

The Nation's Finest

Mike Bellotti credits much of the Ducks' success this season to Nathan Villegas and Josh Bidwell, who rank near the top of college football at their positions

By Rob Moseley
Oregon Daily Emerald

It was possibly the most endearing image, beyond even Pat Johnson's diving touchdown grab against Washington, of Oregon's 1997 football season.

The Ducks' junior kicker, a three-year starter, knelt alone on the sidelines of the L.A. Coliseum staring plaintively into nothing. The image of the stadium's scoreboard loomed above him as Southern California's fans celebrated their just-completed victory. The final score, 24-22, was glaringly displayed over the young man who had just missed a 36-yard field goal as time expired.

The difference between the kick sailing through the uprights and falling short, which it did, was small. But the missed kick's effect on the team's season, which ended at the Las Vegas Bowl instead of the more prestigious Aloha Bowl, was profound. It was enough to urge head coach Mike Bellotti to initiate open try-outs in spring practice for the 1998 kicker, and even recruit two new kickers to battle the incumbent senior for the job.

Enter junior Nathan Villegas, a transfer from Southern California's Citrus Junior College who replaced Josh Smith. In three games this season, Villegas has teamed with senior punter Josh Bidwell to form the most prolific kicking combo in the nation thus far.

"It's kind of cool that we're doing our jobs and getting recognition for it, so that's kind of nice," Bidwell says. "Obviously Nathan's job is to make every kick, and then mine is to try and keep my net average as high as I can, because that means I'm helping the team out as much as I can."

If Bidwell's descriptions of the kickers' jobs are accurate, then each is doing his job to perfection. Villegas has indeed made every kick he's attempted this season, including each of his 16 extra points and all nine field goals, tops in the country.

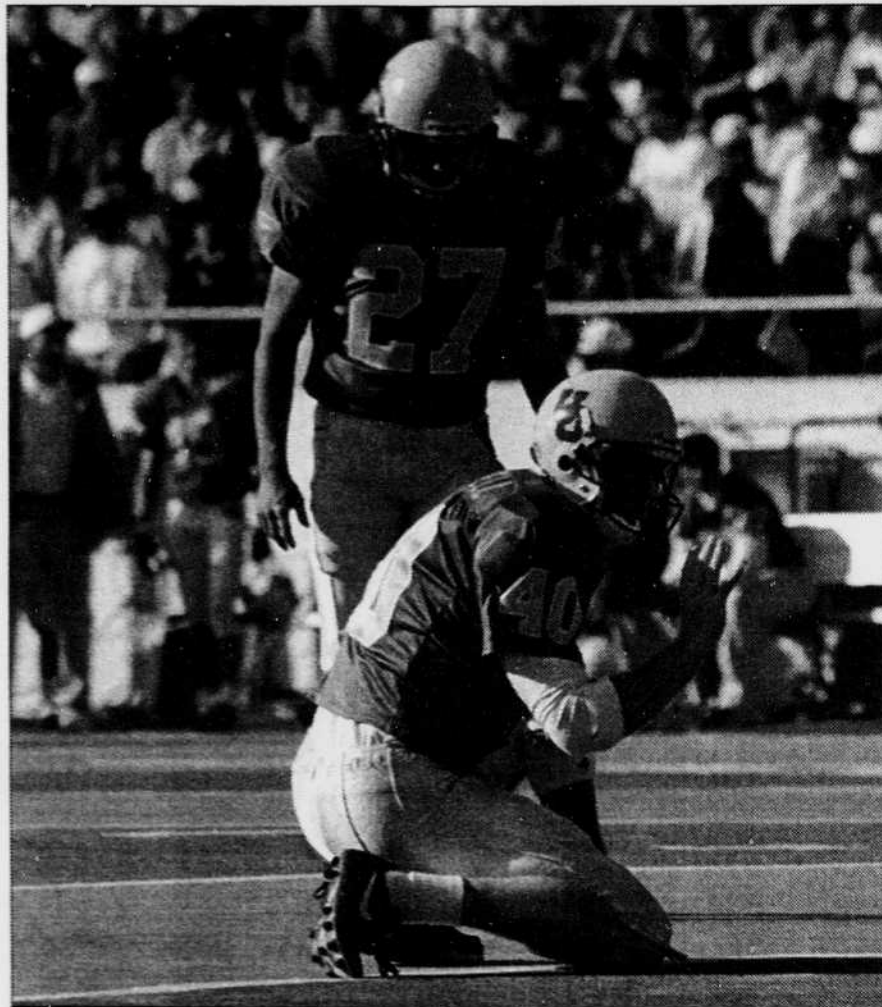
And Bidwell is averaging 49.3 yards per punt, six hundredths of a yard better than the national leader. Unfortunately, Bidwell is one punt short of having enough kicks to qualify for the national leader board.

"There's no question that they are directly responsible, or have been a great part, of our three victories this season," Bellotti says. "It's a good sign that we haven't had to punt that much, but when we do I think [Bidwell] is very effective, and Nathan Villegas kept us in the UTEP game."

