

# Duck backfield looks to step up

By Steve Mims  
Oregon Daily Emerald

Last season Sean Burwell and Ricky Whittle were supposed to be the best backfield duo in Oregon history. That didn't happen, but this year Whittle is back with a new partner, Dino Philyaw.

The circumstances in 1994 will be different for Whittle because this time around he is the experienced member of the backfield. That's a stark contrast from last season when three-year starter Burwell and the younger, more powerful Whittle had Oregon coaches and fans alike salivating over the possibilities. However, despite the build-up, injuries and inconsistencies limited the tandem to less than 800 yards rushing combined.

"It's a real downfall that me and Sean were supposed to be the best backs and this and that and it didn't turn out," Whittle said. "It was a whole fluke."

Whittle showed his promise during his freshman year when he gained 634 yards rushing in a backup roll, but slumped to only 284 yards on 67 carries a year ago. Now that he's the veteran, Whittle said he feels pressure to fill the shoes of Burwell, Oregon's No. 2 all-time rusher.

"(Sean) put a lot of pressure on us," the junior from Fresno, Calif., said. "What he did is phenomenal. He came in as a freshman and did his thing and I guess what we have to pick up

from is game-to-game, being more consistent."

The halfback slot for Oregon is a question mark during spring drills, as only Whittle and Philyaw have played a down in college, yet neither has proved himself over the course of an entire season.

"I'm feeling that Dino Philyaw is hopefully ready to step to the plate," Oregon head coach Rich Brooks said. "Ricky Whittle is going to have to step up and show he's a durable guy that we can count on play after play, day after day, without the nagging injuries that he's had."

Making matters more worrisome for the coach is the fact that the only other halfback on the depth chart this spring is Kamil Stone, a sophomore who played cornerback for the Ducks last season. Freshmen David Crump and Kevin Parker will join the Ducks in the fall.

The Ducks have had other highly-recruited running backs join the program in the last few years, but Kealii Clifford, Greg Fogle, Woody Green and James Reed all left the team for different reasons. Despite the questions, Brooks said it isn't depth that worries him.

"Right now I'm not going to worry about depth at any position," Brooks said. "I'm going to worry about execution and quality of performance at the position rather than whether or not somebody's going to get hurt. I'll be worried about it if one of

them gets hurt. I'll worry in a real hurry."

The 5-foot-9, 188-pound Whittle and 5-foot-10, 175-pound Philyaw differ in stature, and they say their running styles vary as well.

"He's a lot more elusive, like Sean," Whittle said of Philyaw. "He'll see you downfield and already be thinking in his mind, 'Once I get past this guy, I'll set you up for something else.' He's thinking a lot more ahead of time, as far as his moves, than I am."

If Philyaw is the elusive one, then Whittle is the battler.

"Rick wants to punish you now and miss you later," Philyaw said. "He's just as fast as I am, but his style is different."

Oregon quarterback Danny O'Neil said the most important thing is to make the back a more focal point of the offense.

"The first thing we need to do is have an emphasis on the running game, and that's been accomplished already," the senior-to-be said. "There's no doubt we need a better running game. Talking to (offensive coordinator Mike) Bellotti, he had a good point. He said 'To win a lot of games in November, you need to be able to run the football.'"

"I'm a firm believer we need to run the football and that will open up the passing game," O'Neil said. "It all goes hand-in-hand, and as we run the football



Jeff Paslay/Emerald  
Oregon's Dino Philyaw is doing double duty this spring, practicing with the football team and running track.

we'll pass the ball better as well."

Burwell added an extra dimension to the team as a receiver, catching 109 passes for more than 1,000 yards in four years. Whittle and Philyaw have combined for only 27 catches in three years combined.

"I always had a lot of faith that (Burwell) would be in the open area," O'Neil said. "I'll have to see how Ricky and Dino are, but as we saw in games last year, you give Ricky the ball and there's no telling what he's going to do with it. One thing I

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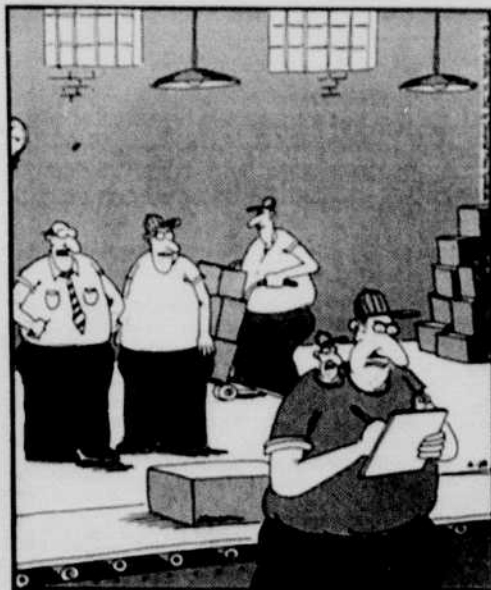
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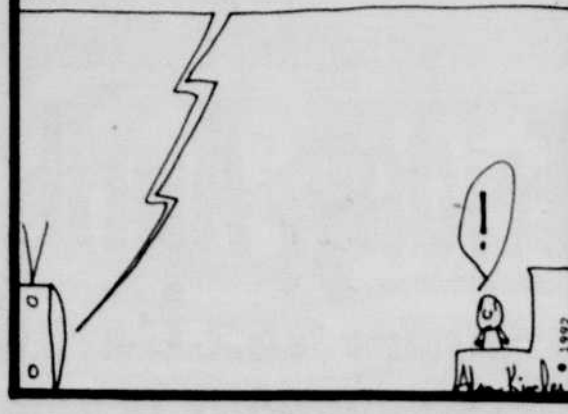
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