

Oregon: Ducks rested, healthier

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state game.

"But there is a lot of rivalry between the two programs," Bellotti continued. "It's always going to be a tough, hard-fought battle."

One that might have been made a little bit easier for Oregon when Rashaan Shehee, Washington's best running back, went down with a knee injury in last week's shutout of Southern California. Also, quarterback Brock Huard, the nation's leader in passing efficiency, is listed as questionable with a sprained ankle.

If Huard can't go, true freshman Marques Tuiasosopo will start under center. Tuiasosopo has completed 22 of 34 pass attempts this season, filling in when Huard was knocked out of the game last week and against Nebraska, the Huskies only loss of the season.

Replacing Shehee in the backfield will be Maurice Shaw, a 6-foot-1, 210-pound sophomore who has rushed for 367 yards this season.

But then again, even without Huard and Shehee for much of last Saturday's game, the Huskies still shut out the Trojans 27-0. The same USC team that beat the Ducks 24-22 a week earlier.

"Playing without Shehee early and then without Huard late and still do that is a great testament to Washington's defense," Bellotti said of Washington's win. "Anytime you shut somebody out in this conference, you're playing real good football."

Not that it's a surprise. Washington was predicted by many to be this season's national champion, and except for the loss to now No. 1 Nebraska, the Huskies are playing like contenders.

"Washington is obviously living up to its billing,"

Bellotti said. "I think they are a very, very good football team that has come back from the loss to Nebraska and is probably playing much better football because of it. I think we're going to have to play maybe our best football game of the year so far to win."

What better time than now? Coming off its bye week, Oregon is well rested, a lot healthier and playing in November, a month the Ducks haven't lost a game in for three seasons. Oregon is undefeated in November dating back to a loss to Oregon State to end the 1993 season.

"I think the whole complexion of this football team changes in November," Bellotti said. "We've been 9-0 in November, but we have a much tougher road this season."

And regardless of what the calendar reads, Oregon still has to play fundamentally sound football to break its string of four straight conference losses.

"Our offense has to be effective and efficient," Bellotti said. "There's certainly pressure on our offense to control the football and to score points. To do that, we have to avoid negative plays."

"[Defensively] we have to control their running game. But as much as we want to stop the running game, we cannot give up the big play."

Oregon's ability to stop the run should be aided by the return of starting defensive lineman Desmond Byrd and inside linebacker Ryan Klaasen from injuries.

"Our kids understand this is a great opportunity to play a top-10 ranked team, change our season from the way it's going and hopefully play up to its potential," Bellotti said.

Frank: Everything but stats in Ducks' favor

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an incredible first-half outburst of 24 points was enough hold off 22 second-half points by the Huskies and start Oregon on its way to winning its final three games.

Look at Washington's future schedule.

You think the Huskies could be looking past the Ducks, instead focusing their attention on their two next games. Washington has to play at UCLA, the hottest team in the conference, on Nov. 15, and at home against Washington State.

If the pressures to get back to Rose Bowl have been weighing on the Huskies all season, imagine what those final two weeks will hold with back-to-back games against the conference's next best. It will be hard for the Huskies to keep those Bruins and Cougars out of their mind.

Look at Washington's injuries.

Yes, the Huskies have depth

like no other team in the conference, but Maurice Shaw and Marques Tuiasosopo are not Rashaan Shehee and Brock Huard. They may be ample replacements, but no one can just walk in and adequately replace the conference's top running back and the nation's most efficient passer. Quarterback Jason Maas said this is a huge game the Ducks need to start another streak. He couldn't be more right.

What better way to erase the memories of four straight conference losses than a win over the Huskies in Seattle. For there is nothing sweeter than beating those damn Huskies at Husky Stadium.

Call it irony, call it pointless, but one year ago to the day of Saturday's game against Washington, the Ducks began their U-turn to finish the season with three straight wins.

Ryan Frank is the sports editor for the Emerald.

Peter Sirmon File



■ YEAR:

Sophomore

■ AGE:

20

■ SIZE:

6-foot-2,

245 lbs.

■ STATS:

Leads the Pac-10 in tackles (73) ... second in the conference in tackles for a loss (15) ... had fourth-highest single-game tackle total with 15 in the season opener against Arizona ... moved from natural position of outside linebacker to the inside this season due to injuries to Ryan Klaasen and Curtis Moore

Sirmon: Duck has found his home at inside linebacker

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his season was considered disappointing by some.

"He went through a lot of growing pains a year ago," Oregon defensive coordinator Rich Stubler says. "When you're young, it's difficult to play at a high level, play after play. That's something that comes with maturity. The older he gets and the more games he plays, the more he understands this. But again, it doesn't happen overnight."

True, it didn't happen that quickly. It took Sirmon just one off-season to progress into one of the conference's premier linebackers.

"He's done just an excellent job," Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti says. "He does everything we ask of him."

Including a willingness to constantly move back and forth between inside and outside linebacker.

For the most part, it's been a revolving door of a career for Sirmon.

Recruited as an outside linebacker, Sirmon was switched to the inside as a redshirt freshman last season when Oregon lost Jeremy Asher and Rich Ruhl to graduation after the 1995 season.

Toward the end of the season, however, he was switched to the outside, where he began this season to supplement the loss of Reggie Jordan and Derrick Barnes.

But four games into the season, Sirmon was moved back inside against Washington State because inside linebacker Ryan Klaasen was injured, and the coaching staff wanted to put more speed on the field, moving defensive backs Dietrich Moore and Brandon McLemore into the outside linebacker slots.

"It got to the point where we knew Dietrich could play, and we needed to get him and [McLemore] on the field," Stubler says. "So we had to move Pete back inside. He had some real apprehension at first because he didn't have a great experience there a year ago. Playing inside is a real difficult position to play as a freshman."

Now that he's back inside, Sirmon says that is where he would prefer to stay.

"I didn't play last year in the fashion that maybe they thought I would at inside," Sirmon says, referring to the coaches. "So they moved me outside to give me more freedom, but I prefer the inside. When you play outside you're a half-field player, concerned about re-

verses and end-arounds and staying in your spot. Inside, you just fill your gap and if it's not there, you start chasing."

Which kind of sums up the Oregon season.

After three straight wins to start the season, the Ducks have been chasing after an elusive conference victory. Sirmon's standout year is one of the few bright spots on a defense ranked 100th in the nation and last in the Pac-10.

"We have to just keep plugging along," Sirmon says. "The coaches have been real good at keeping us up, which isn't too hard considering how much fun each game is. Every team we play you've heard about since you were a little kid, seeing them on TV and watching their celebrity players. How fun is it to play in the Coliseum, against USC, on national television? Or to play against Washington, a top-10 team in Husky Stadium?"

His eyes light up on that one.

"Washington's good," he admits. "But you take a couple guys out of their offense and anything can happen, especially if we get a couple of good breaks early in the game."

Against Lambright and the Huskies, those are breaks Sirmon would love to provide.

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