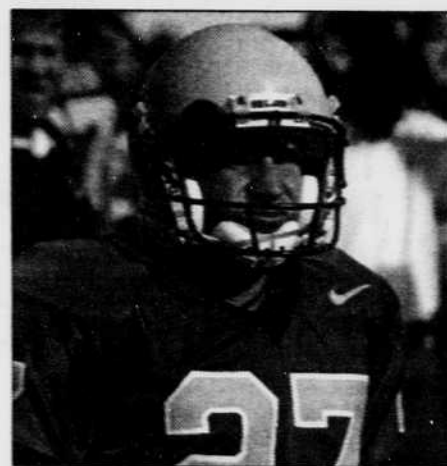
Villegas kicked four field goals, one short of the school record, in Oregon's 33-26 win over the Miners. Included among those kicks was a boot of 49 yards, the longest successful try by a Duck kicker in five years. Before Herman Ho-Ching's three-touchdown outburst in the fourth quarter, Villegas single-handedly kept the score close for Oregon.

"We rode his foot for three quarters and finally got it on track and got the ball into the endzone," Bellotti says of his kicker, whose four field goals kept the Ducks within seven points at 19-12 entering the final quarter.

Of particular importance to the success of any kicker is his holder, which for Vil-



Bidwell prepares to take the snap and place the hold for a Villegas attempt.

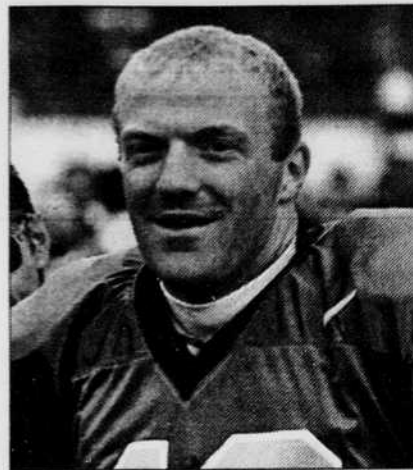


Placekicker Villegas leads the nation in field goal accuracy so far this season.

legas and Oregon fans is a familiar face: Bidwell's.

"I think that's why I'm doing so well on my field goals, because he's out there with me," Villegas says. "I'm not saying I don't have confidence in anybody else holding, but I think I would have more with him because I know him personally. Most kickers, they look at the snap, see if it's coming back, see if they get the hold right. All I do is look for his hands to come out and catch it and that's when I go, cause I know it's going to get down, I know it's going to be there."

Bidwell's own kicking has been even



Bidwell is one attempt shy of leading the nation in punting average.

The mystery of our hatred goes unsolved

I hate Stanford. I hate the University. I hate its athletic department. I hate its students. I hate the color "Cardinal." I hate that Stanford has won the Sears Director's Cup the last two years. I hate the arrogance. I hate the smugness. I hate the stench of insolence.

This I know.

Even if, for the life of me, I can't tell you why.

What is it about Stanford that the people of Eugene hate so much? I have a hunch that it goes a lot deeper than simply Oregon vs. California, the haves vs. the have-nots. I have a hunch it goes beyond all of this.



Joel Hood

On the trail to find the answers to these questions, I found myself on the hunt for a guy named "Buck." I had phoned the Duck Booster Club in search of a man who could help me to understand why the city of Eugene, and in particular the University campus, has such contempt for Stanford. I was told "Buck" was the man I was after but to never speak a word of my encounter with him to anyone.

Following up on a tip I had received from a guy selling fake handicap parking passes along 13th Street, I made my way to a secluded little bar across from a wood-processing plant in the heart of Eugene's industrial mecca.

The bar's old wooden door opened with a creak, and as I slowly walked into this blackened smoke hole, my eyes burned shut.

When I awoke I was sitting at an old oak coffee table in an even darker corner of the bar. Across from me, outlined in smoke, was a grizzled, mountain of a man. His face and hands were cracked and worn like old leather. His immense body was suffocating beneath a faded Dan Fouts jersey from 1972. He spoke in deep, choking breaths of air.

This was it, I thought. I grabbed my pen.

"We all know that Oregon has won 33 conference games over the past four seasons, which is better than every team except Washington," Buck moaned. "And because of this, Oregon acts as if it has finally made it to the top of college football."

"But I got news for you, rookie — it hasn't. The Ducks aren't even close."

Tell me more, I said.

"More so than Washington, more so than UCLA, certainly more so than those pathetic Beavers, Stanford has owned the Ducks in the 1990s. The Cardinal has won six of its last seven encounters with the Ducks dating back to 1991. But there's more, much more."

"Oregon, both the football team and the state, has always taken into battle a 'me-against-the-world' attitude. A 'let's-get-out-there-and-give-them-all-we've-got' battle cry. Stanford does not."

"Be it simple arrogance, or whatever, the Stanford football team does not have this inside them. You'd think that with so many brilliant scientists that have graduated from Stanford someone would figure out the universe does not revolve around them."

"Perhaps it's not that. Perhaps our hatred

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