

Leg injury keeps Belden on sidelines

■ INJURY: The kicker's pulled leg muscle has become a nagging injury that may even threaten his season

By Trevor Kearney
Sports Editor

Last week, it appeared as if the Oregon football team was on the verge of returning one of its most frequently used offensive weapons from last year in sophomore punter and place-kicker Matt Belden.

But as it has turned out, Belden remains sidelined with a pulled muscle in his right leg and the Ducks continue to rely on two freshman to hold down the kicking duties.



BELDEN

Belden was slated to return to the team as the placekicker last week against Washington State and suited up for the game, but after experiencing discomfort in pregame warmups, he was limited to watching the game from the sidelines.

"It was frustrating, but I knew and my coaches knew that it would be best if I didn't play," Belden said of last week's game. "It is always tough [to sit out] when you would rather be playing. It has been tough to deal with just from the standpoint of not playing."

Belden has been out since he pulled the muscle in the Ducks' first game of the season against Utah. The muscle pull, once thought to only threaten Belden's availability for a couple of games, has turned into a nagging injury for Belden and a reoccurring problem for the banged up Ducks as they enter a critical stretch of games starting this week against Arizona State.

"When we first started this deal," Belden said of the rehabilitation process, "we thought I

would be back for the Cal game."

But Belden wasn't back for the California game two weeks ago, and it doesn't look like he will be back this week, either. Despite a pain-free practice on Monday, Belden is listed as doubtful for Saturday's game.

"It is kind of a game-time decision depending on what it feels like," Belden said, adding that he had experienced soreness in his leg during Tuesday's practice.

Having played only five downs this year, in which he had one 39-yard punt and one field goal, Belden would probably be eligible to use this season as a redshirt year, but, he said, he would much rather return, especially since the Ducks have become contenders to retain their conference championship.

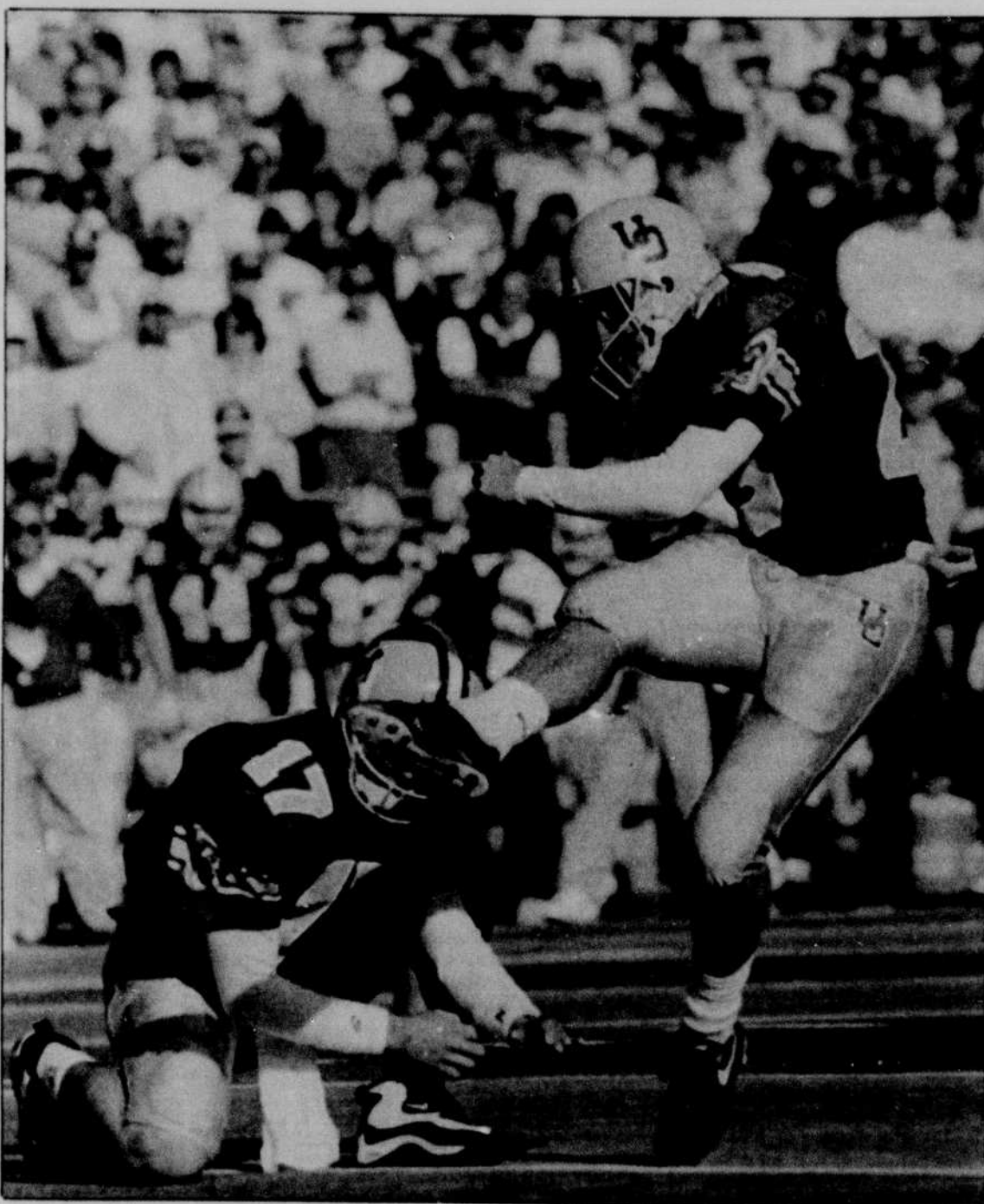
"This is a big week for me," Belden said. "This is where I do think we start the stretch run and I really want to be a part of it. It is getting more frustrating as the season winds down."

