



MICHAEL CRISP/Emerald

Oregon sophomore defensive lineman Jason Nikalao celebrates the Ducks' 58-3 domination of San Jose State last week at Autzen.

## Football: Droughns' return should help UO offense

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The Cardinal passing attack has been decimated in 1998 because its two most productive players from last season have missed all or most of this season. Quarterback Chad Hutchinson has been replaced by junior Todd Husak after leaving Stanford to pursue a professional baseball career, and 1997 Pac-10 receptions and punt return leader Troy Walters missed the North Carolina game after spraining an ankle early in the Cardinal's second game.

Stanford adjusted against the Tar Heels by handing the ball off a season-high 42 times, something Bellotti says the Ducks need to be prepared to face.

"For us to be successful in the Pac-10, we need to run the football, and we need to defend the run," Bellotti said. "We're always going to be a balanced team in terms of featuring the pass and all the things that come off of it, but the most important factor in our success to this point has been our ability to run the football."

Returning for Oregon this week is tailback Reuben Droughns, who rushed for 202 yards in the opener against Michigan State, then left the UTEP game with a bruised foot. Droughns sat out last week's 58-3 Oregon win over San Jose State but is apparently ready to face Stanford.

"I saw him this morning, and he said he feels good, feels better and better every day," Bellotti said during his Wednesday news

conference. "I think that by game time he will be above 90 percent, maybe even 100 percent."

One player who won't be running the ball for Oregon on Saturday is Herman Ho-Ching. The freshman strained a knee ligament in the win last week and is out indefinitely after helping the Ducks to a nearly 225-yard-per-game rushing average in their first three games.

Ho-Ching and Droughns have thus far done all they can to help erase the memory of 1997 Pac-10 rushing champion Saladin McCullough.

"I'm just amazed at what they can do," Willingham said. "You feel like when you lose a guy of [McCullough's] caliber, you get a reprieve the next year. But with those two guys, there's no reprieve. They are very, very impressive running backs. To me, that's what's really been the surprising component of their offense. They've always had the ability to throw the ball and have the best quarterback in the conference right now, and when the running backs step up and play the way they've played, it makes them very difficult to deal with, almost impossible."

Indeed, Oregon's Akili Smith is the best quarterback in the conference and seventh in the nation. Smith's 188.40 rating is more than 25 points better than UCLA's Heisman Trophy candidate, Cade McNown.



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