

War of words

■ Oregon cornerback Rashad Bauman missed all of last season, but has rebounded this fall to become one of the leaders of the defense

By Jeff Smith
Oregon Daily Emerald

He has the advantage before the game even begins.

He gets in the minds of his opponents.

His reputation precedes him.

And he loves every bit of it.

Oregon junior cornerback Rashad Bauman knows that he is labeled as one of the "loudmouths" of the Pacific-10 Conference, but he also knows that he can back up that talk with his play.

"I'm always confident when I'm out there on the field," Bauman said. "Confidence is a good thing. Bring it on."

Bauman thrives on lining up against a team's top receiver and matching him stride for stride — and sometimes word for word. He wants the quarterback to challenge him and throw in his direction. And so too do Bauman's teammates.

"I don't know why quarterbacks keep thinking they can throw on him," linebacker Michael Callier said. "He's one of the top corners in the game."

He was also a top corner who the Ducks sorely missed last year. Bauman was forced to sit out the entire 1999 season with an injured right knee that he suffered during a routine drill that April.

At the time, he was coming off a sophomore campaign in which he led the team in passes broken up and started in 23 straight games. But then, during a spring practice drill, Bauman planted his right leg to switch directions with a receiver. The knee gave out and he screamed in pain as he fell to the ground.

The fists that Bauman pounded on the grass at the time were a sign of his pure frustration because he knew that the '99 season was his time to shine.

"It's a worst nightmare kind of thing ... a very difficult loss. It's not good when you see a leader go down," head coach Mike Bellotti said at the time of the injury.

Bauman had surgery on the knee and did the best he could with the situation. He patiently waited for his opportunity to rise once more. And he says the time off from the game actually helped him in many respects.

"For one thing, I've been a lot more humble than I have been in the past," said Bauman, who grew up in Phoenix, Ariz. "Yeah, I wished I was out there last year and playing with the team, but this is what happened."

Bauman knew that his healthy return to the lineup this fall would be crucial in helping the Ducks shut down opposing teams' offenses. He was still coming along gingerly last spring, but then all doubts were erased in Oregon's season-opening 36-7 win against Nevada Sept. 2. Bauman got right back in his groove by breaking three passes and intercepting one.

Since then, he's gone on to intercept two more, including a 42-yard interception return for a touchdown against Washington State Nov. 4 that has given him at least one touchdown off a pick in each of his three years of action.

"I had to keep my streak alive, right?" Bauman said after the game.

Bellotti attributes much of Bauman's success to the redshirt year of '99, in which Bauman got an oppor-

tunity to see up close what the sport is all about.

"I think not being able to play last year increased his hunger a little bit and allowed him to sit back and watch things develop as a spectator or from a coaching aspect," Bellotti said.

Even if Bauman claims he is more humble than ever before, he still finds time to exchange a few jabs with his adversaries around the league. The most notable exchange on the year came with touted UCLA receiver Freddie Mitchell.

Mitchell and the Bruins entered Autzen Stadium with a No. 6 national ranking and lofty expectations on the year.

"Before that game, he said how he's going to make everyone quiet and make them pay for this and that," said Bauman, who admits that he enjoys feeding off an opponent's mental weakness. "Well, he talked that big trash, and when he came out of the stadium, he had a rude awakening."

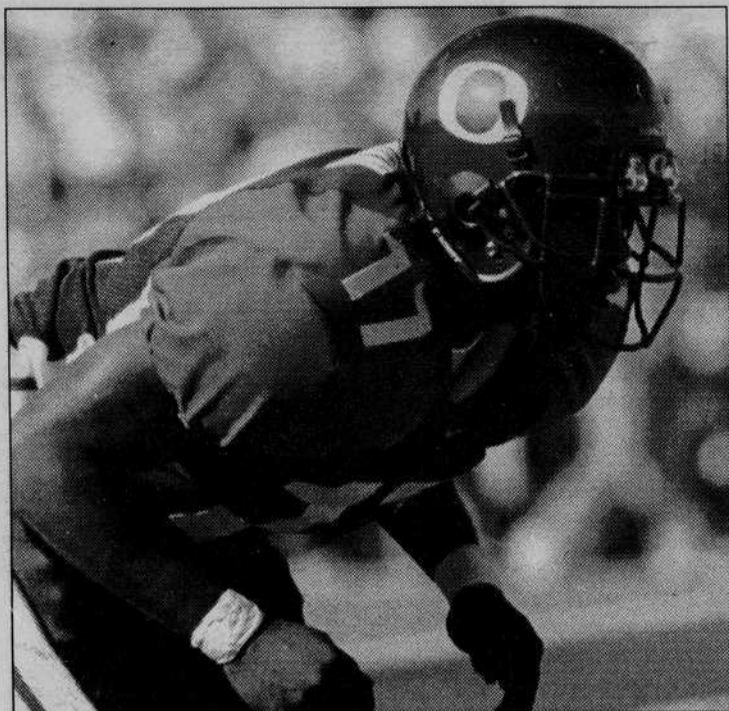
Mitchell did have eight catches for 158 yards, but he still had trouble with Bauman. After the game, Mitchell voiced his displeasure with Bauman's in-game war of words.

"He's the easiest cornerback I've played against all year," Mitchell said. "And I felt that he was so easy to beat, but he talks so much. It's so disrespectful."

Said Bauman: "To make himself feel good after that game, he had to keep his image up and talk that trash in the paper."

The person who hears the most from Bauman is his roommate and fellow Duck, Steve Smith. Smith enjoys seeing his buddy get in the heads of opponents, who usually let a few of Bauman's words affect their play.

"He's a fun guy to play with and I can hear him talking across the field," Smith said. "It's just a mind game. He



Azle Malinao-Alvarez Emerald

Oregon cornerback Rashad Bauman keeps his eyes on the receivers he's guarding. The junior is healthy again after missing all of last season with a knee injury.

gets people out of their game."

No doubt Bauman will try and get every advantage he can in Saturday's 104th Civil War game against Oregon State. He missed last season's in-state rivalry and is geared to put on a show this time around.

Bauman admitted that during his first two Civil Wars, he didn't really treat the game as that huge a deal.

"At the time, it was just like playing anybody else, but as I've gotten older, the rivalry has become thicker," Bauman said. "I pretty much don't care for the Beavers. I've started to see where the seniors are coming from when they say that by the time you leave here, you will hate this team."

That's just how opposing receivers must feel after being out-talked and out-played by a cornerback who only measures 5-foot-8 and 175 pounds.

Rashad Bauman



Year: Junior

Position:

Cornerback

Hometown:

Phoenix, Ariz.

Notable:

He missed all of last season with a knee injury, breaking a streak of 23 straight starts. He was a 1998 honorable mention all-Pac-10 pick, and in 1997, The Sporting News named him as a second-team freshman All-American. In high school, he was honored as the state of Arizona's top prep defensive back.

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