

Oregon State flies high after years of futility

■ Head coach Dennis Erickson has guided the Oregon State football program to unprecedented success

By Robbie McCallum
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You have to go back a long way to find an Oregon State football team that has been as successful as the 2000 squad.

Beaver boosters have waited 28 years for a team this good. Before 1999, Oregon State hadn't had a winning season since 1970. It was almost three decades of futility, a staggering stretch of seasons in which the Beavers went to no bowl games, finished no higher than sixth in the Pacific-10 Conference and won no more than four games in a season.

Six different head coaches came to Corvallis from 1965 until 1999. Most were either fired or quit in frustration, all with losing records.

The Beavers were the Pac-10's doormat, finishing dead last a mind-boggling 14 times.

Enter Dennis Erickson. Erickson came to Corvallis after an unsuccessful stint with the NFL's Seattle Seahawks. Still, the Northwest native sported a 113-40-1 career college record and two national championships while at Miami, Fla. But more importantly, he had a reputation for turning college football programs around.

Erickson's only losing season as a college coach came in 1987, his first year at Washington State. The following season, Erickson guided the Cougars to a 9-3 season and a Holiday Bowl berth.

Although he was only the interim coach at Wyoming in 1986, Erickson built the Cowboy program

into a Western Athletic Conference contender for years to come.

Erickson lost only nine games at Miami while guiding the Hurricanes to bowl games in all six of his years as head coach.

So it's no surprise that Erickson has accomplished what he has at Oregon State. The 29-year head-coaching veteran inherited a 5-6 team and transformed it into a 7-4 team that went to the 1999 Oahu Bowl. The bowl appearance was Oregon State's first in more than 30 years. Erickson accomplished the impossible: Winning in Corvallis.

The building continues as Oregon State finds itself at 9-1 with a No. 8 national ranking and a shot at the Rose Bowl — or, at worst, the Holiday, Sun or Aloha bowls.

On Oct. 21, Oregon State defeated UCLA 44-38 to earn its sixth win of the season, clinching a winning season for the second straight year. It also meant that the Beavers will go to a bowl game — the first time that Oregon State will go to back-to-back bowl games.

Erickson has won more games in two seasons at Oregon State than former head coaches Craig Fertig, Joe Avezzano, Dave Kragthorpe and Jerry Pettibone did in their entire careers.

Oregon State has succeeded this year with an exciting offense, led by quarterback Jonathan Smith and tailback Ken Simonton, and the conference's top defense.

Aside from Oregon State's stars — Smith and Simonton — the

Beavers have an army of role players who complement the Beaver offense.

Although he is second on the depth chart, tailback Patrick McCall does more than spell Simonton on a couple of downs. McCall is a major part of the Oregon State offense and ranks ninth in the Pac-10 in yards per game.

"I can tell you how much [McCall] helped the team this year," Simonton said. "Fresh legs are always a must. If you've got them, that's a problem for a tired defense. We'll try and use that to our advantage."

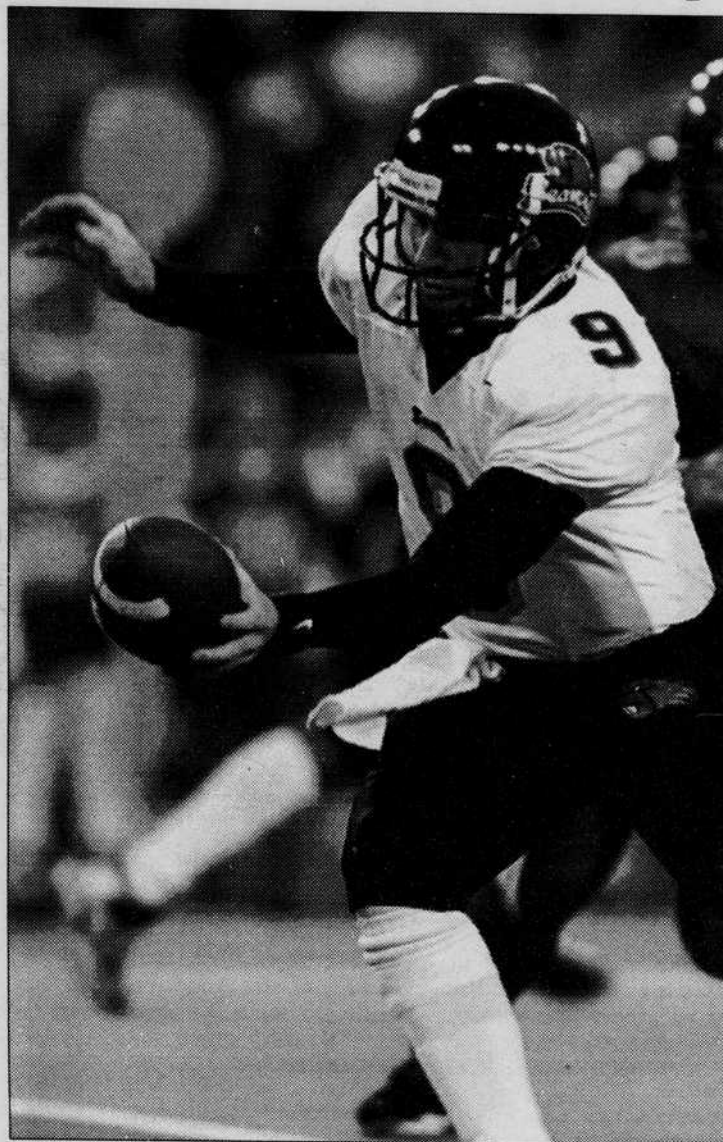
Wide receiver T.J. Houshmandzadeh is one of Smith's favorite targets downfield. The senior averages 15.9 yards per reception, while fellow wide receiver Chad Johnson has also caught the ball well this season.

Senior Ricky Walker is one of Oregon State's options on offense, defense and special teams.

"I think Oregon State is playing as well as any football team in this conference," Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said. "I think the two best teams in the conference, no question, are playing in Corvallis this Saturday."

Prior to the Dennis Erickson era of Oregon State football, the Civil War matchup meant bragging rights in the state, maybe a 4-7 season instead of a 3-8 season, and sometimes it even meant who would climb one game out of the Pac-10 cellar.

Now, the Civil War is for the big time — a berth in the 2001 Rose Bowl. It would be the Beavers' first trip to Pasadena since 1965.



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Beaver quarterback Jonathan Smith directs a big-play pass offense and a deep, fierce running game.

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