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Football: Stubler 'cautiously optimistic' about defensive

Continued from Page 5

that group may be the best we ever brought in," he said. "I hate to put that on them already, but I've been real excited about the way they run, the way they handle themselves, they're athletic, they're mobile and certainly we have some needs at that position."

Behind the line, the Ducks also need to settle on a No. 1 quarterback. Jason Maas and Akili Smith will battle for the job, which Bellotti said likely will not be decided until right before game time of the season opener.

Maas, a junior from Yuma, Ariz., is No. 1 on the depth chart, but will be challenged by Smith, the highly touted transfer from Grossmont junior college.

In the backfield and receiver positions, the Ducks are loaded.

Saladin McCullough, fresh off a school record 15 touchdowns in 1996, will be the focal point of the Ducks' running game, provided he stays healthy. He played only seven games last season because of injuries.

Seniors Pat Johnson and Damon Griffin lead the receiving corps.

Griffin led the team last season with 833 yards and eight touchdowns.

Johnson, who has displayed flashes of brilliance off and on the past three seasons, increased his commitment to football by competing in spring drills for the first time and is ready to reap the benefits of his dedication.

"I'm ready to go," Johnson said. "I just can't wait to play. I worked so hard, I just want to get out there and do it."

Tony Hartley and LaCorey

Collins are also expected to be key contributors as receivers.

On the defensive side of the ball there are many more uncertainties, where the Ducks will be very young and inexperienced.

Bellotti said he expects Jaiya Figueras (free safety), Peter Sirmon (outside linebacker) and Desmond Byrd (defensive end) to provide leadership and experience.

"That leaves a lot of question marks at all the other positions," Bellotti said, "but I do think we have more athleticism than we did last year and certainly more hunger than we did to prove that 'Gang Green' can live again."

The secondary is the most uncertain area of the defense. Figueras is the only player who has proven he can play consistently at this level, and the loss of Kenny Wheaton to the NFL hurts considerably.

At the corners, Brandon McLemore and Eric Edwards should see a majority of the playing time. McLemore started six games for the Ducks last season.

Dietrich Moore, Michael Fletcher and Chris Young are expected to battle for playing time at strong safety. Fletcher started five games and last season, while Young started in six.

Justin Wilcox is back from an injury and should see considerable playing time, Bellotti said.

"If we play as a whole group, we can be successful," McLemore said.

Byrd will anchor the defensive line, which lost key contributors Bryant Jackson and Mark Schmidt.

Called on to fill the holes there

"I'm ready to go. I just can't wait to play. I worked so hard, I just want to get out there and do it."

Pat Johnson
Receiver

will be junior college transfer Masi Heamish and freshman Saul Patu.

Although young, the Ducks have some experience at the linebacker positions.

Sirmon, who started five games last year, will man the outside, while Ryan Klaasen and Chris Vandiver will battle for time at the inside spot. Klaasen started seven games a year ago and Vandiver six.

Garth White and Aaron Cheuvront will contend for playing time at the middle linebacker position.

Defensive Coordinator Rich Stubler said he is "cautiously optimistic" about this season's defensive squad.

"They are talented young kids," he said. "I have high hopes for the young players."

Additionally, Bellotti announced that wide receiver Jamaal Wallace quit the team "because he decided he was no longer interested in playing football anymore."

Bellotti also announced seniors Matt Lofrano and Andy Petty had to quit the team because of injuries, and that eight players are finishing up summer school classes they must pass to stay eligible. He would not identify them.

Frank: Bellotti talks about Smith-Maas quarterback rotation

Continued from Page 5

coaching staff put too much time and effort into just getting Smith, a highly recruited quarterback last season, to Eugene that there is no way he will not start.

To not start Smith would be comparable to Ernie Kent bringing in the one of the country's top five junior college point guards to replace Kenya Wilkins — then not starting him.

How much sense would that make?

The Oregon coaches simply invested too much in securing Smith, who was heavily recruited by Michigan State and San Diego State, to sit him on the bench.

Bellotti says Maas is his starter for now but that the pair's performance over the next three weeks will determine who will start the opener, a decision he says won't come until the week of the first game.

If Smith is right, if he has learned the playbook, his only remaining question mark, to the extent that Bellotti and offensive

coordinator Dirk Koetter are happy with, Smith will be their man, whether they say it publicly or not.

In addition to the effort put forth by the Oregon coaching staff, Smith's performance last season at Grossmont junior college and his physical size make it hard to defend the choice of starting Maas.

Smith ranked fifth in the nation among junior college quarterbacks, throwing for 3,212 yards and 32 touchdowns and stands 6-foot-3 with a bulky frame, weighing 226 pounds. He has the mobility of a running back, like Graziani, hits like a linebacker and has the confidence of a prizefighter.

"I've seen them," Smith says of Feeley and Maas. "I've seen how well they play and things they have opposed to what I have. I think I offer a lot more at the quarterback position than what they do from the standpoint of scrambling to running to just making plays."

"Physically, I'm bigger, stronger, faster, quicker and my

arm is stronger."

While Smith is concentrated on winning the starting job, Maas hasn't given the intrateam competition much thought.

"I don't really worry about it," Maas says. "I am going in No. 1, and as long as I move the chains and stay within myself, I am going to be No. 1."

"It's not something I belabor over. The only time I think about it is when [the media] asks. I can't really worry about people behind me or I'm not doing my job."

Bellotti talked about rotating the two early in the season to see how both handle game situations, which doesn't bother Smith.

"I have no problems doing that," Smith says. "If that's what Coach Bellotti wants to do, then when I get the opportunity to play, I am going to step in and show him that I am the man for the job. Simple as that."

Smith is right: He's the man for the job, simple as that.

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