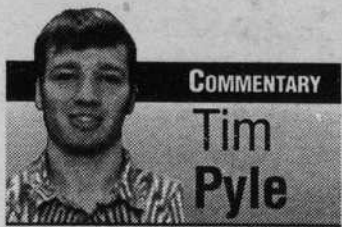


With crowd behind them, Ducks bound to win



COMMENTARY
Tim Pyle

Finally, they're back. They last played here Sept. 25 and left us exhausted, optimistic and most of all thrilled after a 33-30 triple-overtime victory against Southern California.

They induced many of the same emotions last Saturday although they were far from home in a 44-41 win at Arizona.

In between, there were consecutive weekends of pain, doubt and missed opportunities in losses at Washington and UCLA.

But that's all in the past now. All that matters is that the Oregon football team (4-3 overall, 2-2 Pacific-10 Conference) is back at Autzen Stadium, where it will play three of its final four regular-season games.

All that matters is that the Ducks have a realistic shot at ending the season with a five-game winning streak and earning a berth in at least the Holiday Bowl, if not — gasp! — the Rose Bowl.

And with more than 40,000 of us cheering them on — in rain, wind, sun or all three — they could very well accomplish that season-ending sweep and make the last season of the century go down in Oregon football lore.

That's not to say it will be easy. First, the Ducks have to tame explosive J.R. Redmond and talented Arizona State (4-3, 3-1). Before last season, beating the Sun Devils seemed to be too much to

ask of Oregon teams that were routinely mauled by Duck alum Bruce Snyder and his powerful Arizona State running game.

But then Oregon got even — big time. Last November, the Ducks burned the Devils with an old-fashioned Autzen whipping, 51-19, in the eighth straight of a home winning streak that now stands at 11.

Although Arizona State has already won somewhere Oregon couldn't — at Husky Stadium — I don't think the Devils have what it takes to beat the Ducks at Autzen on Homecoming weekend.

Especially when Oregon has not played at home in more than a month, making the already rowdy Duck faithful that much more fired up than usual. After yelling at television sets for the last three games, Oregon fans are just bursting to let loose in shouting distance of their adversaries.

And trust me, the Sun Devils will hear it, as will the Ducks.

"We feel really good when we're playing here," senior line-backer Peter Sirmon said. "It's the crowd and the energy."

"No one likes to play here. So whatever [the Oregon fans] are doing, they should keep it up."

The Ducks fans will because they know just as well as the actual team does that a loss Saturday would kill all that momentum gained last Saturday.

How is Oregon going to go about beating Arizona State?

Well, you can expect a large dose of Reuben Droughns for the second straight week, although he won't approach those eye-popping 45 carries of last week.

With Droughns running as effectively as he has all season and the Ducks home for the first time

in what seems like forever, quarterback A.J. Feeley should bounce back from consecutive subpar performances against a banged-up Sun Devil defense.

Flanker Tony Hartley would love nothing more than to have a huge game Saturday, breaking a couple of all-time Oregon records — career touchdown catches and receiving yardage — while contributing to a big win.

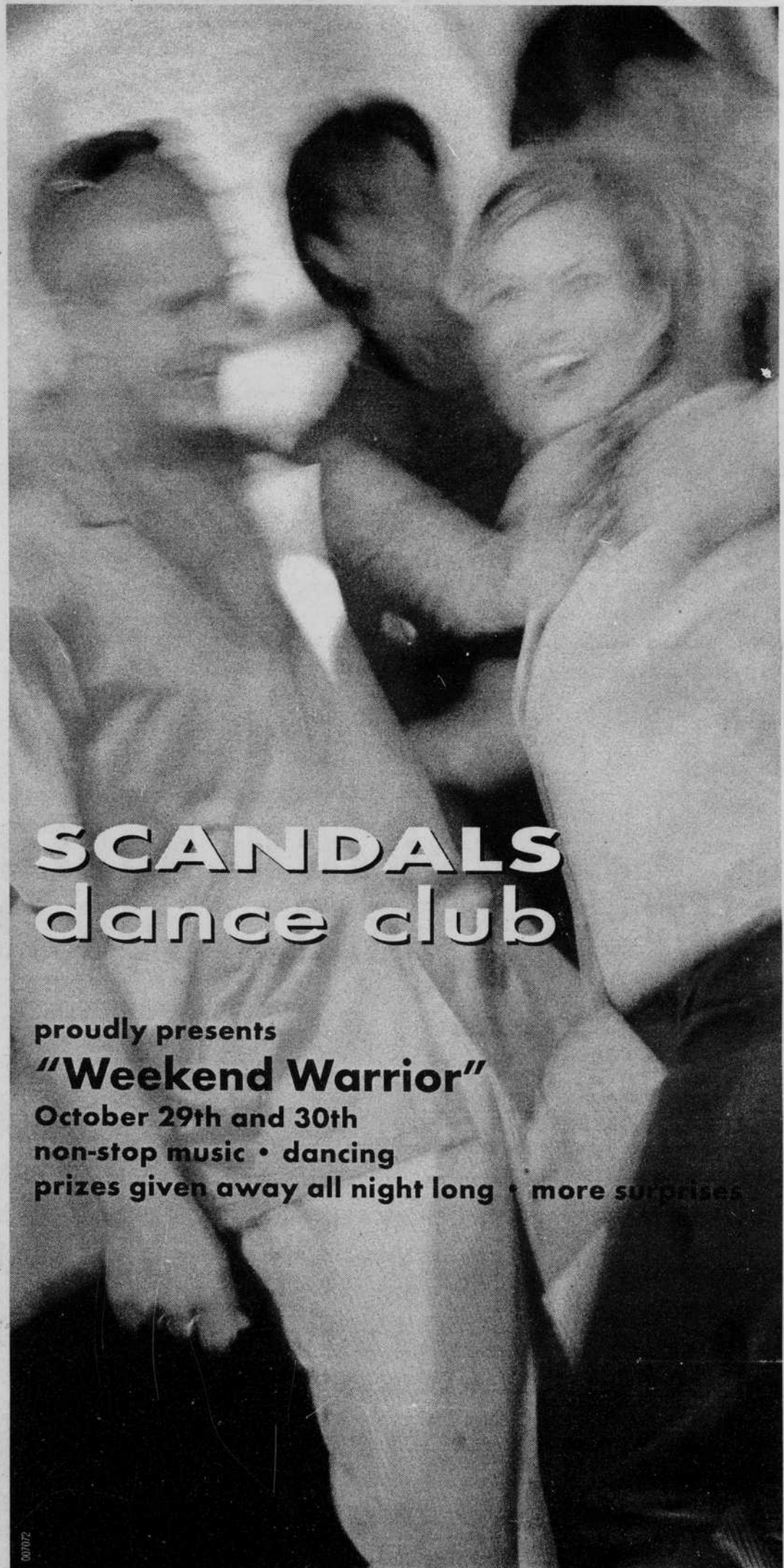
As for the defense, it seems to draw even more from the crowd's emotion than does the offense. This season, the Ducks have given up just 23 points per game at home versus 34 per outing on the road.

On special teams, you know Michael Fletcher and company will make some kind of positive impact for the Ducks as has been their penchant.

And if the wet weather persists Saturday, Oregon is assuredly much more comfortable in slippery conditions than is Arizona State.

Yup, pretty much any way you look at it, Homecoming is bound to be happy for the Ducks.

Tim Pyle is the sports editor of the Emerald. He can be reached via e-mail at tpyle@gladstone.uoregon.edu.



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