

Oregon has nation's respect; now it's time to back it up

HONOLULU — It wasn't supposed to happen this way. Not with this team.

Not in this dream season.

But there it was in glowing yellow numbers as the final horn sounded — Colorado 51, Oregon 43.

What the hell happened here?

How could a nationally ranked team, one that had reached as high as No. 11 in the country, one with an offense as explosive as any in college football and, not to mention, a big fat chip on its shoulder from previous bowl embarrassments, come up short in its most important game of the season?

Opinion



Joel Hood

This embarrassing loss wasn't simply about the six Duck turnovers that led to 23 Colorado points.

This loss wasn't just about sloppy tackling or misreads on defense. It wasn't about rankings or matchups or revenge or any of the hoopla that preceded this event.

This loss was about one thing — intimidation. It's different than respect. You can have one but not the other. Oregon has spent the later part of two decades building respect. It now must find a way to intimidate.

Oregon's mission when it landed on the island of O'ahu a week before the big game was the same as when it stepped into Aloha Stadium to begin its pregame warmups — beat Colorado.

The Buffaloes were a team with national recognition, a national title under its belt, a winner of four straight bowl games and a team that had embarrassed Oregon in its last meeting, a 38-6 victory in the 1996 Cotton Bowl.

But the problem with intimidation is that it only works if the other team is willing to play along. Oregon was the favorite, by about 5 1/2 points at kickoff. The Ducks were the higher nationally ranked team. Their offense was among the best in the country.

And everyone who covers college football seemed to think the time was right for this Oregon football program to come of age by running up the score on a rag-tag Colorado team five seasons removed from its glory years.

But Colorado wasn't fooled. Why should it have been? UCLA wasn't fooled, Arizona wasn't fooled, Oregon State certainly wasn't fooled. Oregon has won plenty of big games in the last 20 years, but it has seldom beaten the big opponent.

The Ducks play hard, they stay in the game, and each time you hear the same thing in the locker room after the game, "... Boy, if we just could have held onto the ball on that last drive, we really could have done something ..."

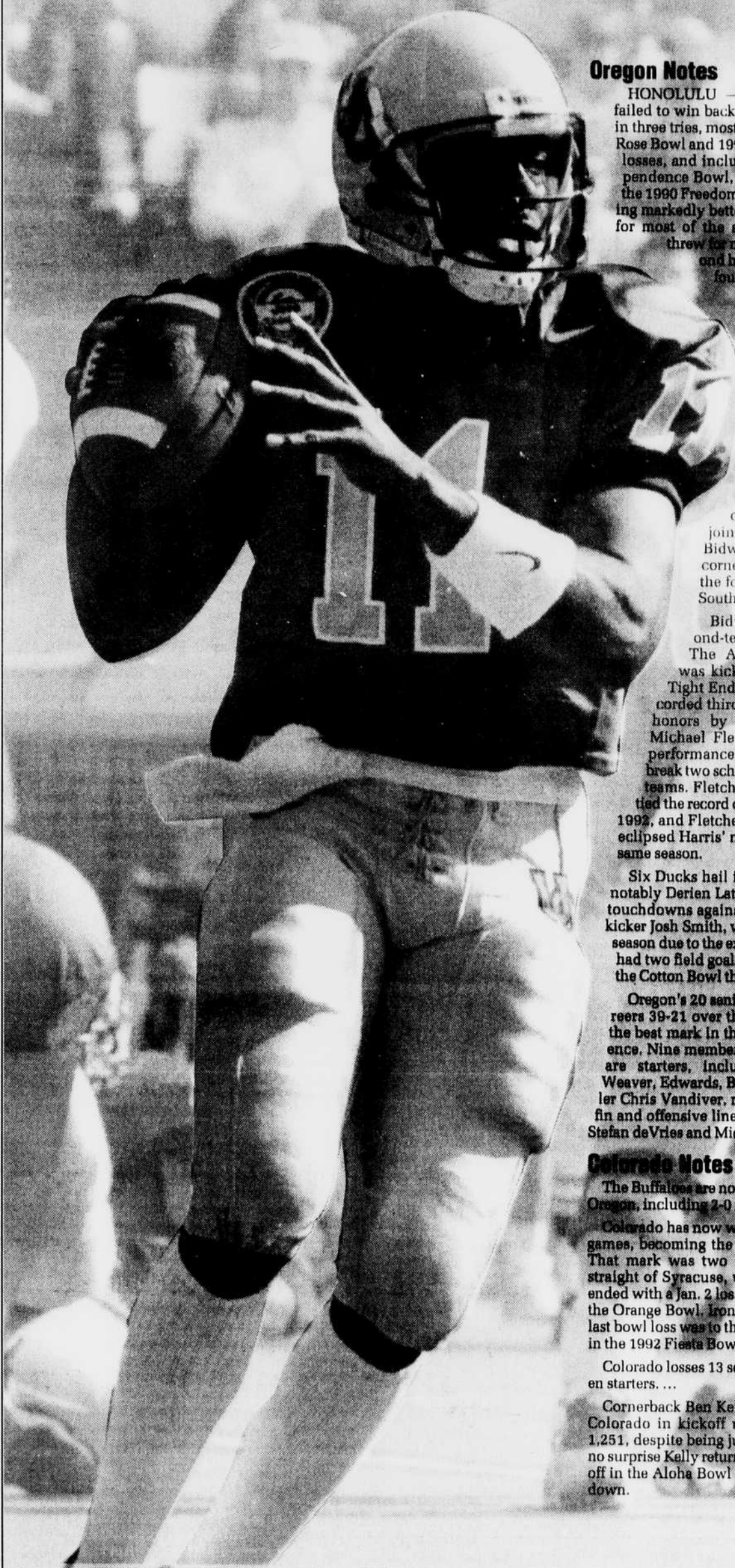
After the game on Christmas Day, Bellotti and Akili Smith talked about the pride and character of this Oregon team and the respect it had earned by coming back from the 23-point halftime deficit to within a touchdown.

