

The Senior Class

The Aloha Bowl represents the final collegiate football game for the most successful senior class in school history

On Dec. 25, in the Aloha Bowl against Colorado, 23 Oregon seniors will suit up in the Ducks' familiar Lemon Yellow and Emerald Green uniforms for the final game of their careers.

Of the 23, 13 came to Eugene five years ago, one, placekicker Josh Smith, was a freshman in 1995, and nine have transferred from various junior colleges.

Those 13, with help along the way from the other 10, have seen Oregon win 39 games during the past five seasons, something no other group of Ducks can say.

This year's senior class includes names like quarterback Akili Smith, one of the country's best passers who has established school records for touchdown passes, passing yards and all-purpose yardage this season, as well as the Pacific-10 Conference record for passing efficiency.

It also includes names like tight end Jed Weaver, who walked on as a freshman only to become an integral part of the Oregon offense.

Josh Bidwell, the Pac-10's top punter. And Kevin Parker, who was injured most of this season, but returned to be one of the Ducks' biggest cheerleaders.

Also among the names of this year's seniors are lesser-known contributors like Mike Armendariz and Chad Normoyle, both effective backups on the offensive line.

Chris Vandiver, who stepped in for injured 1997 Pac-10 tackles leader Peter Sirmon and led the Ducks in the same category this season.

And Jason Maas, who combined with Smith to lead the Ducks to a Las Vegas Bowl victory last season and quietly took a seat on the bench for the good of the team in 1998.

This group of 23 men is one that will not soon be forgotten by its fans, coaches and teammates alike. It has but one goal left to accomplish.

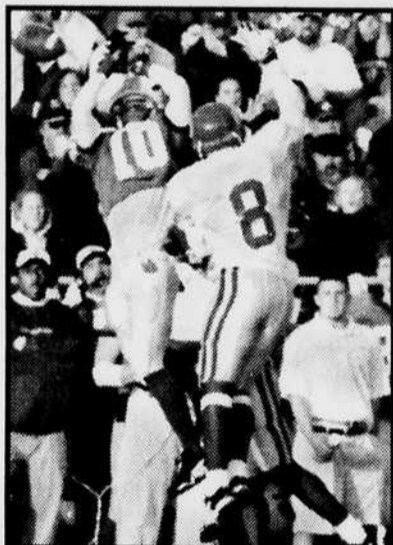
In the 103 years of Oregon football, the Ducks have never won back-to-back bowl games.

Bring on the Buffaloes.



