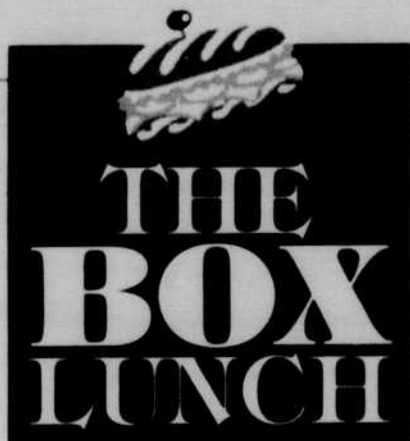


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DUCK FOOTBALL

Cota stars in Duck secondary

□ Oregon's Chad Cota is hoping to make another big hit against USC

By Dave Charbonneau
Oregon Daily Emerald

The last time Oregon played USC at Autzen Stadium, it was under the stars, Trojan running back Mazio Royster was seeing stars and the Ducks' Chad Cota became a star.

On that night, almost exactly two years ago, Chad Cota, a red-shirt freshman from Ashland, was given the call to replace the injured Eric Castle at free safety. Within minutes, Royster took a handoff and was promptly leveled by Cota with one of the biggest Duck hits in recent years.

"I guess you could say I took advantage of the opportunity," Cota said. "When Castle got hurt, the coaches just kind of threw me in there. I think I probably caught their eyes with that hit."

Since that night, Royster has recovered from the blow and is now in the NFL, and Cota, now the Ducks' strong safety, has never relinquished his spot as a starter in the Oregon secondary.

Castle is now gone, and injuries have decimated Oregon's defensive backfield, leaving a largely young and untested crew in the secondary.

Now in his junior year, Cota has covered nicely for Castle. He leads the team in tackles (27) and interceptions (two), but

more importantly, Cota has found himself thrust into the position as the veteran of the secondary, and with that comes a greater emphasis on his leadership.

"I've been here a while, so I think I've earned the respect of the coaches, fans and younger players," he said. "Because of that, I think the younger guys may look up to me a little."

Head coach Rich Brooks said the injuries and youth of the backfield has pushed Cota hip-deep into the leadership role.

"One problem we've had is that there have been different people at free safety and the cornerback position each game," he said. "We have a lot of new faces in the secondary and Chad has been the constant, steadying force of the group. Chad's presence is critically important to bring continuity to our coverage."

Never was the inexperience of the secondary more obvious than last weekend when California destroyed Oregon's defensive backs in the now infamous "comeback game."

"When the game was over, I was just looking around in a daze," Cota said. "I couldn't believe what happened."

In that game, Oregon's secondary gave up 368 yards passing, three touchdowns, and the crucial two-point conversion that won the game for the Bears. Even though Cota admitted he may be the leader in the secondary, he said there's only so much he can do come game-time.

ACCENT ON

CHAD COTA

YEAR IN SCHOOL: Junior
OREGON NUMBER: 7
DIMENSIONS: 188 pounds, 6-foot-1

HIGH SCHOOL: Ashland
REPUTATION: Always been known as a 'big hitter.'

MAJOR: Sociology
HE'S SO TOUGH: Played much of last season with a broken thumb
QUOTE: "I need to start working on getting some more big hits."

Emerald

"I try to give the guys encouragement when they get beat deep," he said. "But we've really been concentrating on coming together as unit defensively. Every player needs to be leader in his own way."

Cota and the rest of the Oregon team has put the Cal game behind them. They have no choice. Things will not get any easier for the Ducks as they prepare to get into the heart of the Pacific-10 Conference schedule loaded with pass-happy teams, USC being one of the deadliest.

Trojan quarterback Rob Johnson has completed nearly 70 percent of his passes, is averaging 247 yards a game and has thrown for 10 touchdowns in five games. Johnson has also only thrown one interception this season.

In addition, USC has one of the top receivers in the country in Johnnie Morton. Morton has been on the receiving end on more than a third of Johnson's completions and already has over 600 yards receiving, including four touchdowns.

"Morton is good receiver," Cota said. "He likes to make acrobatic catches. Their passing attack will be another tough test for us in the secondary."

Saturday's game starts at 3:30, so although the game may not be under the lights, Cota wouldn't mind if he could, once again, make a Trojan see stars.

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