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It's time to give O'Neil respect

If the Ducks don't win, it's Danny O'Neil's fault. Whether a running back fumbles, a receiver drops a pass, the defense gives up 500 yards in total offense, a coach gives a bad play call, or less than 30,000 fans show up at Autzen, somehow, somehow, Danny-boy gets the blame.

Not anymore. In his first three games, Oregon's tormented junior quarterback has thrown for an average of 300 yards a game, six touchdowns, has completed nearly 65 percent of his passes, has had only two passes intercepted, and, most importantly, has led the Ducks to their first 3-0 start since 1988.

Saturday, O'Neil threw for 269 yards against an Illinois team that held 15th-ranked Arizona's offense scoreless the week before.

His performance over the past three weeks has put him among the top quarterbacks in the nation. (O'Neil was ranked second in the nation in passing efficiency before the Illinois game.)

His smoothness in the pocket, and his leadership on the field has been a big "get off my back" directed at the press, fans, and even his own coaches.

As early as this past spring, people were already — maybe a more appropriate word would be "still" — doubting O'Neil's ability to run Oregon's offense.

Following in the footsteps of Bill Musgrave and Chris Miller, two Oregon quarterbacks who were established superstars by the end of their second years as starters, was the worst thing that could have happened to O'Neil.

From day one there were doubts about O'Neil. In 1991, it virtually took until the day of the opening game for Oregon coaches to put their wavering faith in O'Neil as the starter. That year O'Neil was walking on pins and needles. Every trip to the sidelines after a failed series was a potential death march to a seat next to the Gatorade tank.

The fans and the coaches were spoiled by Miller and Musgrave. They not only wanted a new quarterback, they wanted another Boy Wonder QB ... and they wanted it now.

O'Neil would be benched during a couple of

games, only to find himself starting the next game. Then he had a season-ending injury.

Last season, head coach Rich Brooks made no bones about it: O'Neil would be the starter for Oregon.

Give Brooks credit, he stuck with O'Neil the entire season. O'Neil had his slumps, his bad games, but Brooks stayed with him, and the fans learned to live with O'Neil.

Then came the Independence Bowl.

After a marvelous first half, the Oregon offense hit a brick wall as Wake Forest destroyed the Duck defense in the second half. The Ducks lost, and the questions about O'Neil resurfaced.

When spring drills opened this year, the name Tony Graziani started to come up in interviews and

newspapers. Whether it was the coaches trying to push O'Neil, or whether they actually thought Graziani, the redshirt freshman, actually had a chance to take over as starter is up for debate. Just the fact that it was even a question was a slap in the face to O'Neil.

There were never those questions when Miller and Musgrave were around.

It's now five days before Oregon's crucial Pacific-10 Conference opener against California. Yeah, the Ducks have looked weak at times against competition that is far from what they will face in the Pac-10, but it's been no fault of O'Neil's.

Before the Illinois game, O'Neil had thrown 62 passes without an interception. He threw two in the first three series Saturday, but remained confident and played virtually flawlessly the rest of the way.

O'Neil will still have slumps. The difference is that so far this season, the slumps have lasted a series or two, and not a game or two.

It's time for everyone — the fans, the press, and the coaches to put their devoted faith in Danny O'Neil.

It took him a while, but he's definitely earned it.

Dave Charbonneau is a sports reporter for the Emerald.



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Men's golf has room to improve

By Steve Mims
Oregon Daily Emerald

The Oregon men's golf team may not be the best team in the Pacific-10 Conference this year, but at the moment it is probably the biggest.

The Ducks' roster is currently at 18 players as it prepares to

qualify for its next tournament in early October. However, second-year head coach Steve Nosler said he did not prepare for such a large team, and may trim the roster soon.

"I didn't mean for us to be this big," Nosler said. "It is just that some good players from Idaho,

Washington and California became available so I gave them a chance to make our team."


Bigger has not meant better so far for the Ducks this season, as they have finished near the bottom in both of their early tournaments. Oregon opened the season with a horrendous performance at the Husky Invitational, where it finished 13th out of 14 teams. The Ducks played better at the Tucker Invitational in Albuquerque, N.M., last weekend, but finished 16th among the 18-team field.

"We have not played at the level we need to," Nosler said. "We did not seem ready to play in our first tourney but we moved in the right direction last weekend."

The Ducks lost only two players from last year's squad, which advanced to the regional championships, but the losses are huge. Jeff Lyons, an All-American in 1992, and Cam Martin both won two collegiate tournaments during their Oregon careers and were named second-team all-Pac-10 last year.

Oregon's top returnee from last season is junior Ted Snaveley, whose 74.38 stroke average was third on the team, behind Lyons and Martin. Snaveley played in all 13 tournaments for the Ducks last year and finished in the top 10 at four of them. Snaveley paced the Ducks in New Mexico when he shot a 7-over-par 223 for the three-round event.

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