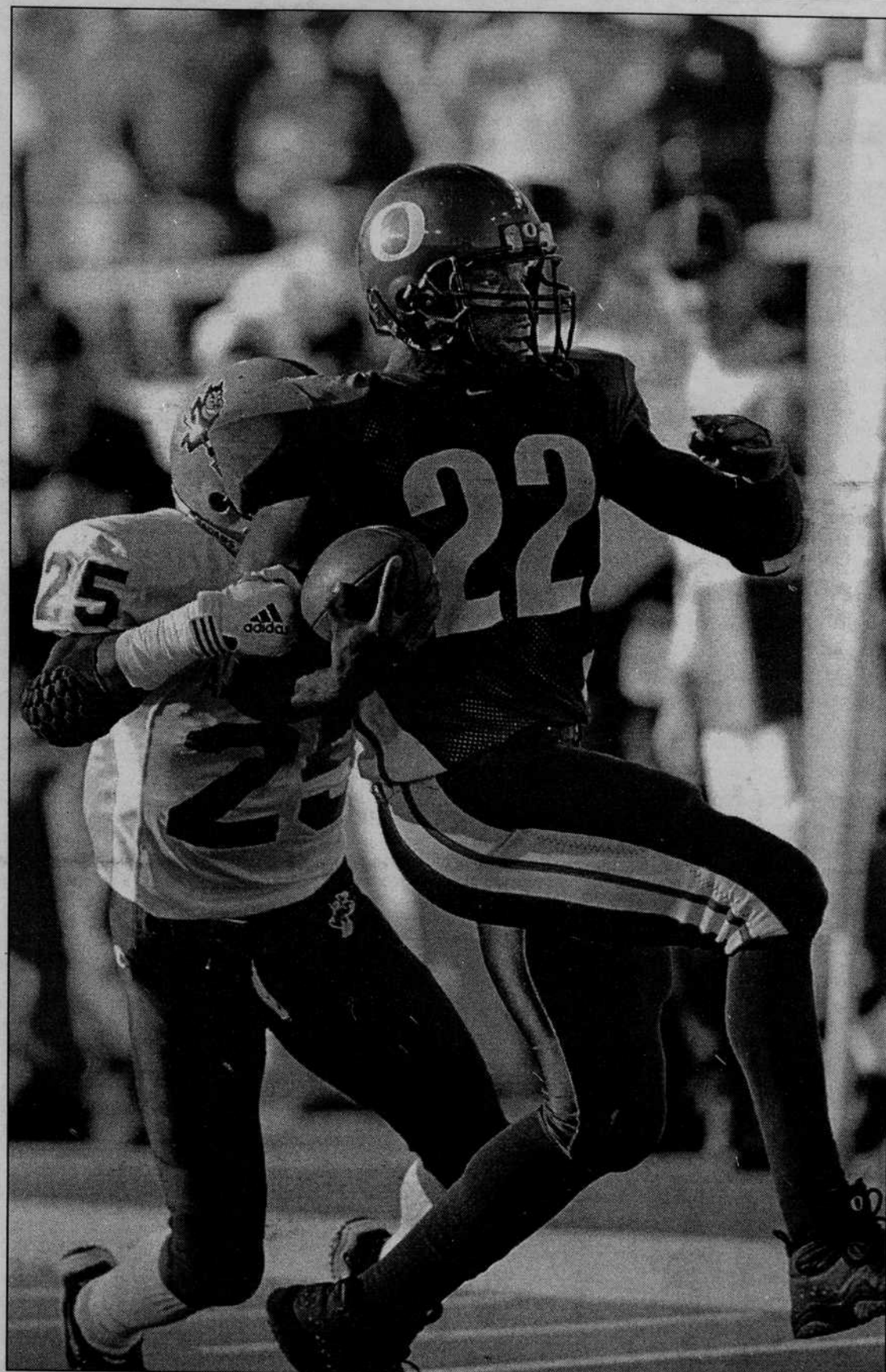


Oregon Daily
Emerald
Editor in chief: Laura Cadiz
Sports Editor: Tim Pyle

Sports

Best Bet

NBA Basketball
Philadelphia vs. San Antonio
5 p.m., TNT



Jeffrey Stockton Emerald

Senior tailback Reuben Droughns has carried 82 times for 390 yards in Oregon's last two games and is "definitely feeling better."

Driving force is Droughns

By Tim Pyle
Oregon Daily Emerald

If senior tailback Reuben Droughns had been as healthy all season as he has been the last two weeks, the Oregon football team could very well be undefeated and leading the Pacific-10 Conference.

