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OREGON FOOTBALL

Defense holds high-scoring Bruins

Giving up the big play kills the Ducks again after holding UCLA to just 39 points

By Joel Hood
Sports Reporter

UCLA fans call him the Bus, and in the first quarter of UCLA's 39-31 triumph over Oregon, tailback Skip Hicks looked as if he was in fifth gear rumbling down the interstate.

Hicks, as he did a season ago against Oregon, ran straight through the Oregon defense, breaking tackles like matchsticks and carrying defensive backs like they were issued equipment.

But the Oregon defense never really broke down. In fact, the players and coaches said, save for a couple of big plays, the Duck defense did a good job against one of the nation's most prolific scoring teams.

"We were hot and cold," defensive coordinator Rich Stubler said. "We would play well at times and then we wouldn't. We need to be more mentally tough. We need to find ways to step up."

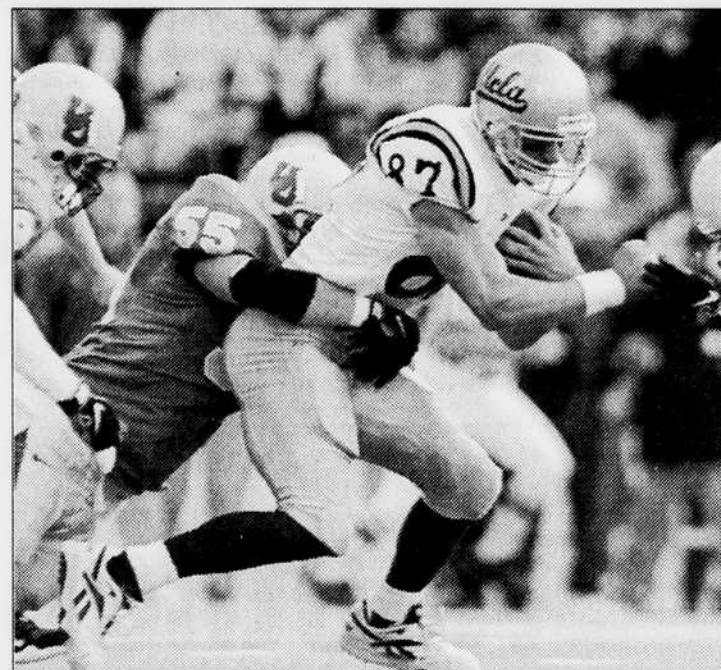
Before the game, Oregon coaches called Hicks "the key" to stopping UCLA's ground attack, and it was clear throughout that the Ducks weren't going to let Hicks beat them.

He finished the first half with 90 yards rushing, but after his first carry of the game, which netted 42 yards, Oregon kept him from breaking the game open.

However, Hicks presented countless problems for the struggling Oregon defense, whether he carried the ball or not.

In the first quarter, with Oregon ahead 7-3, UCLA quarterback Cade McNown faked a hand-off to Hicks, who sold the play by diving headlong into the Duck defensive line. As Oregon's secondary rushed in to stop the hard-charging Hicks, McNown threw to a wide open flanker, Rodney Lee, for 50 yards.

Though it was susceptible to the big play, Oregon's defense scratched and clawed through the



MICHAEL CRISP/Emerald

Garth White tries to bring down UCLA wide receiver Danny Farmer.

first half, making the plays and, seemingly, on the verge of taking complete control of the game.

But the Ducks' propensity for giving up the big play at the game's most inopportune moments kept them from taking control.

"We weren't playing responsibly on defense," safety Jaiya Figueras said. "We would hold them on a couple of downs, and then we'd give up a big play. We'd miss tackles; we wouldn't get into the right gaps; we'd miss our assignments. We beat ourselves."

In the third quarter, with Hicks on the sideline but the Ducks still weary of the run, McNown faked a pitch and completed a 40-yard bomb for a touchdown over a stunned Oregon secondary. That touchdown, players said, sunk the Ducks and put the Bruins on top for good.

"We are a young team that needs to find out how to win," defensive tackle Desmond Byrd said. "We need to put mistakes like that behind us during the game. We need to get tougher."

Tougher indeed.

In the fourth quarter, with Oregon trailing 27-24 and needing to make a big defensive stand, UCLA began a crucial drive from its own 16-yard line. With the crowd standing, urging someone to make a play, Oregon gave up a 21-yard run on the Bruins' first play from scrimmage.

A play later, McNown dumped the ball to flanker Jim McElroy, who broke four tackles en route to a 30-yard gain and a UCLA first down inside Oregon territory. The Bruins scored five plays later.

"It always just seems like we are our own worst enemy," linebacker Peter Sirmon said. "We are always hit or miss."

UCLA's back-breaking seven-play, 84-yard drive closed the door on the Ducks. For the third consecutive game, coaches said, Oregon's defense played hard, and kept the Ducks in the game until the most crucial moments. But the big play, like October rain, always came.

"We are working our tails off, but we are missing opportunities," head coach Mike Bellotti said.

Frank: Ducks can't afford to lose to Utah

Continued from Page 9A

here, a ball caught there, would have, could have made the difference.

But once again, tackles seemed to be missed at just the wrong time and a pass seemed to be dropped at an even worse time.

Of all the couldas, wouldas or shouldas, none seemed bigger than the third-down quarterback switch in the fourth quarter that resulted in an interception on Jason Maas' first pass of the game.

If the Oregon coaches had it to do all over, would they still put an ice-cold Maas, who had been sitting on the sideline for 3 1/2 quarters, in for Akili Smith, who played the entire game to that point?

No way. That's one everybody wishes they could have back.

"I want to be quoted on this; we put Jason Maas in a very, very, very tough situation," Koetter said. "To come in on a third and eight and ask him to make a play — that's 100 percent on me."

Head coach Mike Bellotti called the substitution a mistake and said Maas wasn't ready.

Maas, who is always tough on himself, took it so hard that he left the stadium without speaking with reporters, something he didn't do even after throwing three interceptions against Washington State the game before.

Thanks to Maas' interception, the Bruins got the ball on the Oregon 23-yard line with 6:50 left to play and four plays later, Chris Sailer kicked the field goal that gave UCLA a 36-24 lead.

Had Maas, or Smith for that matter, converted that third-down situation and taken the Ducks the rest of the way for the touchdown, the score would have

been 33-31.

Maas' interception could be considered the most important play of the game and the one that ultimately doomed the Ducks, but there were enough other problems on both sides of the ball to cost the Ducks two games.

The question: How do they fix the problems and start winning games?

The dilemma is who knows if the problems can be fixed.

If there were problems for a game or two, everything would seem fixable. But the way the Ducks have been playing throughout the season, who knows if things will get any better.

The problem may be that this team is, hold your breath, a mediocre team in one of the toughest conferences in the nation.

The only game the Ducks won outright this season was against Arizona to start the season. Since that game, every one has been a dogfight.

It took a Maas miracle to beat Nevada, the defense let Fresno State back in the game late, Stanford made the defense look like it belonged in a Pop Warner league and against Washington State offensive execution seemed like a foreign word.

Unfortunately, things may not get much better for the Ducks.

A win against Utah this week is a must, and should come without much problem, but after that are three straight on the road, not an easy task for any team, let alone one that is 1-3 in conference play.

Expect the questions to continue for Koetter and the rest of the Ducks.

Ryan Frank is the sports editor for the Emerald