

Defense winning, not taking names

■ The 2000 version of the Oregon defense has emerged as one of the best ever, statistically better than 1994's famous Gang Green

By Peter Hockaday
Oregon Daily Emerald

Call them the Mallard Curtain. Call them Green Gladiators, the Green Machine, the Quack Attack or even the Flock of Pain.

By whatever name you call them, there's no doubt this Oregon defense is one of the best you've ever seen. This Ducks defense is first in the Pacific-10 Conference, 18th in the country and unbelievable in Autzen Stadium.

But the defense remains a mystery. How did defensive coordinator Nick Aliotti make so much out of a defense that was supposed to be the team's weak link going into the season?

"We're like a family," junior defensive end Saul Patu said. "The biggest thing in a family is communication. We communicate a lot."

"They're just a bunch of guys playing together as a unit," Aliotti said.

This defense wasn't supposed to be this good. They lost linebackers Peter Sirmon and Dietrich Moore to graduation. Free safety Brandon McLemore and tackle Caleb Smith also flew the coop. Michael Fletcher, a rover and one of the most exciting players on the defense, also graduated.

But Oregon filled those holes with Patu and senior Jason Nikolao on the defensive line, juniors Rashad Bauman and Steve Smith at the corners and senior Matt Smith at linebacker.

"We're very comfortable with our assignments," Nikolao said. "We're mixing up schemes, confusing the other team."

That description might conjure up images of another Oregon defense: The celebrated "Gang Green" team that put the Ducks in the Rose Bowl in 1994. But Gang Green, compared to this year's Oregon defense, might be a little overrated.

The 1994 Ducks gave up 121.3 rushing yards per game, slightly below this defense's 124.8 rushing yards per game. Where Gang Green gave up 205.2 passing yards per game, this season's version is giving up just 164.3 aerial yards per game, good enough for 12th in the nation in passing defense. And in the ultimate test, the 1994 defense gave up 19.2 points per game, while the 2000 Ducks are giving up a mere 15.0 points per game.

The statistics do not lie. This year's Oregon defense has a plus-six turnover ratio, has given up the least amount of first downs in the Pac-10 and has only let opponents convert 26 percent of their third downs.

Top 10 Defensive Nicknames (and who came up with them)

1. Green legs and ... BAM! (Lara Nessel)
2. Flock of Pain (Matt O'Neill)
3. Mean Green Machine (George Alvergue)
4. Mallard Malice (Jason Krantz)
5. Green Reign (Brian Johnson)
6. The Feathered Fence (Ryan Long)
7. Green "Ache"ers (Adam Quentin Gould)
8. Mallard Curtain (Pete Hunt)
9. Aliotti's Coyotes (Dave Taube)
10. The Green (Phil) Knights (Al Johnson)

*Others receiving votes: Quacker-backer Quarterbacker Smacker Pack, Green Horde, Demo Ducks, Soilent Green, The Green Pile, Green Gladiators, B's Swarm, Looney D

Perhaps the most notable improvement in Oregon's defense has come from its secondary. Bauman and Smith have been amazing at the corners, while Ryan Mitchell and Rasuli Webster have been a force at rover and safety, respectively. Bauman and Smith have each broken up nine passes — good enough for third in the Pac-10 — and Bauman has two interceptions on the season.

"They're doing well," Aliotti said about his secondary. "But I think they could play better."

The never-satisfied Aliotti must not realize the Ducks are first in the Pac-10 in pass defense. Nikolao sees that improvement.

"Our cornerbacks are playing like they're the best cornerbacks in the nation right now," said Nikolao. "They're great athletes."

That's not to say that Nikolao and the rest of the defensive line haven't done their job, either. The line held UCLA to negative-nine rushing yards and allowed Washington's Marques Tuiasosopo only 10 rushing yards.

But the defensive line has slipped up once or twice, and Patu is the first to admit it. The Ducks gave up three big touchdown runs to Southern California's Sultan McCullough and Wisconsin's Michael Bennett that totaled 193 yards and 18 points.

"[McCullough's] run was a mental mistake," Patu said. "He's really not that good. He's all right, but we made him look better than he was. We did that with Bennett, too."

Maybe we should call this the Defense That Never Sleeps, or the Unsatisfied Defense.

But whatever you do, please don't call them Gang Green II.

Memoirs of a Florida snob: the trek to Autzen



JACK ATTACK

JACK CLIFFORD

The Oregon football team has been slowly building a winning tradition through the past four years, and I've been a loser: Saturday's game against Arizona will be my first time inside

of Autzen Stadium, despite living in Eugene since June 1996.

The reason isn't a lack of interest in football; I consider myself well-informed about the sport. OK, so my pathetic 12-16 record in the weekly Emerald Pac-10 picks column doesn't exactly back up that claim.

No, the basis for my reluctance to watch the Ducks in person is more sinister: snobbery.

You see, I spent many years in Tallahassee, Fla., before heading west. Any sports fan with a hint of

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