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QBs make history

■ Oregon's Joey Harrington may join an elite group of quarterbacks who have led the Ducks to the Rose Bowl

By George Beres for the Emerald

Few schools have a pantheon of quarterbacks whose reputations can match that of the field generals wearing the green and gold of Oregon.

The names roll off the tongues of longtime observers of the game, starting with Norm Van Brocklin, Dan Fouts and Bob Berry. Their images grew ever-larger through their exploits in the professional game.

Just as deeply ingrained in Oregon football lore are the exploits of three who never have worn a pro uniform, but who earned collegiate stardom during seasons when the Ducks were the pride of the West Coast.

One — this year's passing triggerman, Joey Harrington — has a great shot of making it to the pros, and he's only a junior. The other two — Danny O'Neil and Jack Crabtree — won headlines for performances in Oregon's last two Rose Bowl games, which brilliantly concluded playing careers for both.

"Jack was a hard-nosed kid when quarterbacks could not be protected because they had to play defense in the pre-plateau era," said Len Casanova, who coached the 1958 Rose Bowl team. "His head always was in the game — never more so than when we were huge underdogs to Ohio State in the 1958 Rose Bowl."

The mass media, especially the reporters in Los Angeles, called the game a mismatch.

"The Los Angeles writers gave us no chance whatsoever," said Casanova. "It's one of the things that got us a little fired up. We were out to prove we had ability. I'll tell you, the kids showed it. They out-gutted everybody."

The Ducks kept the Buckeyes off-balance with the pass. Of Crabtree's 17 passes, 10 were caught by tight end Ron Stover for a Rose Bowl record that lasted many years.

"I threw what was considered a lot of passes in a Rose Bowl game," Crabtree said. "Compared to today, that was a small number. ..."

For his performance in a game the Ducks lost, 10-7, Crabtree received an award seldom given to a player on the losing team: player of the game.

Thirty-seven years passed before the Ducks returned to the Rose Bowl,

and they got there on the throwing arm of quarterback O'Neil. It was the era of specialization, which was a break for Danny, whose slim frame was ill-suited to play defense. But his bulls-eye arm kept Oregon in the game against powerful Penn State.

O'Neil passed for a Rose Bowl record of 456 yards, though Penn State won a high-scoring battle, 38-20.

Once again, Oregon had to absorb the pre-game barbs of Los Angeles writers. Syndicated columnist Jim Murray favored Penn State in a game he said "should be covered by the Marquis de Sade." A clipping of his article was taped to the Oregon dressing room bulletin board. When an Oregon partisan asked, "What will you write when we win, wise guy?" Murray answered, "I dunno. Maybe take credit."

In the press box, Penn State sports information director Budd Thalman told me, "I've never seen a passing performance to equal that of O'Neil out here today."

That was high praise from a man who in his early days at the Naval Academy publicized the great Roger Staubach, later the star of the Dallas Cowboys. His Penn State quarterback against the Ducks, Kerry Collins, was good enough to be a finalist for the Heisman Trophy. But his play in the Rose Bowl was overshadowed by Oregon's O'Neil.

If the Ducks can hold onto first place this season, the Rose Bowl quarterbacking mantle will fall on Harrington. A return to Pasadena is unlikely to have L.A. writers as cynical as in the past. They were subdued after the Ducks whipped Southern Cal, 28-17, on Saturday. They also saw one of the finer passing efforts in the history of the L.A. Coliseum as Joey passed for all four Oregon touchdowns, completing 28 of 42 passes for 382 yards.

Even though Casanova, 96, is the patriarch of all surviving big-time football coaches, he can claim some credit for recruiting Harrington to Oregon. Harrington, a Portland native, is the son of a man who played football for Casanova at Oregon.

"The day Joey was born," Casanova said, "I sent a note to his dad with a sample letter-of-intent form. I wanted to be sure he had his boy earmarked for Oregon."

George Beres was Oregon sports information director from 1976 to 1982. He is the author of the 1995 Rose Bowl book, "The Year of the Duck." He can be reached at gberes@oregon.uoregon.edu.

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