be going into his 19th season as Oregon's defensive line coach next fall, but he said his experience doesn't make him any more knowledgeable about how NFL teams draft.

"If you find out, make sure to tell me," said Schaffeld, the Oregon coach designated to handle NFL scouts. "It's a guessing game. You can never say that this is the gospel — this is the way it's going to be."

Several Oregon football players will keep a close eye on that guessing game come Sunday, when the NFL holds its annual college draft.

Schaffeld said he has been called by scouts from nearly every team in the NFL during the past year, but a number of teams — from the Denver Broncos to the Washington Redskins — have recently come to Oregon.

When scouts visit Oregon to look at the talent, Schaffeld said they ask nearly everyone for information about the players.

"They talk to the trainers ... maybe to the janitors," Schaffeld said. "You know, anybody."

A lot of the talk has surely centered around nose tackle Marcus Woods, a student of Schaffeld's. Woods has perhaps the highest potential draft value of any of the graduated Ducks, said Billy Wilson, the San Francisco 49ers scout who looked at Oregon last fall.

"He plays pretty well,"



Jeff Thomason

Wilson said. "He shows some pretty good strength at point. The (Oregon) coaches recommended him."

Doug Kretz, who scouted Oregon for the Seattle Seahawks, said Woods may definitely have more NFL qualities than any of the other Ducks, but he also said Woods would have a hard time fitting into the Seattle defense, which uses a four-man front, thus eliminating the nose tackle position.

"Marcus Woods is a good nose tackle, but we don't use a nose tackle anymore," Kretz said. "He probably wouldn't be as high on our list."

Who's high on the Seattle list, though, is Oregon tight end Jeff Thomason. Kretz said he was impressed with Thomason's abilities when visited Oregon last spring and fall.

"Jeff Thomason is a real good athlete," Kretz said.

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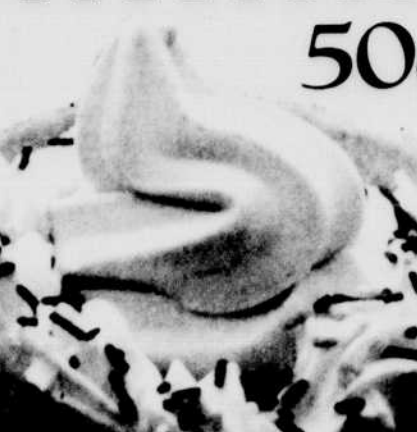


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