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Gladiators

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down pass with nine seconds left in the game to beat Arizona State.

But what has been a key element to the program's success over the years is its ability to sneak up on opponents and capture the win.

This year, however, that element of surprise is gone. The Ducks are no longer a middle of "the Pac" type team, but rather a consistent contender in the always unpredictable Pac-10 Conference.

A team doesn't reach eight bowl games in 11 years and still catch other teams off guard. This season, the players know opponents will be after them.

"We know we aren't going to surprise people," quarterback A.J. Feeley said. "That's why everybody put in the time and effort throughout the summertime."

That's also why Bellotti was not complacent in his recruiting. He went after firepower and found it in junior college running back sensation Maurice Morris.

Morris, a 6-foot, 205-pound tailback, was considered this year's top junior college prospect. He's expected to step right in and make a serious impact.

The two-time J.C. Grid-Wire All-American surpassed national junior college career records with 3,708 yards rushing, 593 carries and 4,487 all-purpose yards. He also surpassed Fresno City College's school records for most rushing touchdowns in a single season (26 in 1998), as well as career rushing touchdowns (45) and touchdowns overall (49).

Morris has repeated over and over how excited he is to be a part of the Ducks and how he can't wait to see Autzen Stadium at its best.

"I've heard about that place," Morris said. "It's going to be exciting to see. I heard all about the craziness."

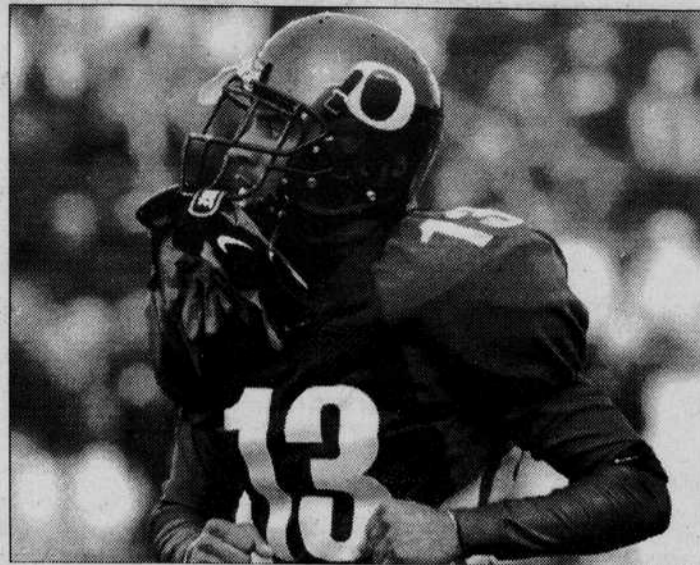
Bellotti and offensive coordinator Jeff Tedford are counting big time on Morris to solidify the backfield and help open up the air-attack combination of its quarterbacks and receivers.

A year ago, the Ducks ranked 19th in the nation in passing offense and 11th in scoring offense, and all indications suggest that they will equal such rankings or perhaps even better them.

Harrington is already impressed with the blend of returning receivers and newcomers.

"Yeah, our receivers have been coming through," Harrington said. "They seem like they're going to fit in really well. I like their attitudes and their willingness to come in here and get a jump on things."

The Ducks will miss the deep threat of Tony Hartley, but will have tough-minded senior Tucker and sleek sophomore Keenan Howry to



Emerald

Starting cornerback Brian Johnson anchors the Ducks' secondary.

anchor the receiving duties. Tucker caught 32 passes last season in his first season after coming over from the junior college level and is expected to blossom in his final season.

But none of the offensive stars will get a chance to flourish if the defense doesn't come through.

There is no doubt that losing starters at the linebacker, free safety, rover and cornerback positions will hurt, but the Ducks are confident that their defense is simply reloading as opposed to rebuilding.

"Quarterbacks are always a key, but the defense is the biggest key," Bellotti said. "We have some huge holes to fill and the onus is on guys like Saul Patu, Matt Smith and Rashad Bauman to continue to improve that defense."

The anchor of the defense will be linebacker Smith, who returned to football in 1998 after four years of trying his hand at baseball in the Kansas City Royals minor-league organization.

"Matt Smith is one of the acknowledged leaders of this football team," Bellotti said. "He's the old man of the group. He doesn't say a lot, but he always packs a full lunch and comes ready to play."

Smith will be joined on the defense by a returning nucleus that includes defensive linemen Patu and Jason Nikolao. Defensive coordinator Nick Aliotti will continue his 4-3 defensive scheme that had the Ducks ranked third in the Pac-10 in rushing defense last year.

Oregon's cornerback position will be given a huge lift as Bauman returns to action after redshirting last season due to a knee injury. Bauman is known for his ability to stop speedy Pac-10 receivers in single coverage, which allows Aliotti room to double-cover somebody else or blitz the opposing quarterback.

And rounding out the Oregon

squad is the special teams, which in the past few years has always lived up to its name. The punting duties will again belong to Kurtis Doerr, who specializes in distance, accuracy and hang-time.

The starting placekicker will be Josh Frankel, a former walk-on who was pushed into duty last fall when then-starter Nathan Villegas went down with an injury. Frankel doesn't like to go beyond 45 yards, but the Ducks don't seem to mind as long as he continues kicking as he did last year when he connected on 10-of-13 attempts.

The Ducks still have some questions to answer, such as who the starting safeties are going to be and who will return kickoffs, but all of that should be taken care of between now and the season opener against Nevada on Sept. 2.

That game will be a beginning to a schedule that the Ducks should have success with, although there are always those crucial make-or-break games.

The Sept. 9 game at Wisconsin will provide the Ducks with a huge challenge and even if they should lose, a hard fought game in a Big Ten environment will do a lot for their confidence.

Other important games to note will be road contests against Southern California (Oct. 14), Arizona State (Oct. 28) and Oregon State (Nov. 18). The two big home games of the year take place against UCLA (Sept. 23) and Washington (Sept. 30), and Oregon should have the advantage in those two since they will be played in the friendly confines of the green and yellow colored Autzen Stadium.

The Ducks haven't lost in 14 straight home games, dating back to October 1997 — the longest such streak in the Pac-10.

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