

Wright

Continued from Page 7

Smith, a junior in his fourth season with the program. Smith compared Wright to 1993-97 starter Kenya Wilkins: "Kenya was real talented and could do a whole lot of things, but maybe didn't look to get other people involved as much as Darius has."

As evidence of that, Smith cites Wright's 13-assist performance last Thursday against Arizona. Should Wright maintain his current pace of more than five assists per game, he would tie all-time Oregon great Terrell Brandon for eighth-place on the single-season assist list with 141.

Adding to Wright's impressive performance against the Wildcats was the fact that he was often being guarded by Jason Terry, considered by some to be the best defensive guard in the Pac-10.

While Wright did have his career-best assist total, he will remember that game more for the fact that Terry, Wright's defensive responsibility, scored a career-high 37 points in the 85-83 Arizona win.

Arizona State's Eddie House had 34 points two nights later while being guarded by Wright, but he maintains a clear head about the situation.

"It's just a personal challenge, really," Wright says. "That's what it comes down to. Those guys got the best of me and everybody else. Those are great players who are probably going to go to the next level."

And just as Wright maintains an even keel, so does his coach.

"He has been the glue that has bound us together," Oregon head coach Ernie Kent says. "He's been the guy that's helped us, even through the adversity and



Nick Medley/Emerald

Wright prides himself on all facets of his game, including defense. Here he takes on Arizona State's Ron DuBois, who scored two points in the Sun Devils' 64-60 win on Saturday.

all the tough losses. On the court, he's only gotten better and really showed his maturity.

"He is one of those guys that is fully an extension of the coaching staff on the floor. He understands time and shot, he understands the tempo of the game and he has great court vision.

"He's been a very, very pleasant surprise for us this year, just in terms of how good he really is and what he's contributed to this team in his first year with this program."

As Kent knows, it shouldn't come as that much of a surprise.

Wright earned all-state honors

in leading West Valley to a 30-4 record and the state quarterfinals last season. He was also named Coast Conference Most Valuable Player after averaging 17 points and 9.8 assists after transferring from Wagner in New York to be closer to home.

This season, Wright is averag-

ing just 6.5 points to go along with the five assists and two turnovers per game.

"That's just another adjustment for me," Wright says. "In this offense, the point guard is not really the main scorer, which is fine, but when I get the open shot, I'm going to take it."

A strong defense is responsible for Atlanta's amazing recovery

The Falcons will lean on their revitalized defense against the Broncos in Sunday's Super Bowl

By Paul Newberry

The Associated Press

MIAMI — Rich Brooks shook his head slowly, his body overcome by a protracted, gut-wrenching groan.

He was remembering the Atlanta Falcons' defense, pre-1997.

"They didn't stop anybody," Brooks said Tuesday, recalling the unit that became his when he accepted Dan Reeves' offer to take over as defensive coordinator of the Falcons two years ago.

Chuck Smith was so fed up playing for a defense that ranked near the bottom of the league for an entire decade, he spoke out angrily and wound up suspended for the final game of the '96 season.

"It's tough getting up and going in to play for a defense that you knew didn't have a chance going into the game," the defensive end recalled.

In 1995, when the Falcons gave up the more yards passing than any other team in NFL history, they had more holes than a putting green.

On Sunday, when they meet the Denver Broncos in the Super Bowl, they will be relying heavily on a defense that cracked the top 10 in run defense (second), points allowed (fourth) and total yards allowed (eighth).

It's been a remarkable turn-

around, the crucial chapter in the Falcons' storybook rise from 3-13 mess to NFC champion in the space of only two seasons. Even Brooks, architect of the revitalization, is astounded by its haste.

"But this is part of an overall plan," he said. "It isn't just defense. Dan Reeves' philosophy is to play sound defense, run the football, don't turn it over and take it away."

The Falcons led the league in time of possession (an average of 33 minutes, 10 seconds). They led the league in turnover margin (44 takeaways, 24 giveaways). They had the sixth-best rushing offense, led by 1,846-yard runner Jamal Anderson.

"We kind of wear teams down with the offense," Brooks said. "The defensive players appreciate the fact that when they come off the field, it's not going to be three quick passes and your fanny might be back on the field 45 seconds later."

That was a not-so-subtle reference to the run-and-shoot offense favored by the previous regimes of June Jones and Jerry Glanville. While the Falcons put up some staggering offensive numbers in those years, the defense felt like a neglected stepchild.

From 1990-96, five of Atlanta's seven first-round picks were used on offensive players. The Falcons also traded two first-round picks for quarterback Jeff George, and another first-rounder for receiver Eric Metcalf.

Finally, with the Falcons fin-

ishing up a three-victory season in 1996, Smith's feelings boiled over. He was tired of practicing against the run-and-shoot, which did about as much good on game day as taking a water pistol to the shooting range.

"I had never even practiced against a tight end," said Smith, who joined the Falcons in '92. "That's why we always finished last in run defense."

Smith said the Falcons would never have a winning team until they hired a defensive-minded coach. That drew a one-game suspension from Jones, but it was Smith who wound up a prophet.

Jones was fired the following week. His successor, Reeves, switched to a conventional offense and turned his attention to the defense — in particular, the woeful secondary.

"The front end wasn't that bad," said Brooks, noting the Falcons still have five starters from their pre-'97 front seven. "But the back end was a disaster."

Not anymore. Cornerback Ray Buchanan, signed to a four-year, \$13 million contract, gave the Falcons their best coverage player since Deion Sanders. Safety William White and cornerback Ronnie Bradford were bargain-basement free agents who turned out to be bargains. Thirty-five-year-old Eugene Robinson was brought in to quarterback the secondary, barking out orders and compensating for his age with savvy, knowledge and enthusiasm.

Pyle

Continued from Page 7

So I guess things could have been worse for Oregon.

Anyhow, the point of my rambling is forthcoming. I promise.

We spent the rest of the season in an unbelieving trance and never did attain any of our aspirations.

The Ducks have lost four of their five games since the USC debacle — all in this close-but-not-quite manner — and they must be beginning to believe they are cursed. What else could explain the fact that every game goes down to the wire, only to end in a loss?

But unlike my soccer team, I think Oregon will recover. And I believe it will happen this Saturday in Corvallis, where — surprisingly — Oregon State is 9-0.

Unlike my soccer coach, Ernie Kent will not let his team wallow in self pity.

He is willing to answer for the team's shortcomings, incessantly remains positive and has even been through similar frustrations as a player.

Back in 1975, Kent's Ducks started 15-2 before losing five games of a six-game losing streak by four points or less. But that Oregon team didn't pack it in. It recovered to finish 21-9 and take third in the National Invitation Tournament.

Kent's willingness to stand

up for his players is best exemplified by a story a buddy of mine recently told me. After the Ducks' loss to Arizona State last Saturday, my friend — who we will refer to as Nick — left a message on Kent's office answering machine asking what was wrong with the players, who Nick thought were looking dejected and listless.

Nick left his number just in case Kent had a reply.

Much to Nick's amazement, Kent returned his call.

In the ensuing conversation, Kent asked Nick, "How would you feel if you barely flunked five straight midterms that you studied hard for?" or something to that effect.

Nick agreed that he, like most of us, wouldn't feel good.

At the conclusion of the conversation, Kent thanked Nick for leaving his name and number. Nick thanked Kent for calling him.

After a week of practice, Kent's admirable approach and unwavering guidance will, I believe, boost the Ducks out of their funk.

And beating the Beavers for the 11th straight time will certainly be fun.

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