

Former walk-on at the helm of the Beavers' attack

Redshirt freshman
Jonathan Smith leads
Oregon State into war

By Joel Hood
Oregon Daily Emerald

It probably seems strange, but Jonathan Smith says he remembers very little from his record-setting 469-yard passing performance against Washington a month ago.

What he thinks about more often is his dismal performance against California the following weekend at Parker Stadium, where Oregon State's redshirt freshman quarterback completed only 17 of 58 passes, threw three interceptions and fumbled the ball three times.

"I really remember standing on the sidelines in the fourth quarter after we had blown that big lead and listening to the crowd saying things like 'Maybe he really isn't that good,' 'What are we going to do now?'" Smith says.

How quickly things can change in college football.

Smith, who began the season No. 3 on the Beavers' depth chart, knows that little, if anything, was expected of him when the season began. That all changed in the second quarter of that Oct. 24 game against Washington when starting quarterback Terrance Bryant was forced to the sidelines with an injury.

Smith's arrival seemed to spark the Beaver offense against Washington. But in a little less than two weeks he has gone from Oregon State's savior to its goat.

But what were Beaver fans supposed to think?

In less than three quarters, on a slow and soggy Seattle afternoon, Smith was able to eclipse former Beaver Erik Wilhelm's school record of 461 yards passing in a single game.

In doing so, Smith brought the Beavers back from a 21-7 halftime deficit to within 35-34 in the last minute. It was quite possibly the greatest comeback in school history.

It was simply one of the greatest single-game performances ever at Oregon State.

Smith, a former walk-on who was relegated to scout team service his freshman season, was suddenly all anyone was talking about.

Two days after the Washington game, Smith was hanging out with three friends in a downtown Corvallis coffee shop when he was approached by close to a dozen Beaver fans and alumni who said they just wanted to meet the next great Oregon State quarterback.

It was a bizarre scene for Smith, who admits he never expected to see much playing time this season when the Beavers signed Bryant. Bryant, a junior-college All-American at City College of San Francisco last season, was expected to be the Beavers' "quarterback of the future."

"It's was pretty wild," Smith says about that coffee shop encounter three weeks ago. "That had never really happened to me before. It's nice. But later I learned how quickly things can change."

The following week, the 5-foot-10, 177-pound Smith had the football equivalent of a Hollywood disaster flick.

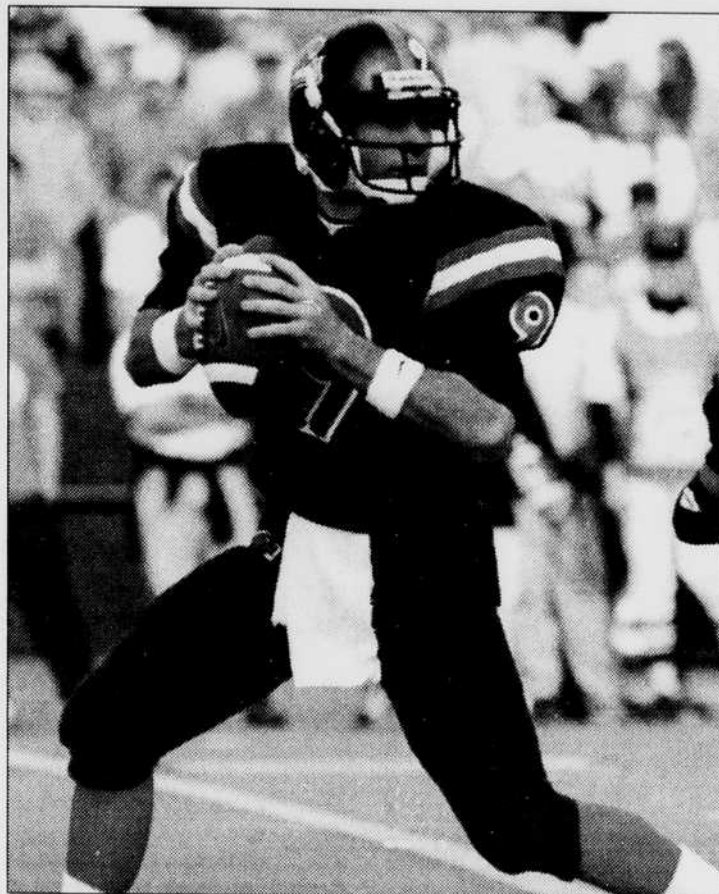
While he passed for 252 yards, his six turnovers helped the Bears complete an improbable second half comeback and a dramatic 20-19 win in front of 23,594 heartbroken Beaver fans. The loss dropped Oregon State to 4-5 overall and 1-5 in the Pacific-10 Conference and all but ended any possibility of postseason play.

