

# Ducks leave with loss; earn respect

By Jeff Smith  
Oregon Daily Emerald

MADISON, Wisc. — You had to respect those brave Duck fans who wore their colors proudly over here in "Mad City," Wisconsin on Sept. 9.

You see, when you're wearing an opposition's colors on a game day in Madison — as one "happy" Badger student eloquently put it — "you might as well shit on the American flag while you're at it."

Well, OK, then. But dude, does that even include the Ducks from Oregon?

"Where the hell is that place anyway?" he asked between sips of his favorite pregame beverage. "Ore-Gone huh? Well, they suck. Look guys, there's some Duck people over there!" (He and his 10 buddies or so begin to chant in unison.)

"Asshole! Asshole! Asshole!" When they finally finished their chant, the student yelled out, "If those Ducks can even hang with my Badgers, I might give them props. But seriously, man, it ain't gonna happen. The Ducks?? No way."

With that, the challenge was on for the Duck football team to enter Camp Randall Stadium and try to upset the fifth-ranked team in the nation.

The Ducks would have to do it playing in front of 78,000-plus die-hard Badger fans — besides, of course, those few hundred scattered Ducks in attendance.

And as we all know, it was a classic back-and-forth battle between two determined football teams, with the Ducks barely coming up on the short end of the stick, losing 27-23.

But even though it may still be hard to think about a defeat such as that, realize this: The Ducks traveled to the home of the fifth-ranked team in the nation, outplayed the Badgers and despite the loss, came away with the belief that if they can just eliminate certain mistakes, then anybody is beatable.

The Ducks truly became a team over here in Madison. All summer they have been training together, working-out together and hanging-out together. During fall camp, the entire team stayed at the University Inn for further bonding experiences.

And while summer and fall workouts created some personal relationships, it takes a game such as Wisconsin, for a team to be created.

You won't find the emotion, the heartache, the tears and the suffering after just a regular non-conference game, or even some Pac-10 games. Yet, there was Joey Harrington, having trouble speaking because the magnitude of the loss was too unbearable at first.

There was Jason Nikolao, who was wiping off wetness from his cheeks, while he talked of this great bond that he has with his teammates.

"I think that's what makes this so hard," Nikolao said. "These are the people that we go to battle with every day and you really want to succeed together. When Matt Smith intercepted that pass and ran it back, I was so thrilled because not only was that my teammate, but that was my friend who just scored."

Some may question how a close loss that was within Oregon's grasp can be considered a team-building type game, but usually it takes a game like this to wake people up and show them that they're not going to be playing the Nevadas and Idahos week in and week out.

A close loss early in the season could especially be beneficial to Oregon because it hadn't experienced a crushing defeat since early last year.

It shows them that they are indeed, beatable, but that if they play the game up to their potential, then they very well could be unbeatable.

Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti strongly believes in games such as these, where the atmosphere and the energy force you to play the game at another level. Bellotti knows his team could have been more crisp, but considering the circumstances, he finds many positives out of the loss.

"I learned we need to take care of business and take care of the little things," he said. "They have tremendous character and heart. If we can couple that kind of intensity and that kind of commitment with better execution, then there is no team that can beat us."

Pretty strong words from coach, but he wasn't the only person who came away impressed with the Ducks.

Just as the final horn sounded to signal the end of the game, Oregon players casually grabbed some of their stuff and walked toward a tunnel to the locker room. As they did that, a crazy group of Wisconsin fans rushed to the tunnel, where I was certain there would be something thrown and plenty of obscenities tossed around.

Instead, though, the Badger fans stood up straight and just clapped their hands in roaring approval of the Ducks' play.

"Great game Ducks!" "You had us on the edge of our seats."

"We wish you the best for the rest of the season."

It was amazing. These Badger fans, who were ripping into the Ducks in the beginning of the afternoon, were left bobbing their heads in appreciation for a team they knew nothing about before the game.

Oregon came into the Wisconsin game in search of respect from the national media, but without realizing it, the Ducks turned into a solid team, and at least earned the respect of those dressed in red and white.



Jeff Smith



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