

FOOTBALL

OREGON VS WASHINGTON STATE

Belden may kick against Cougars

By Chris Stewart
Sports Reporter

Oregon kicker and punter Matt Belden is listed as questionable for Saturday's game against Washington State. Coach Mike Bellotti said he is hopeful that Belden can return in a limited-duty role.

Belden suffered a leg injury in the season opener at Utah and has not played since.

If Belden does play against Washington State, he will only assume the role of place kicker, handling the field goals and extra points. He cannot begin punting or kicking off due to pain and the possibility of aggra-



BELDEN

vating his injury further.

According to Bellotti, Belden has been practicing over the weekend and during the week but still is having some discomfort.

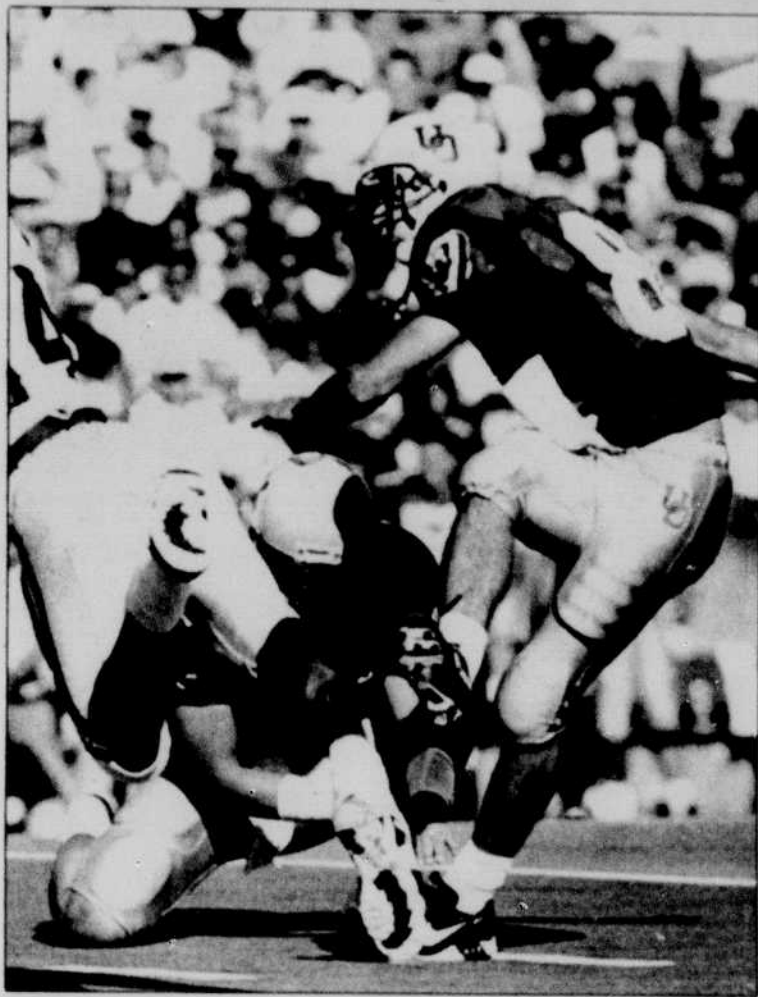
"Matt Belden is practicing as our place kicker," Bellotti said. "He tried [kicks] Tuesday and could not."

The Ducks' kicking game has

been sporadic in Belden's absence, but last year's stats show that with Belden, the kicking game can be a strength rather than a question mark.

Last year Belden averaged 40 yards on 81 punts. He was also the team's leading scorer, connecting on 13 of 23 field goals. He was twice recognized as the Pacific-10 Conference special teams player of the week.

Washington and Oregon are tied for third with Stanford in the Pac-10 and with the game expected to be a fairly even match, it's possible that the game could come down to a field goal.



NATALIE MONTGOMERY/Emerald

Oregon's special teams have been inconsistent, but they must play well if the Ducks hope to beat Washington State.

Preview: Ducks need to shine in all aspects

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but the Cougars are still playing very good defense.

"In my time here it has been the poorest offensive effort we've had," Bellotti said of last year's meeting.

A big difference for the Ducks this year is that their offense is healthy, as compared to last year, when many of the Ducks' offensive stars were injured.

Seniors Ricky Whittle and Cristin McLemore and junior Tony Graziani are among the nation's leaders in different statistical categories. And junior Josh Wilcox and sophomore Pat Johnson are beginning to produce more and more as the season goes on.

"We have a lot of weapons," Bellotti said. "Ricky Whittle has done a great job, Cristin McLemore has done a great job, and they command a lot of attention."

Bellotti said he was happy with Graziani's play and pointed out that he is still learning as the season progresses.

"He has ability," Bellotti said. "Each game he learns more and more how to utilize the talent around him. Tony is doing a good job of selecting the right guy to throw to and of finding the open receiver."

Oregon's biggest concern is stopping the passing attack of Washington State with a defense that has suffered some injuries.

The Cougars are also much improved on offense from a year ago.

The Ducks' secondary will be put to the test this week and it may have to be some younger and less-experienced players who will step up and make the plays. Safety Dante Lewis and cornerbacks Kenny Wheaton, Alex Molden and Lamont Woods are all banged up.

"Hopefully we can get our DB's healthy and get some of the young guys like Kip East, Ronnie

Gipson and Brian Collins to step up," Bellotti said.

Oregon should get a big boost from the return of senior nose tackle Troy Bailey, who is listed as probable for the game. Bailey will help add to a potent Oregon pass rush that is much improved from a year ago.

"Last year at this time we were last in the conference in sacks, and now we're leading the conference in sacks," Bellotti said.

Bellotti said he was impressed by the improvement of the Cougars' offense this year and with so many injuries to the Oregon secondary, Washington State's five-receiver set could pose some problems for the Ducks.

"Chad Davis is the kind of quarterback that can pick you apart," Bellotti said. "We need to be able to pressure him."

Another concern for Oregon is the play of the special teams. Sophomore kicker Matt Belden is listed as questionable for the game, but the Ducks seem to have found a temporary solution to the problems they've had with kick-offs. Against Cal the Ducks used a pooch kick to allow the coverage to get down field better and it proved to be fairly effective. Josh Bidwell has continued to steadily improve with his punting duties and will be Saturday's punter regardless.

Along with the revenge factor and the Pac-10 standings, the game is key because of natural rivalry and recruiting prospects.

"There is a natural rivalry there because of geographical location," Bellotti said. "Beating your Pac-10 Northwest rivals gives you a leg up in recruiting."

Saturday's game is the second in a key stretch of Pac-10 games for the Ducks. The Ducks won the first against Cal last week and face Pac-10 opponents for the rest of their season.

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