And who knows, if the Ducks land on a few of those first-half turnovers instead of Colorado, things could have been different.

Either way, Oregon learned a valuable lesson this Christmas — that respect is no longer good enough. Or was this outcome just a case of Colorado respecting Oregon so much that it didn't want to see Duck fans jeopardize missing their flights home after celebrating all night?

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

Aloha Bowl Notes



Oregon Notes

HONOLULU — Oregon has now failed to win back-to-back bowl games in three tries, most recently in the 1995 Rose Bowl and 1996 Cotton Bowl, both losses, and including the 1989 Independence Bowl, a win, and a loss in the 1990 Freedom Bowl. ... After playing markedly better in the second half for most of the season, Akili Smith threw for more yards in the second half in three of his last four games.

Despite the loss, three Ducks have another chance to end their careers on a winning note. Smith will play in the Jan. 16 East-West Shrine game at Stanford Stadium in Palo Alto, Calif., as well as the Jan. 23 Senior Bowl in Mobile, Ala. The quarterback will be joined by punter Josh Bidwell in California and cornerback Eric Edwards the following week down South.

Bidwell was named second-team All-American by The Associated Press, as was kicker Nathan Villegas. Tight End Jed Weaver was accorded third-team All-American honors by Football News. ... Michael Fletcher's Aloha Bowl performance helped him tie or break two school records in special teams. Fletcher's 46 punt returns tied the record of Ronnie Harris from 1992, and Fletcher's 532 return yards eclipsed Harris' mark of 517 from the same season.

Six Ducks hail from Colorado, most notably Derien Latimer, who had three touchdowns against the Buffaloes, and kicker Josh Smith, who did not play this season due to the exploits of Villegas but had two field goals against Colorado in the Cotton Bowl three years ago. ...

Oregon's 20 seniors finished their careers 39-21 over the past five seasons, the best mark in the Pacific conference. Nine members of the team are starters, including quarterback Weaver, Edwards, Bidwell, punter Chris Vandiver, receiver Damon Coffin and offensive linemen Marco Antonio Stefan deVries and Michael Klewa.

Colorado Notes

The Buffaloes are now 8-6 all time against Oregon, including 2-0 in bowl games. ...

Colorado has now won five straight bowl games, becoming the 11th team to do so. That mark was two less than the seven straight of Syracuse, which had its streak ended with a Jan. 2 loss to Florida, 31-10, in the Orange Bowl. Ironically, the Buffaloes' last bowl loss was to the Orangemen, 26-22, in the 1992 Fiesta Bowl.

Colorado losses 13 seniors, including seven starters. ...

Cornerback Ben Kelly is first all time at Colorado in kickoff return yardage with 1,251, despite being just a sophomore. It's no surprise Kelly returned the opening kickoff in the Aloha Bowl 93 yards for a touchdown.

— Rob Moseley