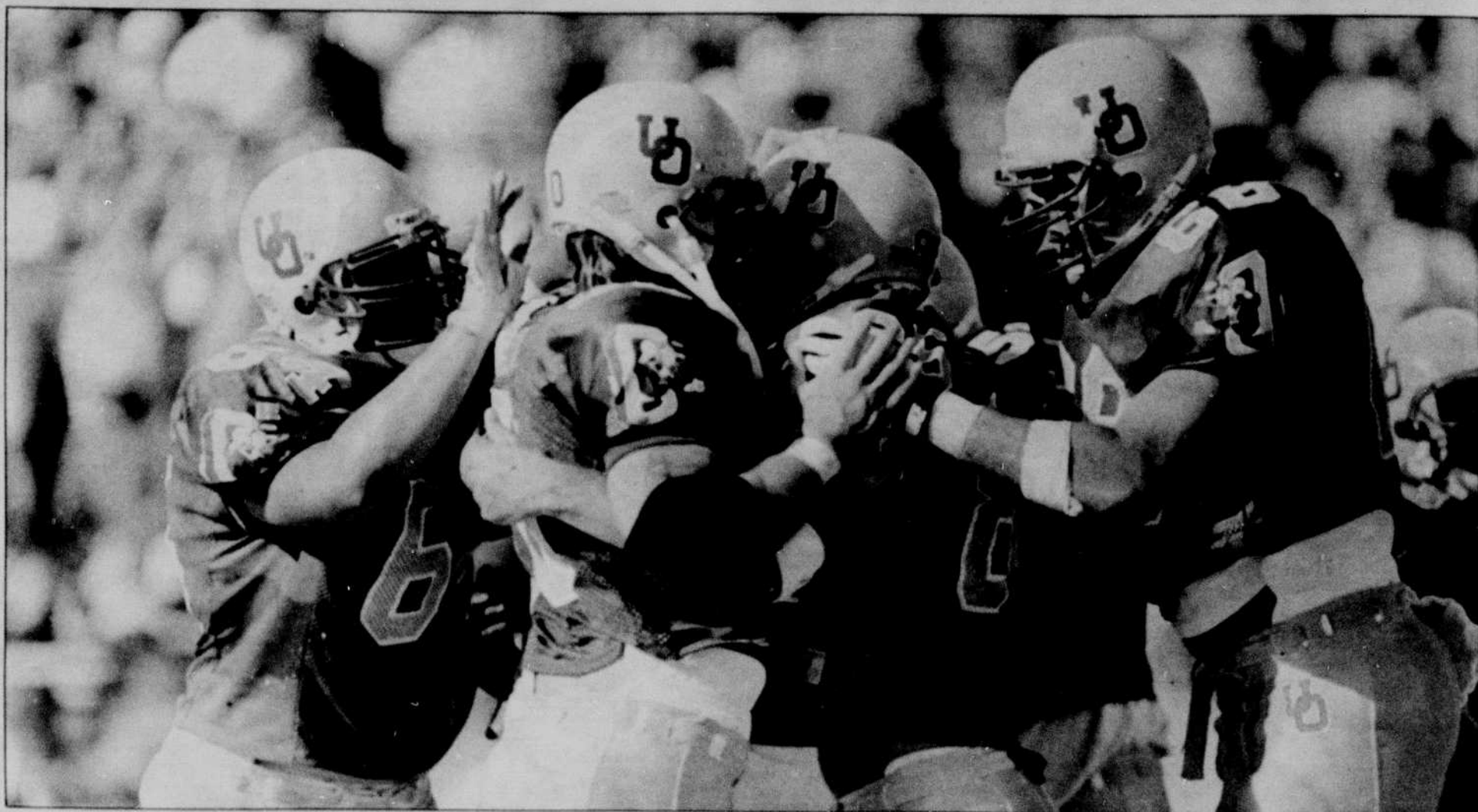


COTTON BOWL

OREGON VS COLORADO



NATALIE MONTGOMERY/Emerald

A close-knit Oregon football team worked hard to defend its Pacific-10 Conference title, but fell just short after losses to Stanford and Arizona State.

From spring game to OSU, Oregon focused on Jan. 1

■ **THE SEASON:** The Ducks never took their eyes off a New Year's Day bowl game

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The Oregon football team's berth in the Cotton Bowl on Jan. 1 isn't a perfect compliment to their Pacific-10 Conference Championship and Rose Bowl appearance last year, but after a long, hard-fought trip it is by all means the next best thing.

The Ducks' journey began back on Feb. 10, when former Oregon coach Rich Brooks left Eugene for the Rams of the NFL. Brooks' departure, along with the graduation of several key seniors, left many questions as to how the Ducks would go about defending their conference championship.

But only four days after the head coaching vacancy opened up it was filled from within the Oregon coaching staff with the naming of offensive coordinator Mike Bellotti.

