

Quarterbacks live up to hype

In a game of unfulfilled expectations, Akili Smith and Cade McNown prove they are Heisman Trophy worthy

By Rob Moseley
Oregon Daily Emerald

PASADENA, Calif. — The pregame hype leading up to Oregon's 41-38 overtime loss to No. 2 UCLA on Saturday had numerous subplots.

The Bruins entered the game ranked second in the nation and the Ducks 11th, but neither team played to even a top-25 level.

Oregon and UCLA were second and third, respectively, in the nation in scoring, but neither helped its average, even with overtime. The thought of 100 points and 1,000 yards crossed people's minds, but neither happened.

But if any aspect of the pregame propaganda did manifest itself, it was the battle between the two Heisman Trophy candidates at quarterback, Akili Smith and Cade McNown.

UCLA's McNown had 395 yards, his fourth-best total ever, and three touchdowns on 20-of-36 passing, including two interceptions. Smith was just 15-of-37 for 221 with one interception, but he had three touchdowns through the air and one on the ground.

Although McNown's numbers appear better, the Oregon defense was unanimous in its support of Smith.

"Akili's an overall better quarterback," safety Michael Fletcher said. "He's one of the best competitors I've ever played with. He's better athletically, stronger arm, everything. He fires guys up out there, and you want to play with a guy like that."

Smith's leadership skills were never more evident than on scoring drives that ended the first and second halves.

With Oregon down 24-7 after Saul Patu's interception with less than a minute left in the first half, Smith took the Ducks 70 yards on eight plays, culminating with a two-yard keeper for a score.

Then, with the Ducks down 38-31 and 2:36 remaining in the game, Smith marched them 65 yards on 11 plays with only one timeout. Oregon tied the game at 38-38 on a two-yard pass from Smith to Damon Griffin with 22 seconds remaining.

"He was just being Akili," Griffin said. "He was poised, in the zone. Me and Tony just said no matter what, we've got to make plays for Akili. We didn't have much time, so we had to go out there and make plays, and we did."

McNown, too, earned his share of praise from the Ducks.

"He's a good athlete and a great improviser," Fletcher said. "He's a great play-action guy. He's a mix between Boomer Esiason and Steve Young."

McNown did not seem concerned with his two interceptions, saying both were out of his control.

"The first interception was a little screen, and when we hit that screen it's pretty tight every time," the senior from West Linn said. "They kind of spied there — they just sat there and didn't rush. If I could have it back I would like to have put it in the ground. You try and find those windows, but the guy just looked up at the right time. The second one bounced off a guy's hands, and there's really nothing you can do but just go back out on the sidelines and regroup."



SMITH

Hood

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to march up and down the field against the Bruins speaks volumes to how far this team, and indeed this program, has come.

The three-point, overtime loss dropped Oregon to No. 12 in the Associated Press Top 25 Poll, yet Oregon still finds itself in very select company. Its offense is clearly as overpowering as any in the country. Its defense plays well enough to contain a high-powered opponent in even the most hostile environment. And it believes, justifiably, that it can go toe-to-toe with any team in the country.

The mood around the campus bar scene late Saturday night was a somber one. It seems people can't help but ask the questions: What if Oregon had not given UCLA so many easy scoring chances in the first quarter? What if Oregon had not fumbled on its opening drive?

These are fair questions to ask. Had Oregon not beaten itself so unmercifully through out this game, it most certainly would have beaten the Bruins. That's what

has made this loss so hard to swallow. And that's what keeps our collective student body doubled over as if we've all sustained a swift kick to the stomach.

This feeling will go away in time. It had better, because there is still a long road ahead for the Ducks. Oregon faces four perennial bowl contenders in its next four weeks and will likely be favored the rest of the way. That's unfamiliar water for the Ducks, who have been able to use the underdog role to their advantage for much of their program's history.

If this indeed is a team of destiny, if this is indeed the best Oregon team in history, we'll find out in the next few weeks.

One thing is for certain: Oregon came within a couple of turnovers Saturday of giving the Eugene Police Department and this city a real riot to worry about.

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Injury

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Cooper is third on the team in rushing with 103 this season, with 13 of those yards coming against the Bruins. Latimer had three yards on four carries Saturday, while Brown has yet to play this seasons due to a left ankle injury.

"It's a lot like when Peter Sirmon went down. It's going to take more than one player to step into his place," Bellotti said. "This is something our entire team is going to have to make up for."

Droughns is the second Oregon tailback to suffer a season-ending injury this season. Freshman Herman Ho-Ching strained the posterior cruciate ligament in his left knee against San Jose State on Sept 19. Ho-Ching

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Mike Bellotti
UO head coach

was expected to miss a minimum of six weeks at the time of the injury, setting the table for a possible post-season return.

In other injury news, left tackle Marco Aguirre did suffer a partial tear of the medial collateral ligament in his left knee. He is expected to miss just four games.

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