

Molden looks to prove that he's finally back

By Steve Mims
Oregon Daily Emerald

Alex Molden says he has something to prove next year, and he's spent the off-season putting himself in a position to do it.

It's been almost 16 months since Molden suffered a major knee injury during the Ducks' Independence Bowl defeat at the end of the 1992 season. Since that game, there have been times when Molden thought he was back in the shape that made him an impact newcomer for the Ducks during his freshman year, but it never happened. Now he says it has.

"I'm feeling real good, the strength is back 100 percent," Molden said. "After working out over winter term, my speed kept picking up and I started gaining more confidence. I realized that I was faster than I was during the season. I feel like I'm better than I was when I was healthy."

Molden has already run the gamut of emotions in only two years of playing cornerback for Oregon. The 5-foot-10 junior from Colorado Springs, Colo., burst onto the scene for the Ducks two years ago as a red-shirt freshman, intercepting four passes before suffering the knee injury in the Independence Bowl.

By his own admission, Molden wasn't 100 percent healthy when he elected to come back at the start of last season, and his performance showed it. Just one year after being a fan favorite, Molden was taking the brunt of the criticism leveled at the defense.

"I personally feel I have something to prove because I took a lot of criticism," Molden said. "I thought I was healthy but I wasn't. I tried to say (the injury) didn't bother me, but it did. I finally mentioned that after the season. I didn't have the speed to make up for some mistakes I made."

The Oregon defense was given most of the blame for the Ducks' 30 point-collapse and subsequent 42-41 loss at California, a loss that started 1993s downfall. The defense also took shots for the Ducks three-game losing streak at the end of the season, including losses to Arizona and Stanford in which they gave up 31 and 38 points, respectively.

The Ducks' defense endured a series of injuries, one of the reasons the unit gave up more than 4,000 points and 250 points for the first time since 1986, and forced only 17 turnovers, the lowest total in head coach Rich Brooks' tenure.

"One thing I was always pretty proud of about our team and in particular the defense is that we played hard and played with

great effort and emotion," Brooks said last week. "I thought we lost some of that last year. We're going to make a big push to get that back to where it needs to be."

Now that Molden has the physical capability to full strength, he says he will begin working on the mental side.

"I've led by actions not words," Molden said. "Now it's time to step it up and be more vocal. This is a good time to do it, during spring."

Molden is now preparing for a 1994 season in which he will be one of the veterans of a young secondary, particularly at cornerback. A major factor that could determine the Ducks' success next year is the health of Molden's partner on the corner, senior Herman O'Berry, who was injured in the Ducks' season opening win at Colorado State last year.

O'Berry and Molden were expected to be one of the top cornerback duos in the conference last year, but obviously injuries ended that possibility. O'Berry will be limited during spring, although Brooks holds out hope that he can participate in some contact drills near the end of workouts.

"Herman will not be 100 percent this spring, but we do believe he'll be 100 percent by fall," Brooks said. "Alex is 100 percent. We saw them out there for 11 games two years ago, and they were pretty spectacular."

Molden is also excited about the possible return of his secondary mate.

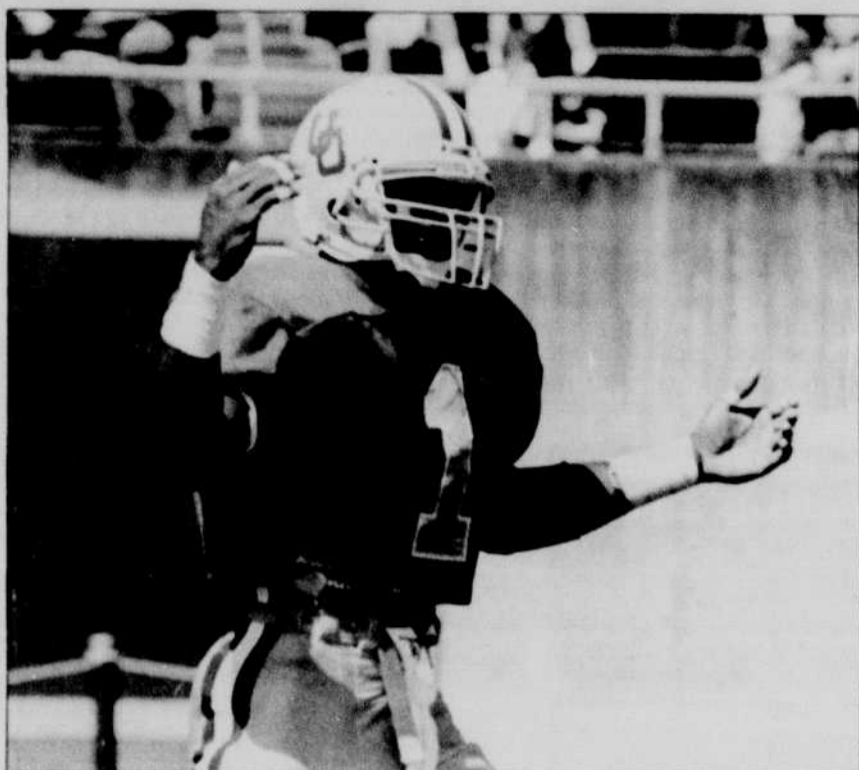
"I'm pumped up about it," Molden said. "(Herman) won't be out there right away, but having him on the other side will help me out. I can't wait until we're both lined up. It's going to be excellent."

If anything positive can be taken from the Ducks' 5-6 season of a year ago, it's that all the injuries gave some of the younger players in the secondary to gain valuable experience. The Ducks enter spring with 11 lettermen in the secondary, including four cornerbacks who have started at least two games.

"Now whatever happens, I'm going to feel confident," Molden said. "Whether it's Isaac (Walker), Lamont (Woods), Ronnie (Gipson), everyone, a lot of players got time on the corners. That's going to make us better."

Molden hopes the return of talent alongside him as well as the speed that left him, will mean the return of the player he knows he can be.

"Now I have the speed back, and I really have something to prove," Molden said. "I want to get back out there and play better than I ever played before."



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