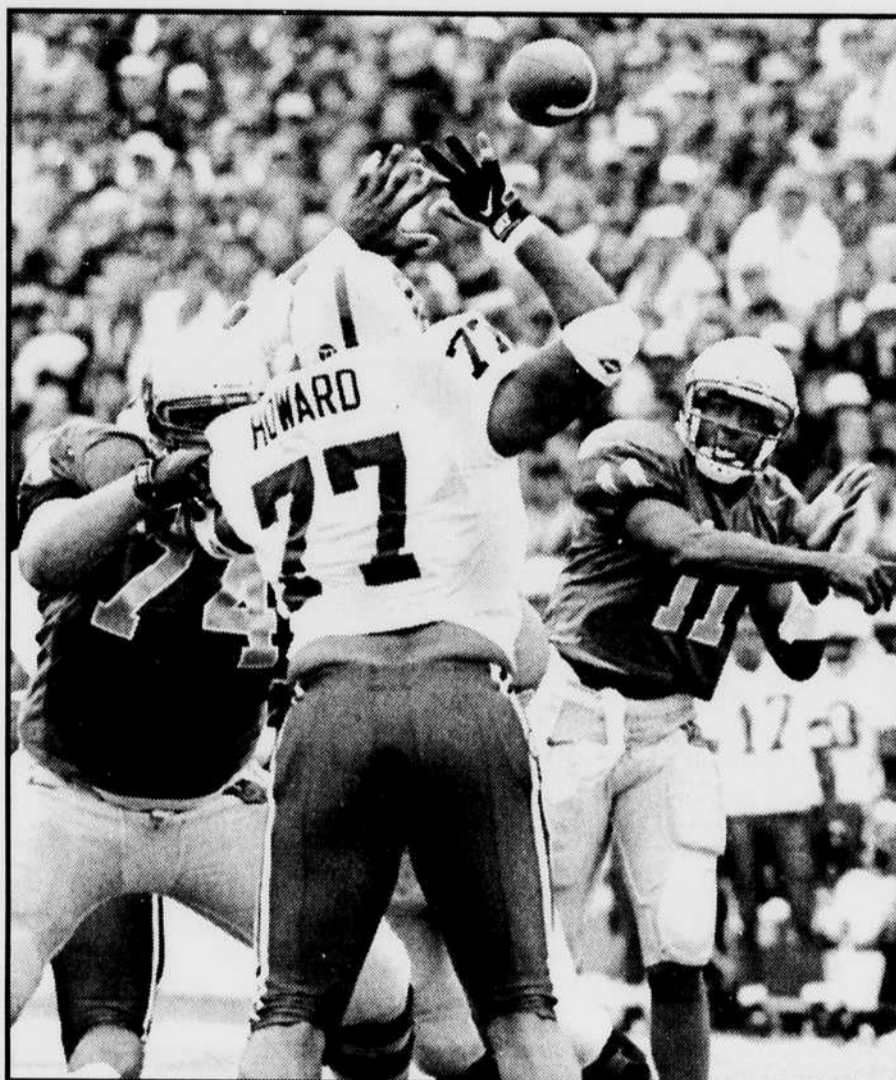
Matt Hankins/Emerald

Damon Griffin breaks free of Stanford's Tank Williams for a touchdown against the Cardinal.



Nick Medley/Emerald

Donald Haynes tries to pull down a pass from quarterback Akili Smith against Southern California on Oct. 24. Haynes and Smith came to Oregon as junior college transfers from San Diego.



Matt Hankins/Emerald

Quarterback Akili Smith fires one past Stanford's defensive line in the Ducks' 63-28 victory on Sept. 26.

"It's exciting for me to be a part of this senior class. It's exciting to see that a lot of people have grown up to be men and have done so well and been successful."

Josh Bidwell
UO punter

Opinion



Joel Hood

UCLA loss gives Oregon the perfect chance for redemption

As if Oregon and the rest of the teams in the Pacific-10 Conference needed another reason to hate UCLA, they got one Saturday.

When Cade McNown's last-second, fourth-down pass fell helplessly to the Orange Bowl turf in Miami, so too went the postseason dreams of Oregon and Arizona, which hoped to jump to a more prestigious bowl game when the Bruins accepted the bid to the Fiesta Bowl.

I can't say the same for myself, but Oregon seemed to take Saturday's news in stride.

The Ducks practiced inside the Ed Moshofsky Sports Center on Sunday in one of those "just-glad-to-be indoors," 30-degree Oregon afternoons. The mood was upbeat and lively. The players did not speak much about losing a shot at defending-national champion Nebraska.

Instead, the players were excited for the matchup with Colorado, spending Christmas Day in Hawaii and being just the sixth team in school history to finish the season with nine wins.

But there is another side to this coin. Oregon is no longer afraid of matching up with the Nebraskas and the Colorados of the college football world. Where 10 years ago they were simply happy to get a bowl game invite, the Ducks now crave the intense challenge and media attention they get in lining up against a national powerhouse.

Sorry Air Force, there's simply nothing that can equal that feeling.

So, after an emotional two weeks away from the playing field, Oregon finds itself with a very intriguing matchup this holiday season. Colorado

presents a host of new and exciting challenges for the Ducks, included in which is a defense as quick as some of the elite offenses in the country. But the Buffaloes are an interesting opponent in another area as well — revenge.

Oregon's seniors who played in the 1996 Cotton Bowl can still recall Colorado head coach Rick Neuheisel calling a fake punt late in the fourth quarter after the Buffaloes had earlier scored a touchdown to go up 32-6.

Neuheisel drew criticism for the call in the weeks that followed and to this day there remains just a few in the Oregon football program who don't still have a bitter taste in their mouth from that embarrassing 38-6 loss in Dallas.

After Sunday's practice, Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said revenge probably wouldn't be a big factor for the Ducks. I suspect Oregon's players are happy just at the thought of beating any team with national prominence into the pavement. There just happens to be a little extra incentive for the Ducks this season.

Before this season began, I figured that as long as the Ducks weren't playing for a national title in Tempe, Ariz., that it didn't much matter which bowl game they ended up in. What mattered to the Ducks were who they played and whether they won.

Although Oregon's players and coaches would never admit it, I'm sure everyone took a little sigh of relief when UCLA's receivers dropped that fourth down pass. While Nebraska surely would have provided a difficult test for the Ducks, at this

point in the building process, Oregon simply needs a passing grade.

A victory against Colorado would give Oregon just that, and help the Ducks recover from a season so close to perfection.

It was so close to perfection that certain questions can't help but be asked.

Despite Oregon's heartbreaking loss to UCLA on Oct. 17, its blow-out loss to Arizona two weeks later and a humiliating loss in Corvallis to end the season, was this the greatest team in school history?

Exactly how far could this team have gone if it wasn't decimated with injuries in its biggest games?

Was Akili Smith, who threw for more yards and more touchdowns than any quarterback in school history, the best Duck to ever play at Autzen Stadium?

These questions are left for us to ponder — as is the mythical defensive scheme that Oregon was planning on using to curtail Nebraska's vaunted rushing attack.

One thing is for certain: The Ducks wanted to end this season in a big game and they've been given that chance. We'll see if Colorado has what it takes to not only stop one of the country's most explosive offenses, but also a football program on the rise.

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