Say what?

Look at the facts.

In the season-opening loss at Michigan State on Sept. 2, Droughns — in his first game back since suffering leg injuries at UCLA on Oct. 17, 1998 — was by his own admission tentative and not 100 percent while rushing for 59 yards on 23 carries.

Fast forward to Oct. 2, when the Ducks lost at Washington. Droughns did not play because of a rib injury suffered the previous week against Southern California.

With a pounding running game, the Huskies dominated in time of possession in their 34-20 win. A healthy Droughns could have conceivably allowed the Oregon offense — which was almost exclusively reduced to quick strikes through the air — to eat up some clock and play some keep-away of its own.

The following week, it was not known until the Ducks boarded their flight for Los Angeles whether Droughns would make the trip to UCLA. He did, but his playing time was limited because of the still tender ribs. Still, he was a driving force in the Oregon comeback attempt that fell just a foot short.

But let's not dwell on Droughns' injuries because injuries — as any player or coach is quick to point out — are a fact of life in football.

Instead, let's look at what Droughns has done in his brief, but magnificent, Duck career.

During the last two seasons, Oregon is 9-3 with Droughns and just 4-4 without him. A football player cannot be paid a higher compliment than to have the numbers prove his team is markedly better with him in the lineup.

"He does so much for this team because he runs so hard and takes the pressure off A.J. [Feeley] and I," quarterback Joey Harrington said. "They can't key on our passing game, which is loaded with weapons like Tony [Hartley] and Marshaun [Tucker]."

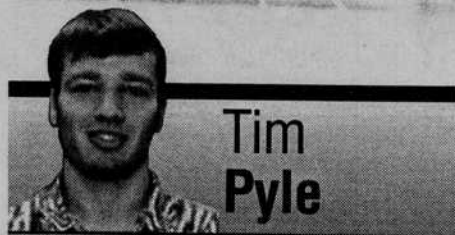
"You just can't say enough about the guy."

Those three Duck losses with Droughns playing? Two are the aforementioned de-

During the last two seasons, Oregon is 9-3 when tailback Reuben Droughns plays and 4-4 when he doesn't

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Powers of the century, decade won't rule NBA



Tim Pyle

When the New York Yankees completed their World Series sweep of Atlanta last week, it was a fitting end to the decade and century for professional baseball.

With their 25th championship of the 20th century and third of the 1990s, the Yankees were the best of both periods.

As the NBA tips off its last season starting in this century and decade today, there is no way either of those sensible conclusions will

be reached come June.

Boston, the 16-time NBA champion, is at least a season or two away from making any noise with a nucleus comprised of young stars Antoine Walker and Paul Pierce.

And the team of the '90s, the six-time champion Chicago Bulls, faces an even tougher road this season. With Michael Jordan retired and running mates Scottie Pippen and Dennis Rodman long gone, the Bulls are expected to start Will Perdue and Randy Brown, role players in the championship days.

The rest of the league must be trembling. On a more serious note, the outlook is good here in the Pacific Northwest.

Portland, fresh off an appearance in the Western Conference Semifinals, did anything but stand pat during the off-season. Our beloved Blazers traded for Pippen and shooting guard Steve Smith and also added free-

agent forward Detlef Schrempf to the mix.

Team those three with point guards Damon Stoudamire and Greg Anthony; forwards Brian Grant, Rasheed Wallace and Jermaine O'Neal; center Arvydas Sabonis; and rapidly improving guard Bonzi Wells and Portland is a legitimate title contender.

But with that kind of talent — not to mention a payroll of around \$71 million — the Blazers won't be surprising anybody like they did last season. Most publications have picked either Portland or San Antonio, the defending champion and team that beat the Blazers last season, to win the title.

As we delve into my predictions, be advised that I am a native Oregonian who grew up with Blazermania flowing thickly through my blood.

But also heed this warning: Portland is assuredly red hot 'n rollin' this season, baby.

The East

Not much going on in the Eastern Conference these days.

Well, I guess there is Allen Iverson and his killer crossover, Alonzo Mourning and his killer glare and Latrell Sprewell and his killer choke hold, but the team power definitely resides in the West.

Mourning's Miami Heat is the popular choice to earn the East's berth in the NBA Finals. Gutsy guard Tim Hardaway teams with Mourning's intimidating inside play to lead legendary head coach Pat Riley's squad.

But new rules designed to rev up the NBA could fatally hurt the slow-it-down, bang-it-out Heat, who held opponents to just 84 points per game last season with its physical play.

The New York Knicks, with Sprewell and fellow guard Allan Houston paving the way,

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