

Poised & Ready

Saturday's game is junior Tony Graziani's chance to show that he can overcome adversity and provide his team with the leadership it needs.

By Trevor Kearney
Sports Editor

Some quarterbacks provide the leadership that is necessary to lead a team back from a tough loss, while some simply have the raw power to put up the big numbers required to win games.

But some quarterbacks — the really great quarterbacks — possess both of these qualities and utilize them to the fullest.

In the past year, Oregon's Tony Graziani has proved to be that kind of quarterback. He has proved that he can play in pressure situations and bounce back from tough outings. He has proved that he can overcome injury and be there for his team.

And he isn't about to stop now.

"He is a serious football kid and I think that is what I like about him the most," Oregon offensive coordinator Al Borges said of Oregon's junior play caller. "I wouldn't say that he is immersed in the game, but he is very dedicated to it, and I think his dedication is very contagious to the other players."

Tabbed the Pacific-10 Conference's best backup quarterback in 1994, Graziani watched from the sidelines for the first four games of the season as former Oregon quarterback Danny O'Neil showed no signs of giving Graziani the chance to prove he could live up to his preseason title.

But an injury to O'Neil shoved Graziani into the unfamiliar starting role, giving him the chance to prove to Oregon coaches and fans that he deserved to be the Ducks' starting play caller in 1995.

And he did.

A 16-for-31 performance — good for 287 yards and one touchdown — against USC last year showed that Graziani lived up to his title and that he was capable of taking over the helm after the 1994 campaign.

Graziani is coming off his worst performance — a three-interception performance — of the year against Stanford. The outing was the only game in which Graziani has both started and finished that the Ducks did not win. But, Graziani said, his mishaps weren't a result of any nervousness of starting for the first time at Autzen.

"I had a little bit of the jitters on the first drive — and that was my best drive — but after that I was fine," Graziani said. During that first drive, Graziani connected on five consecutive passes for 59 yards, but then threw the three interceptions and found himself on the sidelines at the end of the first half.

Like he has done during his whole Oregon career, Graziani showed poise when the Ducks needed it, completing 20 of 36 passes without turning the ball over in the second half.

Graziani doesn't expect any different in Saturday's game against Pacific.

"I'm just going to go out and play my game," Graziani said of his plans against Pacific. "I have never had too many problems believing in myself. I came back in the second half and I think I played pretty well."

According to Borges, Graziani provides the Ducks with needed leadership and is without a doubt the starting quarterback of the present and of the future.

"I don't think he has stepped up to his own expectations [against Stanford]," Borges said. "I know he can play better and I think he would be the first one to tell you that, but he has done a nice job of leading us and a nice job of handling our offense."

"There is going to be some growing pains that go with [having a new quarterback], but sometimes a kid has been start-

ing two years and has a bad game. I think if you jump off of the bandwagon, that is when you start really playing with the chemistry of your football team."

Going into Saturday's game against Pacific, the southpaw has led his team to a 3-1 record, showing smatterings of brilliance and poise in the process. More impressively, however, is the fact that Graziani has quietly put up the statistics needed to become fourth in the nation in total offense — and he didn't even play a down in the Ducks' second game of the season against Illinois. That kind of play has earned him respect as one of the Pacific-10 Conference's best at his position.

But predictions, titles and praise aside, Graziani has gotten down to business this year, both as an emotional leader and as an effective play caller.

"You can't pay too much attention to titles or you lose focus," Graziani said. "It's always nice to hear but you can't dwell on it. If anything, they give you more incentive to work hard."

He also attributes his success and perseverance to the undying support that his teammates and coaches have given him.

"They have pretty much carried me on their backs and I think that has shown," Graziani said. "[That makes] you feel freedom so you don't play tight or uptight."

And Graziani has utilized that incentive, completing 73 passes in 134 attempts, good for 869 yards, a .545 percentage and a 289.3-yard average. His 79 rushing yards gives him 948 total net yards in 152 total plays this season and 6.2 average yards per play. He also has 7 touchdowns and is averaging 316 total yards per game.

In his career at Oregon, Graziani has thrown for over 1,400 yards and has a .541 overall passing percentage.

"I definitely feel like I am the man that can kind of lead this team to good things," Graziani said.

And he has. In the Ducks' third game of the season, Graziani, who had sat out the Saturday before with a shoulder injury, led his team to an upset of UCLA at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif. Graziani hit 19 of 35 passes for 255 yards in the game, and did not toss up an interception once during the game.