The Bellotti era begins

Bellotti was faced not only with adjusting to his new position and the new responsibilities of taking over the reigns, however, but also with replacing defensive coordinator Nick Allioti, offensive line coach Steve Greatwood and wide receivers coach John Ramsdell, all of whom followed Brooks to the Rams.

Bellotti looked outside of the organization and found offensive coordinator Al Borges, defensive coordinator Charlie Waters and wide receivers coach Chris Peterson to fill the voids.

So the Ducks began spring drills with a different head coach and three brand new assistant coaches and ended spring practices with a lackluster intrasquad spring game, in which Tony Graziani, the starting quarterback for the first-string team, threw two interceptions and only one touchdown and the Ducks played a sloppy, mistake-ridden game. The Ducks went into their first game of the season unranked in the polls.

Game 1: The Utah Utes

Utah was no laughing matter for Oregon because the previous year the Ducks had watched the Utes waltz into Autzen Stadium an underdog and waltz out a 34-16 winner.

But Oregon got busy early and utilized its running game to the fullest. Senior tailback Ricky Whittle, who did not start the game, ended up with 160 yards on 30 attempts, and Graziani threw for 322 yards, connecting on 28 of 49 attempts for two touchdowns.

In the end, Oregon's defense held a 27-20 win together and earned the squad a No. 24 ranking in the Associated Press top poll.

Whittle's consistency in running the ball would set the tone for several games down the road, but the game proved to be costly, as sophomore kicker Matt Belden went down with what would become a season-ending injury and Graziani suffered a hit that would force him to miss the Ducks' home opener against Illinois.

Game 2: The Illinois Fighting Illini

In an effort to alleviate the problems produced when Belden went down, the Ducks flew in true freshman Joshua Smith early and handed the kicking duties over to him, while sophomore Josh Bidwell handled the punts.

Oregon got on the scoreboard first, as Whittle scored the Ducks' first touchdown.

The Illini took over from there, however, converting on a touchdown and three field goals to take a 19-7 lead into halftime.

Oregon quarterback Ryan Perry-Smith took over on the first play of the second half, though, converting on a 66-yard pass to McLemore, setting up Whittle's second touchdown of the day. The two teams battled back and forth late into the fourth quarter with Illinois leading 31-28.

Oregon's Gang Green defense then stepped up and put the game away. Sophomore strong safety Jaiya Figueras sacked Illinois quarterback Johnny Johnson and jumped on the subsequent fumble, giving the Ducks a 34-31 win and a No. 20 ranking in the Associated Press top 25 poll.

Game 3: The UCLA Bruins

Graziani was back and in full force, as he led the Ducks to a 21-3 halftime lead. The game was all Oregon before the break, as the Ducks' new weapon, converted-fullback A. J. Jelks, ran all over the Bruins defense and finished with 81 rushing yards.

But the Bruins, a pre-season Pac-10 favorite, fought back by scoring 28 points in the second half, but once again Oregon's defense proved to be the difference.

On what was the most critical drive of Oregon's young season, Figueras and junior defensive back LaMont Woods stuffed UCLA running back Karim Abdul-Jabbar just inches from the endzone, and the Ducks went on to win 38-31.

The win gave Oregon a 3-0 record and a No. 12 ranking in the AP poll.

Game 4: The Stanford Cardinal



The Ducks showed no signs of giving up their winning ways, as they marched 80 yards in 10 plays on the first possession of the game and scored on an 11-

yard pass from Graziani to McLemore. But Graziani was picked off on Oregon's next two possessions, and Stanford's running backs, Mike Mitchell and Anthony Bookman, made him pay for it as they ran over a flat Oregon defense as the Cardinal took a 14-7 lead.

The Ducks then evened the score on a 57-yard pass from Graziani to McLemore and then a one-yard touchdown dive by Whittle, but the moment was short lived. Stanford senior Marlon Evans returned Smith's strong kickoff 96 yards to put the Cardinal up 21-14. Stanford added another touchdown and stopped the momentum the Ducks created from an 80-yard touchdown drive and an onside kick to win the game 28-21. The loss dropped the Ducks to the No. 19 spot in the AP poll.

Game 5: The Pacific Tigers



After a week off, the Ducks hosted the Pacific Tigers and were looking to get back on track.

The Ducks left no room for the Tigers to escape with a victory, as the Oregon offense scored four times in the first 25 minutes of the game. Whittle finished with 130 rushing yards and Graziani completed 15-of-23 passes as the Ducks amassed 523 total yards and held the Tigers to 217 en route to a 45-7 victory.

The Ducks did get back on track, moving up to No. 17 in the AP poll before heading south to take on California.

Game 6: The California Golden Bears



Oregon had something to prove heading into Berkeley, considering Cal had been picked ahead of Oregon in some of the preseason polls.

And behind Whittle the Ducks proved that they were the better team. The senior dominated Cal in every facet of the game as he amassed 312 all-purpose yards, 161 of which were on the ground.

In the first half of the game, Gang Green stuffed the Bears, allowing them only three field goals. Oregon's slow start offensively gave way to an offensive outpour after the break, as Graziani threw three touchdowns and