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Hood

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low 100 yards receiving. It held quarterback Rob Johnson to just 220 yards passing. It was the first time Gang Green showed up in a game that mattered.

The rest of the story is well documented. Oregon went undefeated the rest of the way, represented the Pac-10 in the Rose Bowl and took then-No. 2 Penn State to task for 2 1/2 quarters.

But that undefeated run in 1994 started against USC. Here's why Oregon's undefeated run in 1998 will start against them as well.

As it showed last week with the loss to UCLA, Oregon finally has the speed and talent to compete with any team in the conference and any team in the country. For the first time in their history, the Ducks have athletes who can compete game in and game out with the California schools.

So Oregon has lost the Pac-10's best running back for the remainder of the season. So it has lost the conference's possible future freshman of the year. So it has to shuffle its offensive line-man around each game.

The Ducks still have as many weapons on offense as any team in the Pac-10. They still have a defense that ... well ... keeps them in most ball games.

And don't be fooled by the burgundy and gold this season. These are not your father's USC Trojans. They are inconsistent at quarterback, thin at tailback and slower on defense.

But at the same time, there are demons that circle over the Ducks in this series. Last season, kicker Joshua Smith missed a 36-yard field-goal try at the end of regulation that would have given Oregon a stunning come-from-behind victory and probably an Aloha Bowl berth in December.

USC has won five of its last six games against Oregon, including the last two at Autzen Stadium. But it seems the Ducks are the only conference team that con-

tinues to struggle against the Trojans year in and year out.

USC has been to 28 Rose Bowls. It has won eight national titles. It has produced four Heisman Trophy winners. But the 1990s have been hard times for these former Pac-10 bullies: one Rose Bowl appearance, two New Year's Day bowl bids.

Be it because of scholarship limitations, upheaval in the coaching ranks, or just plain inconsistency, USC football no longer strikes fear along the West Coast. While cross-town rival UCLA has put together the Pac-10's best recruiting classes the last four seasons, USC has nearly dropped off the map — by its own elite standards.

The Pac-10 dominance the Trojans once enjoyed has been spread around the conference in the 1990s. Six different conference teams in the last six years have been to the Rose Bowl. The biggest beneficiaries were Washington State, Arizona State and Oregon — three teams that could not have risen to the top as quickly as they did if it weren't for USC's demise.

With that being said, there is no understating how important Saturday's game is to both USC and Oregon. The Ducks have a chance to go 5-0 down the stretch, assuming they are healthy enough to field a team at the end of the season. The Trojans still have their most important games ahead of them, Washington on No. 14, UCLA on Nov. 21 and Notre Dame on Nov. 28.

If they can find a consistent quarterback and a tailback to handle the bulk of the carries, the Trojans have as good a shot as anybody does to reach the Rose Bowl. And they have something Oregon players would love to have — a crack at the Bruins at the end of the season.

Joel Hood is the sports editor for the Emerald. He can be reached at hood@gladstone.uoregon.edu.

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