

Defense continues late-season surge of stinginess

■ The Duck defense comes through in the clutch for the fifth straight game and leads Oregon to a Sun Bowl victory over No. 12 Minnesota by shutting down a potent rushing attack

By Tim Pyle
Oregon Daily Emerald

Heading into the 66th Sun Bowl, No. 12 Minnesota boasted a rushing attack that ranked 11th in the country with an average of more than 239 yards rushing compiled per game.

Golden Gopher tailback Thomas Hamner had been named first-team all-Big Ten Conference after finishing second in the conference and 12th nationally with 1,362 regular-season yards rushing, an average of 124 yards per outing.

Quarterback Billy Cockerham had rushed for a mind-boggling 805 yards himself, more than five yards per carry.

And so the Oregon football team's defense set out to do what had not been done to the Minnesota offense: It planned to shut down the ground game.

"Our whole goal coming in was to stop the run," junior defensive end Saul Patu said.

On the Gophers' first play from scrimmage, the Duck defense did just that, sending an immediate message.

As Hamner took his 289th handoff of the season, Oregon senior linebacker Peter Sirmon burst into the backfield and drilled Hamner for a three-yard loss.

The Ducks' leading tackler had set the tone for what would be a day-long struggle for the vaunted Minnesota ground game.

By halftime, Hamner had rushed 14 times for just 41 yards, an average of almost two yards below his normal per-carry output. Overall, the Gophers had only 58 yards rushing on 23 carries and had scored seven points.

"You have so much time to prepare for a bowl game," said the football-strategy savvy Sirmon, who would finish with a team-high 16 tackles to run his season total to 109. "We broke down film of all 11 of their games.

"You know everything they do. You know all their strengths and weaknesses."

With Oregon attacking the line of scrimmage and daring Minnesota to run, the Gophers turned predominately to the passing game in the second half.

And not entirely without success.

Cockerham's arm led Minnesota to a touchdown drive on the first possession of the half to give the Gophers a 13-7 lead. After the Ducks jumped out to a 17-13 lead, Cockerham again used the pass to direct another touchdown drive and gain a 20-17 edge early in the fourth quarter.

But ultimately, Minnesota's inability to run made the difference, as the Gopher passing game failed in the Sun Bowl's deciding stages.

On the Gophers' last four possessions, Cockerham completed three-of-nine passes, was intercepted once and lost a definitive fumble — thanks to senior linebacker Dietrich Moore's sack and Patu's recovery — with 41 seconds remaining.

Oregon had succeeded in forcing Minnesota to try to win through the air, which was what the Ducks wanted all along.

"I think it was evident today, [Cockerham] was not going to beat us with his arm," Sirmon said. "We wanted to make him do something he wasn't comfortable doing."

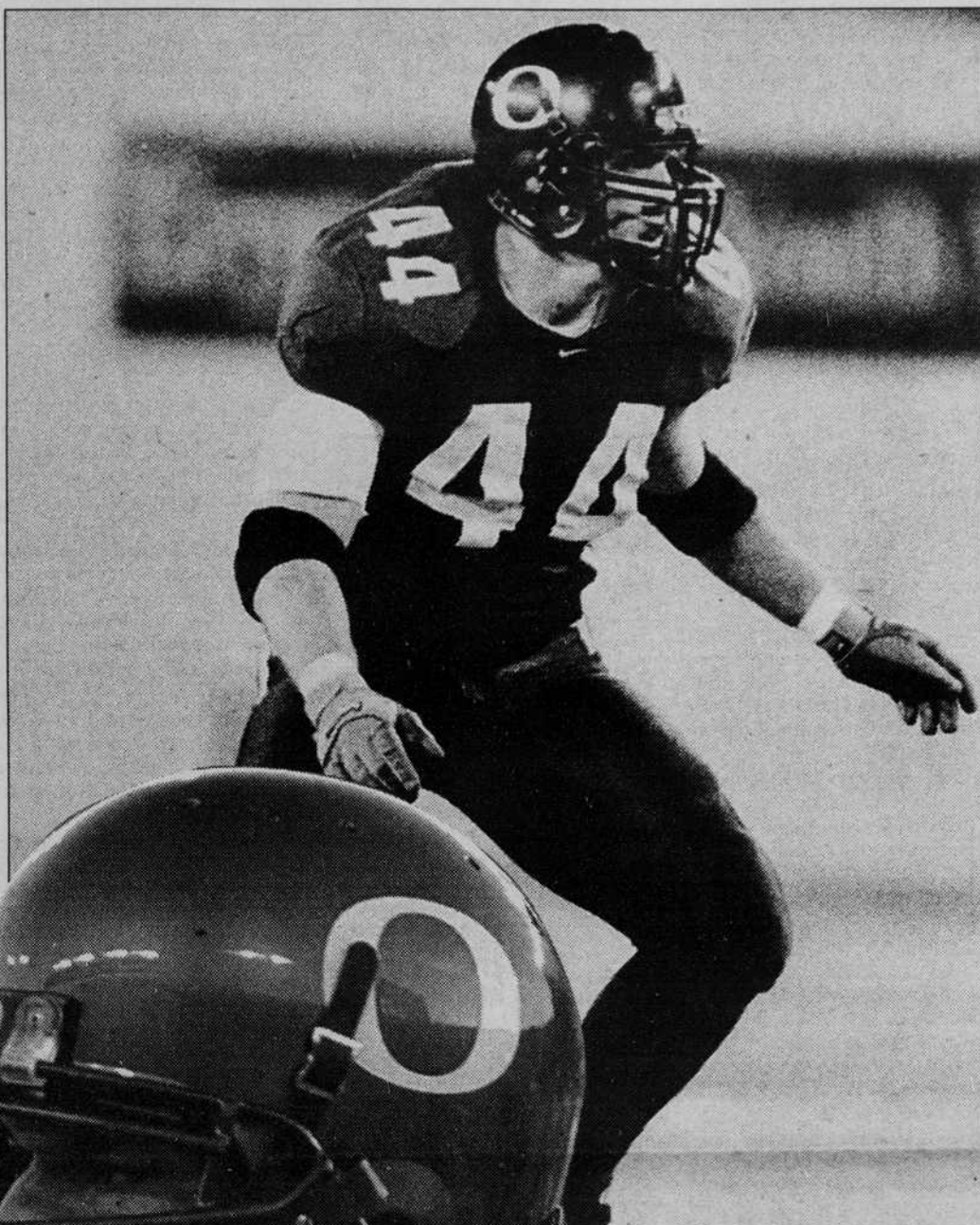
The Gophers finished with just 96 net yards rushing on 35 attempts, more than 143 yards below their average. Hamner was held to 64 yards on 20 carries and was never really a factor.

"An absolutely wonderful job of taking away the run," said Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti after securing his second bowl win in four appearances. "We made it the kind of game we wanted to."

In the last five games of the season, the Duck defense — much maligned both locally and nationally early on — did everything that could be asked of it, holding all five opponents to 20 points or less.

Sirmon, who finishes ninth all-time on Oregon's career tackles list with 317, found such a stand sweetly satisfying amid the Duck celebration after the 24-20 Sun Bowl victory.

"To go out like this ..." Sirmon said, "I think it is the best feeling I've had in my career."



Photos by Scott Barnett
Senior linebackers Peter Sirmon (above) and Dietrich Moore (below) proved themselves instrumental in Oregon's defensive success once again in the Ducks' Sun Bowl victory over No. 12 Minnesota.

