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Matchup promises emotion, revenge

Last Saturday, during the middle of the second quarter, Joey Harrington reached the sidelines after engineering yet another scoring drive in the Oregon rout over Idaho. He sat down on a bench to catch his breath, and glanced at the Autzen Stadium scoreboard. What he saw was: UCLA-23 Michigan-20. And his reaction to this?



Pure delight. He clapped his hands and said, "Yeah! I'm glad they won!" It was odd to see Harrington, who loves his school, cheer on the rival Bruins with such passion, but as Harrington said, the more the other Pacific-10 Conference schools win, the better. "Yeah, it's weird cheering for UCLA and Washington, but we want them to be as highly ranked as possible when they come into

town," Harrington said. Well UCLA certainly did its part and will carry that mighty No. 6 ranking into Autzen Stadium on Saturday at 12:30 p.m.

Any Pacific-10 Conference game is huge. Especially when it's your opener. Especially when your opponent is in the Top-10. Especially when it's on national television. And especially when ESPN decides to come to town to shoot its popular "College GameDay" show.

But when you shove all of those above considerations aside, there is only one major reason why this Saturday's game is so huge for the Ducks: Because it's against UCLA.

It doesn't matter what television networks are in town, or whether the teams are ranked or not, or even whether it's at home or away. The fact that it's the Ducks versus the Bruins takes precedent over all else.

This group of Ducks has revenge on their minds. No current Oregon football player has ever beaten the Bruins, making this Saturday's affair all the more important.

"Hey, we owe them for the last three years," Harrington said. "Number one, for that loss at Autzen, number two for that overtime killer in Pasadena and number three, for last year's loss at the one-foot line."

Let's go over Harrington's three points one by one.

His first point refers to the last time the Ducks lost at home. Remember that game? Probably not, because it happened on Oct. 11, 1997. Since then, there have been 16 straight home wins for Oregon.

But let's briefly refresh the memory of Oregon's last loss. The Ducks jumped out to a 21-10 early first quarter lead. Life was good, until the Bruins bounced back and overtook the 27-24 lead and held on for the 39-31 win, sending the Ducks to a 1-3 Pac-10 record at that time.

Then there was the game at UCLA on Oct. 17, 1998, the game that Harrington referred to as that "overtime killer." And oh man, if you had any kind of a pulse in your body, you had to be enthralled with this game.

It was the showdown between the No. 2 UCLA Bruins and the No. 11 Oregon Ducks. ESPN's "College GameDay" preview show was in Pasadena making its first ever West Coast appearance, and the eyes of the nation would be watching the game on ABC.

For the many who watched, they were rewarded with a back-and-forth, may-the-best-team-win affair that left fans breathless and a certain UCLA quarterback puking his guts out in between plays. (A moment of sickness for Cade McNown that was perfectly captured by a Sports Illustrated photographer and blown up in a two-page spread.)

In the waning moments of that game, Oregon quarterback Akili Smith found wide receiver Damon Griffen in the end zone with 22 seconds left to tie the game up at 38, and presumably send it to overtime. But a McNown-led UCLA offense marched down the field and set up its All-American kicker, Chris Sailer, with a chip shot 21-yard field goal for the win.

A chip shot that sailed right, forcing the drama to continue.

Unfortunately for Oregon, however, the Bruin defense stuffed the Ducks, and held on for the 41-38 overtime win. UCLA went on to the Rose Bowl that year while Oregon was sent to Honolulu, Hawaii, for the Aloha Bowl.

And finally, there was last year, and again the stage was the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

For last year's seniors, this was their final chance at payback. Some of those seniors were fresh-faced redshirt freshmen on Sept. 16, 1995 — the last time Oregon beat UCLA.

In the game, Oregon jumped out to a 10-3 lead, but then inexplicably gave up 31 unanswered points that seemed to put the game away.

Oregon entered the fourth quarter down 34-10, looking for any sort of spark. It found it in the form of linebacker Matt Smith's 81-yard interception return for a touchdown.

In the ensuing 3 and a half frantic minutes, Oregon put 13 points on the board to cut the margin to 34-29. The score stayed that way until Oregon took the ball on its own 11-yard line with a mere 1:16 minutes left.

The Ducks needed 89 yards to win, but as many sadly recall, they would only get 88. With four seconds left, quarterback A.J. Feeley found Marshaun Tucker just in front of the end zone. Tucker pulled in the bullet, got drilled by a Bruin defender, and fell one agonizing foot short of the goal as time expired.

"We gave it all at the end — we could have come back and won the game," said then-freshman receiver Keenan Howry following that game. "If we weren't a couple inches short, we would be celebrating right now."

Which brings us to the present. The point of sharing the dramatic details of the last three meetings between these teams is to bring people up to speed with the emotion involved in these Bruin-Duck games.

Some of the seniors leading Oregon onto the field on Saturday were freshmen the last time they lost at Autzen, and have experienced first hand the heartache of Bruin defeat each year that followed.

And now, all that's left for the seniors is this game.

"Obviously, we've got a lot of emotion involved in this game from what has happened in the past, and we're going to be mentally and physically ready," said Tucker, who is a Chula Vista, Calif., native. "We're going to go out there and break that trend of losing to these guys, and play our hearts out. It's going to be a wild environment out there at Autzen."

Another interesting element to the game is the motivation and inspiration for each team. Obviously, for the Ducks it is the opportunity to finally beat the Bruins, beat a top-10 team in the process and keep its home winning streak alive.

The sixth-ranked Bruins, however, are feeding off the fact that the betting line on this game has the unranked Ducks as the favorites to win.

In fact, the Bruins started the week as the one-point underdogs, then the line moved to 2 and a half.

"I guess it doesn't take a genius to [set the odds]," Bruin linebacker Robert Thomas told the L.A. Daily News. "They beat Nevada and Idaho, and we've beaten Michigan and Alabama. I think people will figure it out."

UCLA head coach Bob Toledo was asked during his weekly conference call whether he will use the "no respect" line as motivation. Toledo sighed, let out a slight laugh and said: "Let's just say I've mentioned it to them."

Ha, it's more like he's blown up the betting numbers in size 250 font and taped them on his players' lockers.


It's just another interesting footnote that makes for great college football theater.

Two teams. One mission. What more needs to be said?

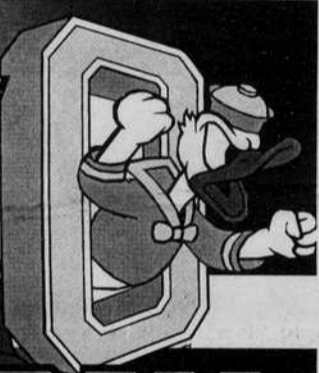
Probably a lot more, so I'll let ESPN's GameDay crew handle the rest of the hype on their Saturday morning show, and leave you with four simple words from Marshaun Tucker.

"Bring on the Bruins," he said with a smile.

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