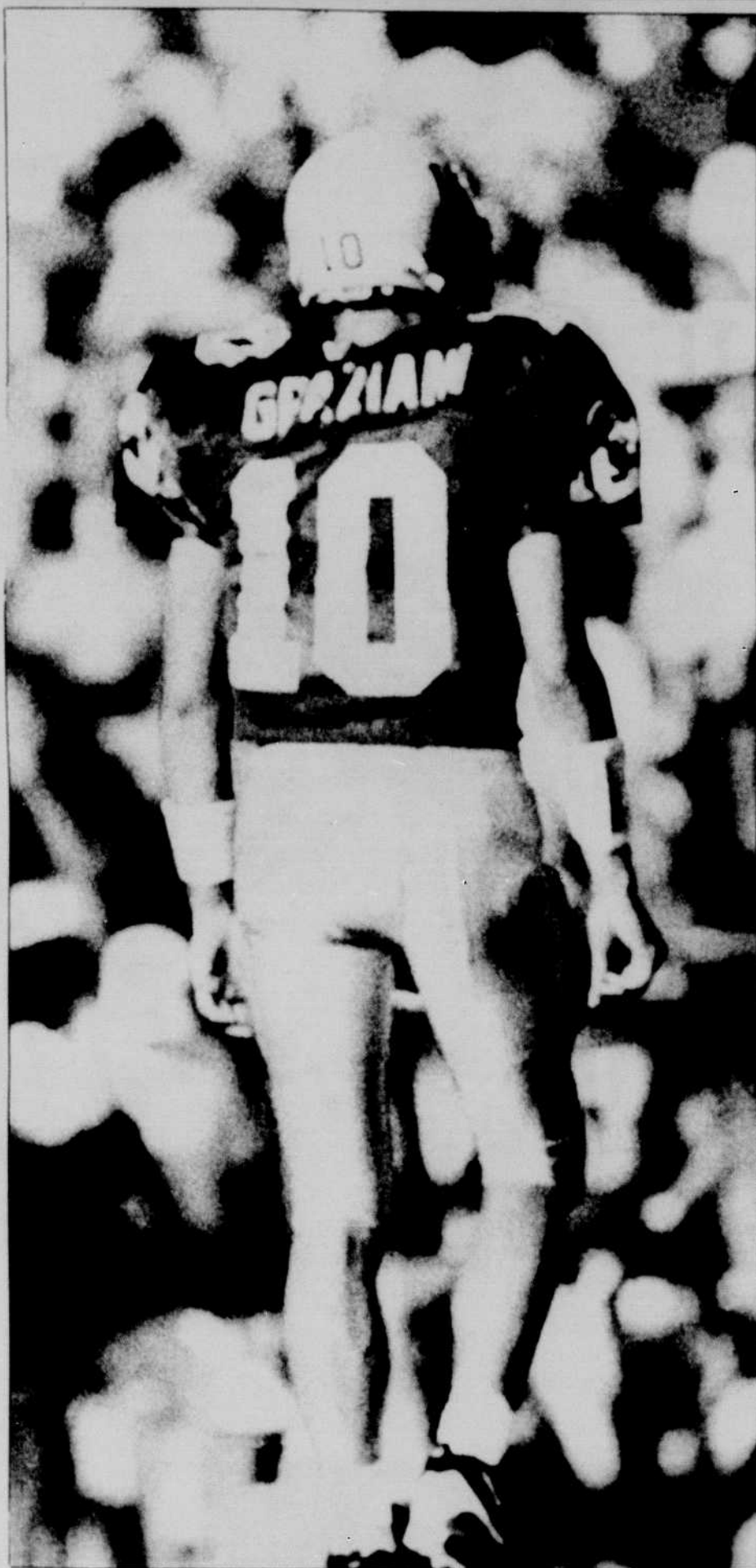
"He plays a very high profile position that we are very dependent upon to win football games," Borges said. "If he is healthy and he is confident, I think he can play as good as any player in this conference and he may be one of the best in the country."

"I think, particularly on the offensive perspective, when he is feeling good about himself and he feels that every time he drops back he is going to complete the pass, it makes our running game go, it does so much for our field position — which helps our kicking game. So I think it is reflective of our overall performance."

And as far as the team suffering its first loss, Graziani and Borges both agree that the defeat served as a wake-up call to the players and a reminder to the team as a whole of what the season could be like if the players don't get down to business.

"I see this as a good situation for the team to get back into our winning ways," Graziani said. "We have had a really good practice week. I think we want to come out strong and hungry. I think I could go out there and play an error-free game."

"I think we are ready," Borges said, "because the last time we played we didn't win and it was a week and a half ago. I think the kids are hungry to play again, I think we are practicing harder and I think we are ready to go."



Tony Graziani has developed into one of the football teams vocal and emotional leaders since taking over the quarterback position this year, and has shown composure under pressure doing it.

