

The Oregon offensive line has met many expectations set for them this season. The line's protection of its quarterbacks has been the best among Pac-10 schools this year.

# The Offensive Line's Last Dance

*After four years together, four of Oregon's five starting offensive linemen will play in their last home game on Saturday*

**By Chris Hansen**  
Sports Reporter

Even before the start of the season, Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti was touting his starting offensive line as the strength and stability of his offense.

And who could blame him? After all, the line had all five starters returning, including four seniors.

But early on in the season, Oregon had problems establishing and sustaining a running game, guard Willy Rife went down for the year with a knee injury and the Ducks then found themselves in the midst of a five-game losing streak. Suddenly, Oregon's offensive line looked like a group of under-achievers.

Then, last Saturday against Arizona, tailback Saladin McCullough ran for 223 yards and five touchdowns, and quarterbacks Tony Graziani and Ryan Perry-Smith had all the time in the world to throw the ball. Just like that, the offensive line was once again being praised for its greatness.

But if you were to ask any of the linemen, they would say they have played pretty consistently all season, and the great games by McCullough and the quarterbacks last Saturday just complemented the solid game that they played.

"People say we haven't been able to run the ball well, but it is not because we haven't wanted to," left tackle Paul Wiggins claimed. "It just seems we have been in many situations where we have to give up the run because we need a quicker way to get into the game."

True, the Ducks' poor play on defense has put the offense in the position of having to come from way behind many times this season. This has led to a pass-dominated offense. But even then the line has played exceptionally, leading the conference in fewest sacks allowed while also leading the

conference in passes attempted.

"They have performed up to all expectations that I had, for the most part," assistant head and offensive line coach Neal Zoumboukos said. "They have protected the quarterback extremely well in all the games. I am very pleased with what they have done."

What they have done is show what a group of guys who have played together for four years can do when they become one cohesive unit.

"The experience of playing with each other for four years really helps our game," right guard Tasi Malepeai said.

"We were all on the scout team together and moved up at roughly the same time," center Mark Gregg said. "That has helped us to gel and come together. We're so in tune with each other that we always know what the other is doing and what each others' tendencies are."

Even though they are all together as a unit, each player brings something different, a characteristic of his own, to the line.

**Wiggins:** The most athletic of the group and definitely the strongest.

"We nicknamed him the 'Tower of Power' because he is the muscle of the group," Gregg said.

"This young man obviously has a future playing on Sundays," Zoumboukos said.

**Malepeai:** At 6-foot-2, 340 pounds, he is the largest on the line. He has deceptive quickness for a person his size and is also very agile.

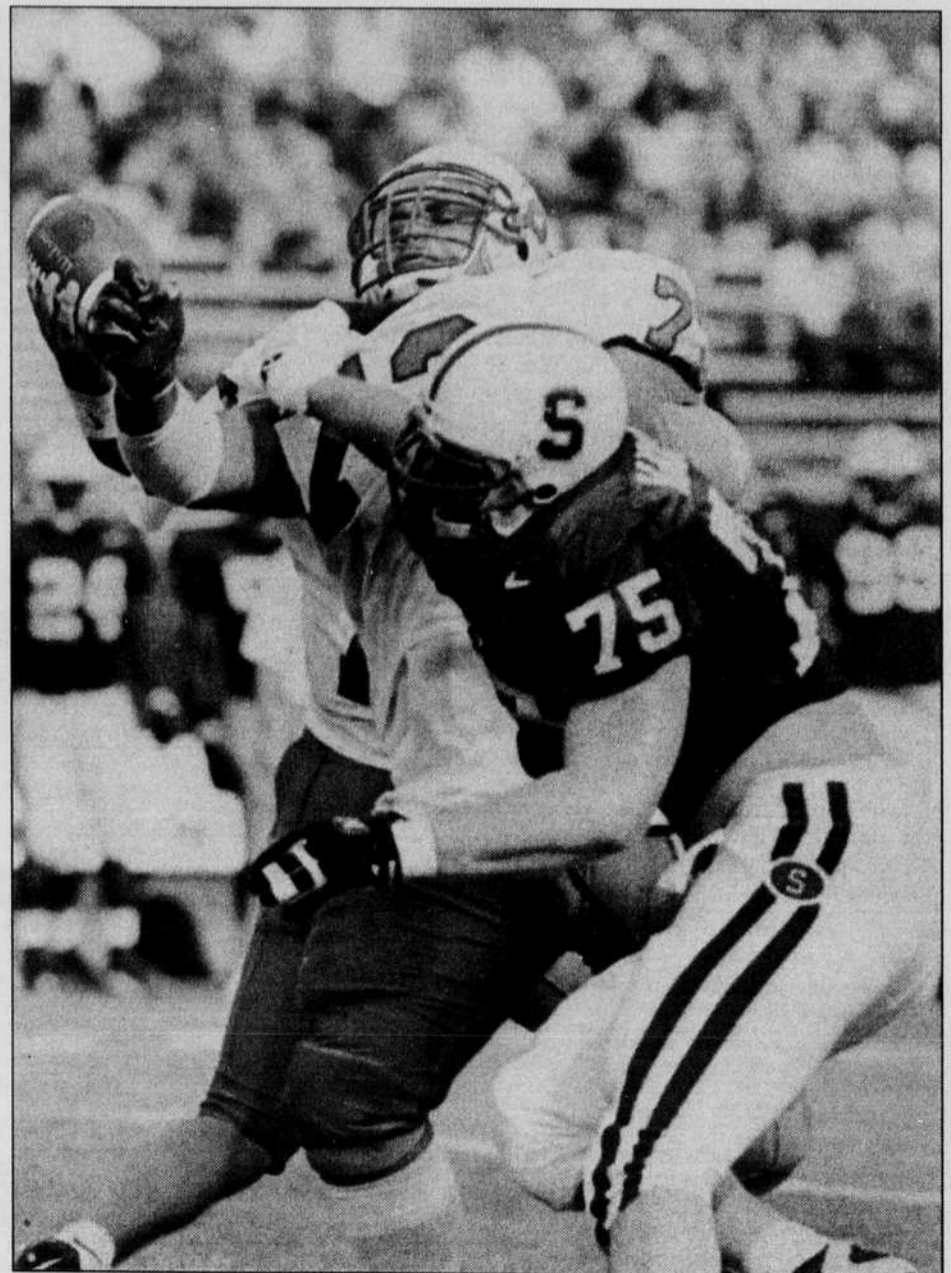
"He is one of the better guards around," Wiggins said. "He can do it all out there. It is amazing to watch him."

**Gregg:** Not as physically imposing as the other linemen, but makes up for it in intelligence. Along with Malepeai, Gregg is known for talking on the field.

"It is like having another coach out there on the field," Zoumboukos said.

"He is the ultimate competitor out there," Wiggins said. "He is a brawler."

**Baldwin:** Speedy, athletic and motivated. Stepped in for the injured Rife and has done well.



Oregon's offensive lineman Tasi Malepeai uses his size and deceptive quickness to protect the quarterback and open running lanes for the running backs.