

UO seniors honored before last home game



Senior defensive ends Jason Nikolao (on top) and Saul Patu team up to sack California quarterback Kyle Boller in their last game at Autzen Stadium.

■ A pre-game ceremony paid tribute to 27 seniors before their final game at Autzen

By Scott Pesznecker
Oregon Daily Emerald

The band and cheerleaders lined up near Autzen Stadium's north tunnel as they usually do before any Oregon football game, but before Saturday's matchup, they were also joined by most of the football team.

On DuckVision, Kenny Wheaton's "pick" faded not into a group of players getting pumped up in the tunnel, but of a handful of focused Ducks who were about to take the home field for the last time in an Oregon uniform.

Saturday's game was the last game at Autzen for 27 Ducks. One by one, they walked into the stadium and were greeted by loud cheers from their fans.

The crowd wildly greeted quarterback A.J. Feeley, who started for Oregon last season and led the Ducks to a triple-overtime home win against Southern California. Spectators roared for place-kicker Josh Frankel, who fought through a field-goal drought this season to kick the game-winner against Washington State. And the sound of "TU!" echoed through the cold afternoon air as defensive end Saul Patu emerged from the tunnel.

"I'm happy to have the game over, but at the same time, it's over," offensive tackle Lee Gundy said. "You'll never get the chance to play here again, and unfortunately, that's a big loss."

By the game's end, the seniors tasted victory yet again. Several of the Ducks' seniors, including defensive end Jason Nikolao, played minutes in all of Oregon's 20 consecutive home wins — a winning streak bested only by Florida State.

"It was a great game to go out of Autzen," Nikolao said. "I've played in more closer games here in Autzen than I have blowouts, but this was a close one, and it's been the story of my life — close games at Autzen."

"This is the greatest place to play in the world. I love the fans, I love Eugene — I'm going to miss it very much."

Although the Ducks beat California, they trailed at halftime for only the second time this season. Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti didn't blame Oregon's slow start to teammates' emotions running high.

"We were as emotionally ready in the locker room as we've ever been," Bellotti said. "Sometimes with the senior deal, some of the kids get very emotional or too emotional. But I think we were ready to play."

20th win

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be complete until we play a good, physical football game next week.

"I guarantee you both of these teams are going to be fired up and ready to hit somebody."

Several Ducks said they had evening plans to watch the Beavers play Arizona in Tucson, Ariz., that night because an Oregon State loss would have meant a certain Rose Bowl berth for Oregon.

Turns out that the Beavers routed the Wildcats, 33-9, and one might think that if any Oregon State players were watching the Ducks play California, they may not have been

as impressed.

Oregon, perhaps swayed by an emotional ceremony to honor the team's departing seniors minutes before kickoff, wasn't in synch during the first half of play.

Harrington completed just 11 of 25 passes in the opening 30 minutes of the game, including one interception, and Oregon committed four penalties for a loss of 44 yards.

Despite California's 7-6 halftime lead, the Ducks' offense was on the field for almost six minutes longer than Cal's, had 10 first downs to the Bears' five, had twice as many rushing yards and 33 more passing yards.

Fortunately for Oregon, its offense settled down in the second

half. Harrington was true on his first eight passes, and dived into the end zone from two yards out with 10:25 left in the third, giving Oregon a 12-7 lead. He finished with 252 yards passing.

Following a spectacular, 87-yard catch-and-run touchdown by California receiver Geoff McArthur, the Ducks took control of the game for good in the fourth quarter after Harrington passed 29 yards to Keenan Howry in the end zone. Harrington rushed one yard for another touchdown with five minutes left to seal the win.

"I was very pleased that the kids responded to the challenge from halftime, and clearly this was a little bit more pleasurable at the end than

some of the games we've had lately," Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said. "Although it was close, I did expect it would be a hard-fought game."

The Ducks set the tone for their dismal first half with a poor opening drive. A false start set Oregon back to its 23-yard line, tailback Maurice Morris was stopped for a loss of two and Harrington was sacked for a loss of 13. One incomplete pass later and Kurtis Doerr was punting, but a non-contact interference call put Cal's offense on Oregon's 27-yard line.

California quarterback Kyle Boller completed a 26-yard pass to receiver Phillip Pipersburg, and tailback Joe Igber dived in for the

early touchdown on the second play of the drive.

The Golden Bears lost to Oregon State last Saturday, even though Beaver tailback Ken Simonton missed most of the second half with a hamstring injury. After losing at Autzen Stadium — the 20th straight time an opponent has done so — all but one Golden Bear remained indifferent as to which team in the state of Oregon was best.

"Oregon State executes way better than Oregon did today," California punter Nick Harris told The Register-Guard. "Oregon may have played better in the past, but right now Oregon State looks like the best team in the Pac-10."

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