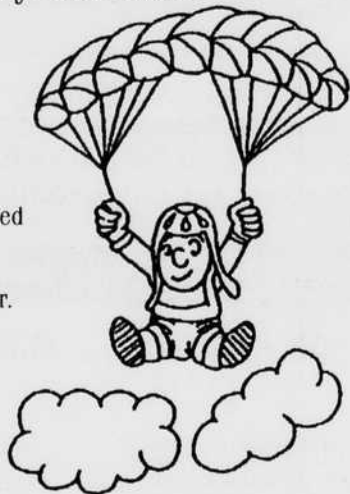


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**Droughns takes long route to Eugene**

First recruited by Oregon in 1996, Reuben Droughns takes the field this season

By Joel Hood  
Oregon Daily Emerald

The punts blast off. First there is one, then another, and then another.

It has been three days since tailback Reuben Droughns torched Michigan State's defense for an incredible 202 yards on just 17 carries — marking the sixth highest single-game total in school history, and undoubtedly, the single most impressive debut by any player ever associated with Oregon football.

Even so, Droughns is not wasting one minutia of strength during this twilight practice to boast about his accomplishments. Instead, Droughns is standing with a small group of players in a semi-circle, shagging punts and talking game strategy with special teams coach Tom Osborne.

The balls rocket into the sky, then bend forming a soft arch, and spiral back toward earth. They fall like arrows: one after the other, after the other.

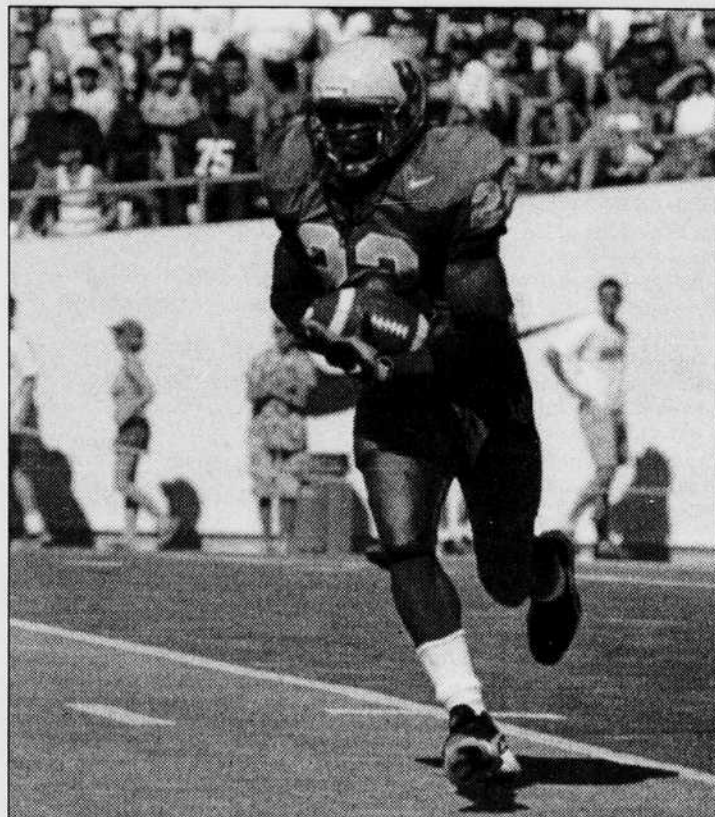
It is now more than 30 minutes after practice and Droughns is alone catching punts against the silver sky. Although his coaches and teammates have already left toward the locker room, and mindful of the fact that he is keeping members of the media waiting, Droughns continues because he is still more comfortable fielding punts in this fading light than he is talking about his opening-day heroics.

To people outside Droughns' inner circle of friends, his success has been both immediate and sudden. The local media only began reporting that Droughns had earned the No. 1 tailback spot a few weeks before the Sept. 5 date with Michigan State.

But those on the inside know that every on- and off-the-field success Droughns has ever enjoyed has helped to get him to this practice field at this time in his life. And to them, it's no wonder that Droughns stays on this field as long as he does.

"I'm just happy to finally be here," Droughns says.

Oregon is finally happy as well. Originally recruited by the Ducks in 1996, Droughns failed to score high enough on the Scholastic Achievement Test to be admitted to Oregon as a freshman. He then failed the final math class during his senior year at Anaheim High School which meant this blue-chip California recruit was



LAURA GOSS/Emerald

Reuben Droughns ran for 202 yards in his Oregon debut on Sept. 5

forced to attend a small junior college in Merced, Calif., to make up some of the credits he missed.

Droughns admits that it was painful for him to have to start out at the junior-college level, but as he looks back on it now, the time he spent at Merced JC proved to be more valuable than he ever could have imagined.

"It would have been nice to come up here right after high school," Droughns says, "but to tell you the truth, I don't think I would have been ready."

What Droughns learned, and what he still takes with him today, is the importance of education — the importance to grow as a man both on and off the football field. And that is one lesson, Droughns admits, that many from his old neighborhood in Southern California could never fully understand.

Droughns grew up along one of the "bad stretches" of Anaheim, Calif., just a few miles from Los Angeles' turbulent inner city. His mother, Crystal, bounced in and out of work for most of his young adult life, never fully able to provide for Reuben or his three brothers. Reuben's older brother, like many of his friends, got caught up

with gangs and violence at an early age.

Droughns admits that it would have been real easy to get caught up in that lifestyle himself.

"My family struggled for a long time," he says, "and they're still struggling. There have been tough times for all of us. For a while at the JC I couldn't afford any rent, and it wasn't as if I could call up my family and ask them for money."

"It was hard for me. There were times when I felt like I should just drop football and drop out of school so I could get a job and help them out."

But football had always meant much more to Reuben than he was willing to admit. Having never really known his father, Droughns says he has always sought guidance from his coaches. And instead of turning further away from his dream to play "big-time" college football, Reuben was told to hit the books.

Reuben never excelled in the classroom at Merced, but with the help of his coaches and some close friends, he earned enough credits to be eligible to transfer to Oregon.

"I have seen a lot of punks walking down the street that have come out of the same environment," said Tony Lewis, the head coach at Merced who tutored Droughns

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