

# Pool man turned tailback ready for Ducks

■ Walk-on tailback Tom Pace continues to improve and makes his starting debut against the Ducks Saturday

By Scott Pesznecker  
Oregon Daily Emerald

Nobody involved with Arizona State athletics knew what to expect when a 5-foot-10, 195-pound professional swimming pool cleaner walked on to the football team.

No scouting report. No starting experience. No first-hand knowledge of Pacific-10 Conference intensity.

Tom Pace, born and raised in Mesa, Ariz., figured he'd spend his first year in a Sun Devil uniform, red-shirting it on the sideline.

No way. Following a strong performance in Arizona State's 23-20 win against Washington State last Saturday, Pace cracked his team's starting lineup at tailback and makes his starting debut against Oregon this weekend.

"I didn't expect to have any playing time at all, really," Pace said. "This makes me feel like the coaches have confidence in me, and it makes me feel like I'm comfortable in what I'm doing."

"Starting is a little more nerve-wracking; all that weight is on your shoulders."

Pace meandered into the Sun Devils' depth chart as the team's tailback supply was suffering early in the season. Starter Delvon Flowers went down with a season-ending knee injury, J.R. Peroulis quit the team because of a lack of playing time and Davaren Hightower came down with Valley Fever.

With Hightower bound to recov-

er, Arizona State head coach Bruce Snyder figured Pace would reach no higher than third on the depth chart.

However, it didn't take long for Pace to catch his coach's eye. He made his Sun Devil debut against Utah State Sept. 23, rushing 65 yards on 16 carries en route to a 44-20 win.

"We didn't evaluate him, and when he was coming out of high school, we didn't recruit him," Snyder said. "I had no idea what we'd get."

"It was fun, but I was pretty nervous because I'd never been on a field like that before," Pace said, recalling the Utah State game. "I was also out of shape because I walked on three weeks late."

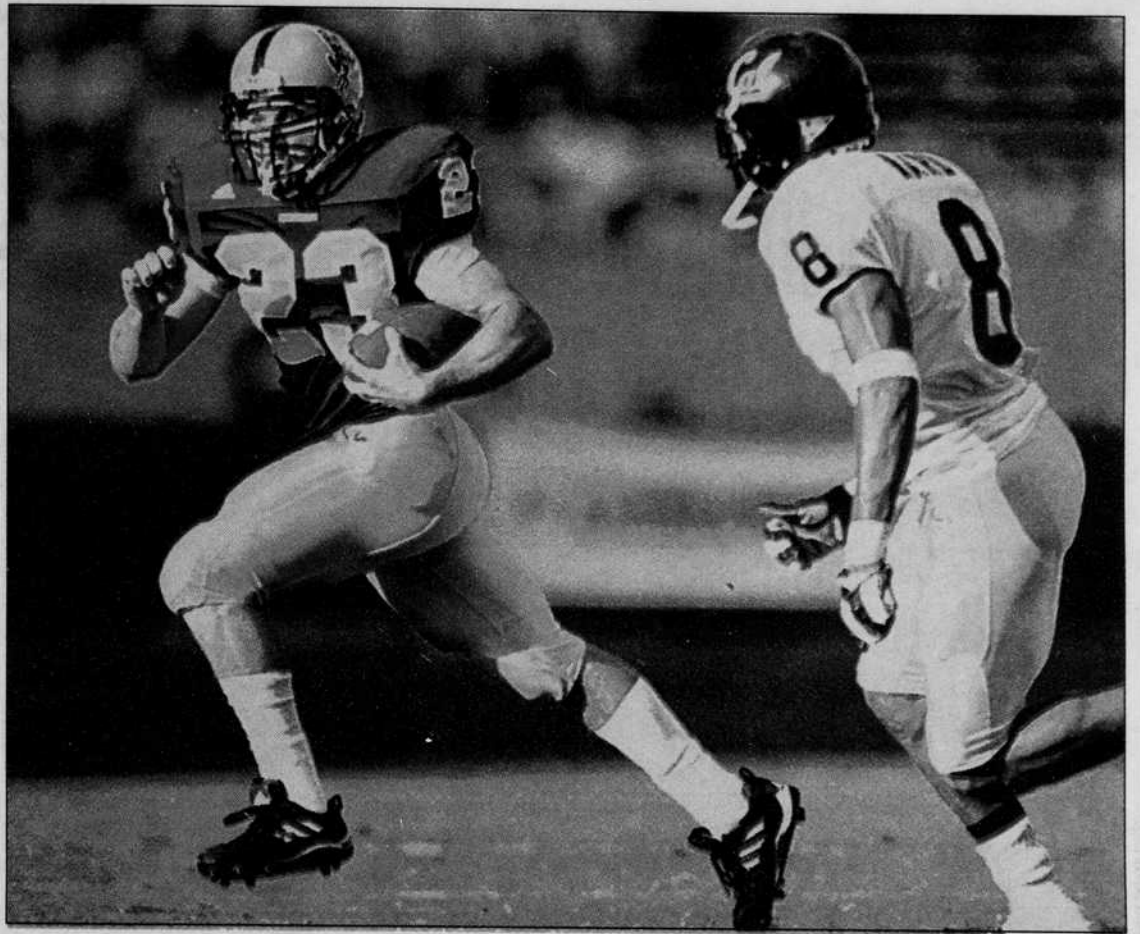
Nevertheless, Pace's efforts continued to turn heads. The junior had a career day against California Oct. 7, rushing for 93 yards and a touchdown in 17 carries.

Pace secured his starting role last Saturday when he crossed the single-game century mark in yardage for the first time as a Sun Devil. He amassed 103 yards in 26 carries at Washington State, including some clutch plays in the Devils' overtime drive.

"That little sucker is pretty good," Snyder said. "He squirms around."

Pace spent his freshman year playing for Idaho as a full-time kick returner and part-time tailback. He took a two-year leave from school to go on a mission for his faith, then returned to the state of Idaho and earned an Associate Arts degree from Ricks College.

Eager to resume his NCAA football career, Pace followed his wife to Los Angeles. He planned to become a UCLA Bruin, and she planned to pur-



Tailback Tom Pace, who cleans swimming pools for extra money, rushes for some of his 93 yards against California on Oct. 7.

Courtesy of Arizona State media services

sue a career in modeling.

But Pace didn't have enough credits to enroll at UCLA, so he returned to Mesa and began studying at Arizona State. Everything else has fallen into place.

"I'm happy with the way it's worked out," said Pace.

Perhaps the walk-on's emergence on the field couldn't have come at a better time. The Ducks have the third-best rush defense in the Pac-10, allowing opponents just 109.4 yards per game.

Penetrating Oregon's defensive line should be more difficult than

cleaning swimming pools, which Pace still does before football practice to make some extra money.

But he's up to the challenge of swimming with the Ducks.

"I feel like all I can do is my best," Pace said. "Hopefully that's good enough."



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