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Football: Jaiya Figueras to carry young secondary for

Continued from Page 7

terbacks I have no problem with that," Smith said. "If that is what he wants to do then when I get the opportunity to play, I'm going to show him and the rest of the team that I'm the man."

Junior Jason Maas is the Ducks' most experienced returnee at quarterback. Maas saw limited action last season in four games.

Also expected to see time at the position is redshirt freshman A.J. Feeley. A former first-team all-state quarterback, Feeley has added size and arm strength and, coaches say, has vastly improved his game.

A veteran offensive and defensive line anchored Oregon's run for the roses in 1994 and their Cotton Bowl season of 1995, but those days are gone.

If the quarterback question is the most frequently asked, then the offensive and defensive line is the most important question the Ducks have to answer.

"Those questions about the offensive line are a positive," offensive line coach Neal Zoumboukos said. "Those question marks have motivated the young men and they have responded to the challenge."

Senior David Weber started all eleven games at right guard a year ago, but represents Oregon's only returning starter from last season.

The Ducks are a little more experienced on the defensive front, where Desmond Byrd returns at defensive end after a stellar season.

Another defensive star from a year ago returns at outside linebacker. Sophomore Peter Simon, second on the Ducks last year with 69 tackles, is expected to start and possibly make a run at a postseason honor.

Chris Vandiver and Ryan Klaasen also return at linebacker

to give the Ducks talent and depth at that position.

All of this adds up to a very talented and very young defensive front seven, a unit the coaches have high hopes for this fall.

"I feel like we made some great strides last year on defense ...," Belloti said. "I do think we have more athleticism than we did last year and certainly more hunger to prove that Gang Green can live again."

But if Oregon is to improve on the Pac-10's ninth ranked defense from a year ago, the real change must come in the secondary.

The Ducks lost their best coverman in two-time All-American Kenny Wheaton, who led Oregon in tackles and interceptions. His early exit from the college ranks to the NFL leaves a big hole to be filled at the cornerback position. A challenge that sophomore Brandon McLemore has been waiting for.

"I've worked real hard in the off-season for this," McLemore said. "I've gotten a lot bigger, a lot stronger. My vision has improved and certainly my cover skills."

Expected to lead the Ducks' young secondary is fifth-year senior Jaiya Figueras. Figueras' return to the starting line-up has helped secure the secondary, which was greatly improved the last half of the 1996 season when Oregon mounted a three-game winning streak to secure their third consecutive winning season.

"My job is to keep the young guys relaxed, but focused," Figueras said. "I don't feel much pressure, I just feel like I have to be a leader."

A common theme with the 1997 Oregon Ducks, the coaching staff sees a lot of young, unexperienced talent with this year's

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Jaiya Figueras

secondary.

"We have better man-to-man coverage in the secondary, even with the loss of Wheaton, I think our secondary will play better ...," Belloti said. "We have a tremendous amount of young athletes in that group."

Defensive coordinator Rich Stubler sees a lot of talent, but a lot of young talent.

"We have a lot of great young talent," Stubler said. "But the key is maturity and getting these kids into game situations."

Where the questions finally come to an end is at the skill positions.

Senior Saladin McCullough has already proven himself under the pressures of Pac-10 football. His 15 touchdowns a year ago tied a school record and established him as one of the conference's most exciting backs.

However, a barrage of injuries plagued McCullough in 1996. The junior tailback started only four games for the Ducks last season but still ran for almost 700 yards.

Oregon is also deep at the wideout positions with standouts Damon Griffin, Pat Johnson and Tony Hartley returning, and highly touted LaCorey Collins is finally healthy after nursing injuries all of last season and taking a medical redshirt.

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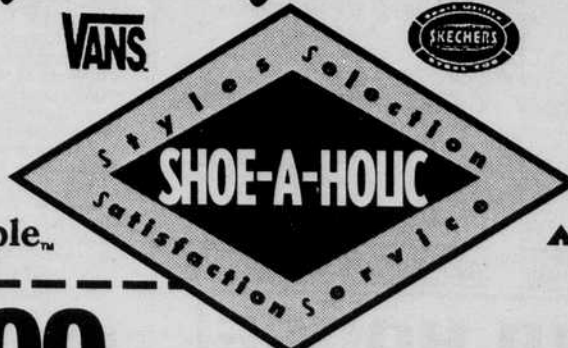
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