In place of Belden, the Ducks have used true freshman Joshua Smith as a place-kicker and red-shirt freshman Josh Bidwell as punter. And as of late, the Ducks have handed the kickoff duties over to redshirt freshman Matt Brewer.

The Ducks have made the most of the new kicking squad, developing several trick plays — including a successful on-side kick attempt — and a pooch kick strategy in order to solidify their special teams unit.

"I think they have done a pretty good job," said Belden, who has helped ease the transition for the new kickers. "It is a kind of revolving door with us. As a group, we have done a really good job of helping each other. I can use my experience from last year to help Josh and Josh out. I guess I have kind of taken on a role of a coach, but they are the ones who go out and do it."

Last year as a true freshman, the native of Glendale, Ariz., had some big shoes to fill, as former Duck and current San Francisco 49er Tommy Thompson —



Sophomore kicker Matt Belden pulled a muscle in his right leg in the first game of the season against Utah and has been out of action ever since. EMERALD

who twice led the Ducks in scoring and ranks among the top five Ducks in career scoring (157 points), field goals made (55) and field goal percentage (.672) — had just graduated.

But Belden proved to be a consistent and dependable member of the Rose Bowl bound Oregon squad. His team-high 76 points last season ranks ninth among Oregon's all-time single season leading scorers. His three field goals in the Ducks' upset win over USC last year earned

Belden the honor of Pacific-10 Conference Special Teams Player of the Week, as did his two field goal, seven PAT performance against Stanford.

"I like my role," Belden said. "It is a role where no one knows who you are unless you screw up or make a big kick. I thrive on it. I like having that responsibility."

Belden also averaged 39.8 yards-per-punt last season, and made 13 field goals in 23 attempts, good for a .565 field goal percentage.

After having a season like that, being limited to the sidelines has been all the more tough for Belden. But Belden said, when he does come back, he will be ready to show that last year was no fluke.

"It has been tough," Belden said. "It has been really frustrating. I was really looking forward to this season. I felt I was in a position to do a lot better this season."

"But when I come back, I will just do it all over again."

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