

All in all, he's just another Oregon fan in the crowd



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PULLMAN, Wash. — The sight was so familiar and treated with such ease, that it made you forget for a second how significant it was.

Walking through the press box and into the visiting athletic director's box at Martin Stadium was a certain man decked out in Oregon attire. At first glance, he looked just like any other alumni with his white "O" hat atop his head and a hooded green jacket around his body to help keep him warm in the cold air.

But when you looked closer, you noticed it was none other than Nike CEO Phil Knight.

Knight was in Pullman, Wash., Saturday to cheer on the Ducks in their 27-24 overtime victory over Washington State. It was the first

Oregon game that Knight has attended since his fateful decision to "cut ties" with his beloved alma mater April 23 after it joined the Worker Rights Consortium.

His presence came on the heels of the strong rumors surrounding the University that its arrangement with the WRC was nearing an end. He was rumored to be in attendance last week in Tempe, Ariz., but did not make the trip. There he was Saturday, however, and you had to believe that the whole WRC-Knight fiasco was finally going to be put behind us.

You know it had to be killing him this season not to be able to watch his Ducks play. After all, this was a guy who regularly attended practices and flew to all of the Oregon road games. He has a personal relationship with many of the Duck players, who all will tell you how much they've missed him.

But on this day, the family was reunited. Knight was back as a fan. And that's all that matters to the Ducks right now.

"I was just glad that he was back

to enjoy the program that he loves," Oregon athletic director Bill Moos said. "He's got such tremendous passion for Oregon and I know this has all been hard on him. But he was here today, and he was thrilled with the win."

"It was nice to see a good smile on his face."

Indeed, that was genuine emotion after the game as Knight was following the Oregon players into the locker room.

"Was that fun or what?" said Knight, making up for his time lost away from the team.

Knight hugged players. He hugged fans. Heck, he even hugged a reporter.

He was back in the mix.

"He's a true fan," fullback Josh Line said. "You look at the guy and say, 'He's a billionaire and he has so much.' But really, he's just a true Oregon fan who knows all these things about every person on the team — even me, and I'm no one special. He's out there congratulating me."

Line then pauses, collects his thoughts and says:

"I'm just going to be real with you. We rely on him. He's a great guy."

Oregon quarterback Joey Harrington also was excited to see Knight and said that the team was understanding of Knight's actions and that "he has to stand up for what he believes."

Harrington eluded to the fact that he believes the "situation" is coming to a close.

"Oh I'm sure things are being taken care of away from our football team," Harrington said. "They'll take care of it. But there was no mending that needed to be done between [the players and Knight]."

Where all of this will go from here is anybody's guess. This doesn't automatically mean that Knight will fork over his \$30 million dollars for the Autzen expansion, but it is a huge step in that direction.

It also is another important step for Oregon football in a year that has survived so many close calls in the Pacific-10 Conference to maintain a top-10 ranking. Things just seem to be clicking lately for these

Ducks, and Knight is the latest example of that.

"Well, it's obviously great for our program," said Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti, referring to Knight. "Phil lends a presence that gives us national recognition and it's nice to have him back. And whether he ever pledges money or not, it doesn't matter. It's nice that he can indulge his passion and be around our players."

This was no cameo appearance for Knight. He confirmed that he will be at the California game next Saturday at Autzen Stadium, with the Civil War most likely to follow.

When stopped briefly and asked his thoughts on the game, Knight said: "Fabulous. Absolutely fabulous."

He then scurried off into the sea of green and yellow, where, after his first couple of steps he was tough to distinguish, as he was just another celebrating duck fan in the crowd.

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