After the game, Smith spoke with Oregon State's second-year head coach Mike Riley. Riley reinstated confidence in his young quarterback by naming him the starter in the Beavers' biggest game of the season the following week against No. 3 UCLA.

"It did a lot for my confidence," says Smith, who passed for 323 yards and just one interception in a near upset of the Pac-10 champion Bruins.

Smith directed three scoring drives of more than 65 yards, including a drive with less than two minutes to play that knotted the game at 34-34.

After three roller coaster games in a row, Smith says he has more experience under his belt than most freshman quarterbacks who



The (Oregon State) Barometer
Oregon State quarterback Jonathan Smith set a Beaver record with 469 yards passing against Washington after replacing injured starter Terrance Bryant in the first half.

play the entire season. "A big part of it is just having your teammates have confidence in you," Smith says. "I think that's one of the biggest obstacles freshmen have to overcome."

In five appearances this season, including the last three as a starter, Smith has thrown for 1,124 yards and four touchdowns. He is now less than 250 yards behind Bryant, who started Oregon State's first eight games.

After beginning this season in virtual obscurity, Smith is now catching the eyes of coaches around the Pac-10.

"He just lit the world on fire against Washington," Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said. "He throws the ball with great repetitive accuracy, he sees the field very well, he has a great comfort zone in the pocket and understands where the hot receivers are."

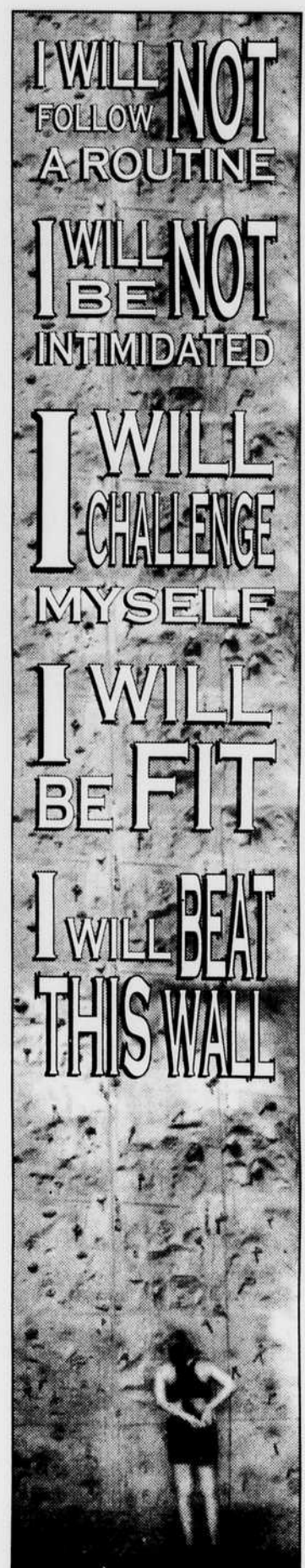
Smith says a great deal of that

comfort comes from just being allowed to play every week and the confidence that the coach wants to see you in there whether your hot or your struggling.

"A lot of it just comes your preparation during the week," Smith says. "I wasn't able to even practice with the first team until the week before our Arizona game [Oct. 17]. It makes a huge difference for a quarterback, going into a week of practice knowing that you're going to be the guy on Saturday."

And it is working for the Oregon State offense. The Beavers have had 47 plays this season of 25 or more yards, more than any Oregon State team in recent memory. Smith has been responsible for 27 of those 47 plays.

It's enough to make a young quarterback sit back, relax and reflect on a job well done — if only he could focus on the bright spots of the season.



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