

Football

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room and they allow the quarterback to get back and throw the ball," Bellotti said.

Smith said he is grateful for the protection he's been getting from the group of four seniors and two juniors, which has allowed just five sacks this season.

"I've got a lot of time to throw back there, and I'm benefiting right now from the offensive line doing a good job with working hard in the summer and all the way up to now," Smith said.

The quarterback said he and last season's defending Pacific-10 Conference rushing champion, Saladin McCullough, were recently discussing the line's improvement and how much McCullough could have gained from running behind a more experienced group.

DeVries said the line's improvement was helped in part by the position shuffle the coaches ordered last season.

"We're communicating very well, and that comes a lot from everyone

having played a lot of spots," the 6-foot-4, 275-pound native of Holland said. "We're on the same page. Our knowledge of who to block has been excellent this year. Our technique and actually getting the block done leaves a lot to be desired."

Sirmon's new role

Linebacker Peter Sirmon returned to practice this week, but as a spectator. Sirmon underwent surgery for a torn pectoral muscle Sept. 28 and was absent from practice for the rest of the week.

Bellotti confirmed that Sirmon will miss the remainder of the season. Sirmon will be returning to action next spring to prepare for his senior campaign.

"There's a pain and a healing process that takes place when you're not able to perform, when you're not able to be out there with your teammates," Bellotti said. "We require [injured players] to be there, and that's painful at times, but it keeps them connected to the team."

Bellotti said Sirmon will be asked to tutor the other Ducks line-

backers as well as help break down game films, among other duties.

Starting in Sirmon's place is senior Chris Vandiver, who helped his chances of retaining the job by piling up 19 tackles against Stanford two weeks ago.

"That's as good a football game as any linebacker has played here that I can remember," Bellotti said. "He's shown that he can do that, so I'm going to expect that every week from Chris."

Bellotti to the pros?

Not to worry, Duck fans. Although Bellotti's name was mentioned in the USA Today's Oct. 6 online edition among a group of possible NFL coaching candidates, the coach said he's not leaving Eugene any time soon.

"I think it's a compliment," Bellotti said. "It's not a distraction because I'm very happy here at Oregon. I think it's one of the best jobs in the United States. If it's a distraction in recruiting, I need to talk with people to make sure they understand I'm [staying] here."

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