

"We're going to battle like hell to not let them run the ball on us."

— Nick Aliotti



FOWL PLAY



MICHAEL SHINDLER/Emerald

The defensive unit of the Ducks has been a pleasant surprise this season after a shaky 1993 campaign.

Mark McTyre
Oregon Daily Emerald

The Ducks are on a roll and looking toward a possible Rose Bowl bid. They have positioned themselves as contenders in the conference largely due to the play of their "Gang Green" defense.

The Oregon defense has been the cornerstone to the Ducks' turnaround this season. Last week, Gang Green took the explosive big-play power out of Heisman Trophy candidate Napoleon Kaufman, holding him to 101 yards of total rushing, 66 yards below his average.

Prior to last week, the defense shutdown USC's running back Shawn Walters and Iowa's one-two punch combination of running back Ryan Terry and fullback Kent Kahl.

One year ago, the Ducks' defense was the team's worst nightmare. Last season, the Ducks traveled to Berkeley looking to upset the 15th-ranked California Bears. Holding a 30-point lead, the defense handed the game right back to the Bears to lose by one point.

Later in the season against Arizona, the Wildcats' coaching staff replaced injured quarterback Dan White with tailback Chuck Levy. Levy and the Wildcats threw only one pass

I'm proud of the defense. We've got so many young players stepping up their play. I'm in awe.

— Silila Malepeai
Nose tackle

(incomplete) but carried the ball 80 times in their unusual option formation. The Wildcats carried for 389 yards and a 31-10 victory.

This season the defense has made a complete 180-degree turnaround, once again creating excitement and putting fans back in the stands.

"The biggest key for us right now has been our players' attitude," defensive coordinator Nick Aliotti said. "They've given tremendous effort. They paid the price after the season in winter conditioning and it's just an attitude of confidence and just playing as one."

The defensive unit is playing right along with the elite defenses of the Pac-10. After a stunning performance last week, Oregon's rush defense improved

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Wheaton showcases talents in dramatic fashion

Chris Metz
Oregon Daily Emerald

It used to be that freshmen didn't play in the Pac-10. A league dominated by upper-classmen that had been seasoned their first couple of seasons on the college level was the norm. Freshmen sensations were rare at best.

Just don't let Oregon redshirt freshman Kenny Wheaton know how things are supposed to be.

Although he's not a starter on the Oregon defense, Wheaton has made the most of his playing time this season with an undeniable flair for the dramatic.

"He never ceases to amaze me," Oregon tailback Ricky Whittle said moments after Wheaton's 97-yard interception return for a touchdown in last week's upset over Washington. "I just look him in the eyes and say 'Hey, we need a big play,' and he says 'All right I'll get it.' And he goes out there and does it."

Wheaton has been named the defensive player of the week in the Pac-10 twice this season, both times being instrumental in upsets over USC and Washington.

Wheaton's play has not only benefited the Ducks as a team, but has affected each player individually as well.

"People should know that from now on Kenny Wheaton is here to stay," Oregon tight end Josh Wilcox said. "(He's) probably the best redshirt freshman we've had in a long time. I'm glad he's on my team, you know."

The interception against the Huskies couldn't have come at a better time as the

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— Rich Brooks
Oregon head coach

Ducks were backed up against their own goal line, seemingly a play or two away from a heartbreaking loss. But for Wheaton, it's all just part of his job.

"I watch a lot of film," Wheaton said. "I'm out there and if I see a set I've seen on film, I live on the edge, so I just gambled, and the gamble paid off this time."

Fallout from the game-clinching interception for a touchdown is still causing quite a commotion. Reruns of the infamous trot down the field are a constant reminder of a player and a team that defied the odds and beat the powerful Washington Huskies.

"As soon as I saw that he had control of the ball, I knew that we had won or that it would take a miracle for us not to win," Oregon defensive coordinator Nick Aliotti said. "I don't even know if I saw him go all the way. I saw him catch it and run up the sidelines. I just figured 'Hey great

job' and I'm happy as hell, and it was just gravy."

Oregon head coach Rich Brooks has seen Wheaton's big plays continue to mount this season and has repeatedly praised Wheaton and his big-time play ability.

"He has made more football plays in his time on the field than I think any other player I've ever been around in my 18 years here as head coach," Brooks said.

Despite his role as primarily a reserve player that comes in mostly in nickel situations, Wheaton is sixth on the team in tackles (33) and tied for first in interceptions with three for 157 yards in returns. To begin the season, a depleted tailback position forced the versatile Wheaton to add one more line to his increasing resume as he took on some rushing duties, scoring a touchdown in the Ducks' first game of the season.

But when it comes time to issue praise, Wheaton credits his fellow teammates for allowing him the chance to step up big.

"I owe a lot to my defensive lineman for putting pressure on the quarterback," Wheaton said. "If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be able to make the defensive plays that I make."

In high school Wheaton, a native of Phoenix, Ariz., was named to the 5A all-state squad and all-Arizona team for all classes by the *Arizona Republic* for top honors. Wheaton, who likes the smaller town and college environment of Eugene, admits that he would have liked to play closer to home for one of the Arizona schools but has no regrets about coming

to Oregon.

"I felt like Oregon was the place," Wheaton said. "The record was not as good, but I felt that they were coming up and would be better as the years progress."

Wheaton doesn't feel any more pressure facing one of the schools that balked at the versatile player, but instead looks at the game as a chance to show people from his home state the brand of football that he is capable of playing at Oregon.

"This Saturday's going to be a little more than just a big game," Wheaton said, citing that he would have liked to have possibly attended Arizona.

The Oregon secondary is one of the strongest areas of the Ducks' team this year, and Wheaton knows that the role he plays is just part of the overall effectiveness of the highly talented defensive backs.

In addition, Wheaton believes that everyone on the back wall of the Ducks is capable of going out and making big plays at any time.

"We have so many good corners here," Wheaton said. "It's at a point to where coach Aliotti can just go down the line and just point out a guy, and I know he can go out and do the same things as the starters."

As for his spectacular flair for the dramatic, Wheaton warns that it's just his job and not to worry about any new-found overconfidence that could come from his thrilling plays such as last weekend's interception.

"I try not to dwell on what I did," the humble Wheaton said.