

Belden answers kicking questions for Oregon

Kris Henry
Oregon Daily Emerald

Matt Belden came to Oregon from Arizona amid a summer of questions about the kicking game.

The 18-year-old was penciled in as the replacement for Tommy Thompson, a semi-legend among Duck faithful for the somewhat endless years he handled the Oregon kicking duties. His shoe, or lack thereof, was thought to be near impossible to replace.

By the time fall practices were over, Belden had eased into the vacant kicking shoes and taken responsibility for the Oregon punting, placekicking and kick-off duties.

Belden began the season described by Oregon head coach Rich Brooks as "a young man who has yet to attend his first college class."

On Sept. 4 he played in his first college football game. It is now Nov. 18 and no one is talking about the kicking game anymore.

"I guess it means I'm doing a good job since nobody is really asking about the kicking game," Belden said. "I came in expecting to win all three jobs. I thought I could do it and that was my first goal."

"Along the way, week to week, I've set some goals for myself. I've gained some of them and others I haven't. I need to get to the point where I gain all my goals each week."

Those aren't exactly words a person would expect to hear from someone experiencing his first full taste of football on the collegiate level.

Then again, Belden isn't exactly your average freshman kicker. Twice this season he has been named the Hertz/Pac-10 special teams Player of the Week.

The first honor came after the Ducks' 22-7 road victory against USC on Oct. 7. Belden connected on all three field goal attempts, hitting from 24, 43 and 24 yards, and punted three times for a 39.3-

yard average. Two of his punts were downed inside the USC 5-yard line.

The second honor came after last weekend's 55-21 road victory over Stanford. He averaged 40.8 yards on five punts with three kicks pinning the Cardinal inside its own seven-yard line. He also connected on two field goals from 27 and 34 yards.

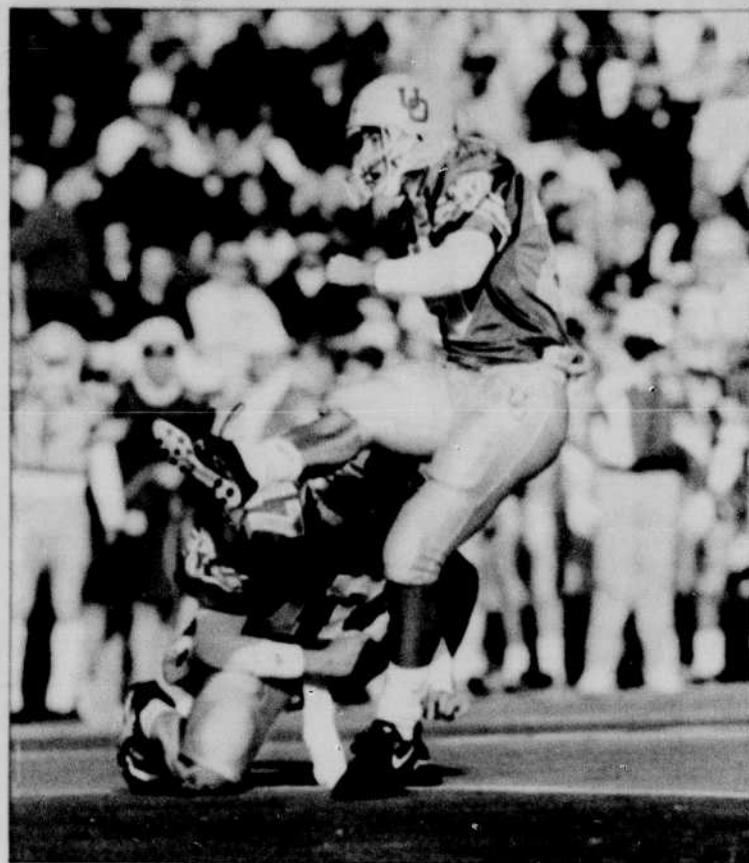
Belden is third in the Pac-10 Conference for field goals per game at just over one splitting the uprights per outing. So far this season, Belden is 12-17 in field goal attempts, connecting at a 70 percent clip.

His punting has been inconsistent for most of the season, however Belden still maintains a solid near 40-yard average.

"The punting has been shaky this year," Belden said. "I'll hit one 60 yards and then I'll hit one 30 yards. That's just flaws in my technique that I have to really work on this week and this winter to make myself better. I need to get to the point where I'm hitting them 45 or 50 yards consistently."

When it comes to flaws in his technique, Belden doesn't have to go far in finding out Brooks' thoughts on his progress. Brooks is also the special teams coach.

"That was one of the things that drew me here," Belden said, "just knowing that the head coach was the special teams coach. That just made me believe



MICHAEL SHINDLER for the Emerald
Matt Belden has stepped up in his first collegiate season and capably filled the shoes, or lack thereof, of departed Tommy Thompson.

that (the kicking game) was a big emphasis.

"He's hard on me, but I like it. I've always liked coaches to be hard on me because I expect myself to do so well. When the

coach keeps on you, you kind of have to keep on yourself to get better."

He has three more years of Brooks' tutelage to perfect a technique that got Belden selected as

one of the members of the all-Arizona squad by the *Arizona Republic* and also earned him first-team all-state honors in Class 4A as a punter and placekicker.

Belden connected on five of 11 field goals during his senior season in Glendale, but four of his missed attempts were from 60 yards or longer.

Since coming to Eugene, Belden has had to learn to deal with life on his own as an out-of-state college freshman in a climate drastically different than what he was used to in Arizona.

"I've loved every minute of it," Belden said about his new surroundings. "Everybody says that it rains all the time here, but when you've seen the sun all the time for 18 years, it's kind of a nice change. The weather hasn't really affected (my kicking) at all."

The success Oregon has had in football this season hasn't hurt Belden's feelings about signing on to be a Duck.

"I've played on a lot of teams and this is one of the tightest teams I've ever played on," he said. "It's been a great season. I can't ask for anything more than what we've done this season."

"Now we just have to work on making it a tradition and making Oregon football respected. That's one of the things that I'd love to be a part of and not make this just a one-time season but an everyday deal."

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