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Griffin: 'Dominant' in final spring game

Continued from Page 7
— a season in which Oregon could have realistically "won 11 of the 12 games," according to head coach Mike Bellotti.

"I could have helped out on one or two plays [in each game] and that would have made a big difference," says the 5-foot-10, 180-pound Griffin. "That was the reason we lost last year — one or two plays. I felt that was a big let-down to the team, not being there to help them out. I think that was the thing that hurt [me] the most."

The fact that his ailment was merely a torn ligament in his thumb and not a more traditional season-ending injury multiplied Griffin's frustrations.

"I was like, 'If I'm going to get hurt, let me hurt something that should keep me out the whole year,'" Griffin says. "But it was just my thumb. If I played any other position, I probably could have played. That hurt."

During his unexpected time off, Griffin earned his degree in sociology and said he came to realize that football isn't everything in life.

"[Graduating] was the great thing about being hurt," Griffin says. "It made me realize I have a whole other life out there. It gave me a big confidence booster in my life, period."

Griffin's postgraduate work? Lead a Duck offense that has lost its three biggest guns from 1997 — a season in which the offense set new school records in total offense, touchdowns, touchdown passes and points scored — in Johnson, McCullough and Spence, all three of whom were in NFL training camps this summer.

Griffin, who snatched 43 passes in 1996 for 711 yards and seven touchdowns after registering just 12 catches in his first two seasons combined, showed he is ready to put his name in lights during spring practice. After recording more than 100 yards receiving in two of the first three spring scrimmages, Griffin

sparkled even brighter in the spring's finale, grabbing 10 receptions for 161 yards and three touchdowns.

"If you saw our spring game, he was a dominant player," Bellotti says. "I think he can do that every game, and I think he'll be an all-league-type receiver."

Quarterback Jason Maas said he was also excited with Griffin's performance.

"In the spring practices, he was phenomenal, so obviously he makes our lives a lot easier," Maas says.

Griffin expects more of the same from himself once the regular season begins.

"I want to be the kind of guy that the coaches and my teammates

look upon like Kenny Wheaton and Ricky Whittle, guys like that," says Griffin, who is one of only two Ducks — Maas is the other — remaining from the 1995 Rose Bowl team. "They were looked upon to come down, make clutch plays and win games. That's the kind of guy I want to be."

Tony Hartley, Donald Haynes, Ray Brust and LaCorey Collins also return to hand new offensive coordinator Jeff Tedford a slew of experience at wide receiver.

"We lost a big threat last year in Pat Johnson," says Hartley, who started eight games last season and is expected to start at flanker. "I think with Damon coming back this year and myself on the other side that will keep the pressure on."

Tedford says Griffin does not possess the world-class speed to directly replace Johnson's long-ball capabilities, but Griffin will contribute in all facets of the passing game.

"We're going to be able to use him on controlled-type passing stuff, and he can go deep, so he's a very well-rounded receiver," Ted-

ford says. "We can utilize him in a lot of ways."

Senior quarterbacks Akili Smith and Maas are also back, so the Ducks should remain lethal in the air, although a new starter must be found at tight end.

The running game is a big question mark with both the fullback and tailback positions essentially up for grabs in fall camp.

For these reasons, both Griffin and Hartley say the passing game must set up the running game, at least early in the season.

"If we spread it out, that's going to open up the running game," Griffin says. "Once [the running backs] get the opportunity to show what they can do, then we'll go back to our balanced attack. But I think at the beginning, the receivers are going to open a lot of things because we have the talent."

Along with allowing him to concentrate on his school work and get his degree, Griffin says his injury made him realize he is not invincible.

"I'm trying to have fun all the time and remember, 'Hey, this could be taken away at any time. Enjoy every minute you're out there,'" Griffin says. "That's in my head all the time. Without a doubt, I'm blessed to have the opportunity to play."

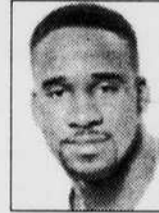
Griffin's attitude has not gone unnoticed by the coaching staff.

"I think the appreciation for what he had and missed is important for all of us to see and pass on to our other players," Bellotti says.

So despite making no official catches on the football field for Oregon last season, Griffin made two important receptions off the field. He caught a degree in one hand and a new respect for the opportunity to simply play in the other.

With those two grabs already under wraps, Griffin says he is eager to get back onto the playing field in his senior season, take two.

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