



Jason Maas and Akili Smith (not pictured) are expected to once again battle for the Ducks' No. 1 quarterback spot.

UO: Weaver top of list at tight end

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"I am very excited," he said. "I think spring football is the best time of the year. It's a chance to really focus on the athletes and not worry about winning and losing a game."

"I think there are a lot of questions to be answered, but I think we have a lot of answers."

Finding a replacement for McCullough, who became Oregon's single-season rushing leader in 1997, will be one of the top priorities for the Ducks this spring.

However, with a long list of players waiting in the wings, Bellotti is confident a solid starter will emerge.

"That will sort of sort itself out as we go," he said. "Right now, if we had to start a game today, we would probably play Derien Latimer and Kevin Parker there. They've had the majority of the work in the backup the past couple of years."

Latimer rushed for 115 yards in 29 carries last season, while Parker ran for just 18 yards but added 199 yards receiving.

Bellotti said junior Jerry Brown and sophomore Jason Cooper are also expected to battle for the position.

"Jason Cooper is probably the fastest player we have in pads," Bellotti said.

The gaping hole that Johnson left at wide receiver should be made easier to fill by the return of Damon Griffin, who led the team in receiving in 1996 but sat

out last season with a thumb injury.

At tight end, senior Jed Weaver leads a long list of replacements for the spots vacated by Spence and A.J. Jelks.

"It feels good to be on top," Weaver said. "Hopefully, I'll stay there after spring ball, heading into fall camp, and hopefully, I can contribute as much as Blake did."

Jason Maas and Smith, when or if he returns, are again the leading candidates to start at quarterback, with sophomore A.J. Feeley and redshirt freshman Joey Harrington expected to make some noise, Bellotti said.

On the defensive side of the ball, the Ducks lost just three starters but will be attempting to improve a unit that was near the bottom of the Pacific-10 Conference in all major defensive statistical categories.

"We need to focus on ourselves and work with the offense to work on the weaknesses that we had last year," said linebacker Peter Sirmon, who led the Pac-10 with 115 tackles. "We need to work together on focusing on getting all our assignments down."

Bellotti said the Ducks will go with a four-man defensive front with a lot of movement in Foster's first season guiding the defense.

Offensively, Bellotti said the Ducks will not change much from last year, other than adding a few new "wrinkles" at Tedford's suggestion.

Bellotti also noted that running back David Crump has left the team for personal reasons.

QB: Bellotti says competition helps team

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one quarterback, but I think having two capable starters last season threw some teams off guard."

The 6-foot-4, 205-pound Harrington is expected to challenge Smith, Maas and sophomore A.J. Feeley for the starting position. With four quarterbacks who could likely start at other programs around the country, one has to wonder whether there simply will be enough snaps to go around.

Offensive coordinator Jeff Ted-

ford, who joined the team in January, said the results this spring will have a lot to do with how much playing time each will receive in the fall.

"We hope to give each of them equal reps this spring," Tedford said. "Then we'll put them in order. We don't know yet if we'll have a rotation or a clear-cut starter."

However, some players question whether that is even possible. "You'd like to think that every-

one has an equal opportunity," Feeley said. "But Akili and Jason have the advantage having taken most of the snaps last year."

In either situation, Bellotti and Tedford said they feel "very fortunate" to have such a quality group of young players at the position.

"I'm excited," Bellotti said. "Competition makes us better, and I suspect that the person who wins the job this fall can and will be one of the best quarterbacks in the conference."

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