

Looking for more

■ Oregon State's star tailback, Ken Simonton, has put himself in position to become an NFL draft pick

By Robbie McCallum
Oregon Daily Emerald

With all that Oregon State tailback Ken Simonton has accomplished this season, the question arises: What is left for him to do?

The preseason All-American holds the school records for career rushing yards and all-purpose yards, and is the all-time scoring leader at 118 points. He also holds the school record for most 100-plus yard rushing games at 20.

Simonton has left his mark on the conference as well. He is fifth all-time in rushing yards at 3,875 and 10th all-time in scoring. Last weekend, Simonton became one of only six players in the conference to have rushed for more than 1,000 yards in three seasons. What is extraordinary about that feat is that Simonton is a junior — he is the only Pac-10 rusher to have gained more than 1,000 yards his freshman year.

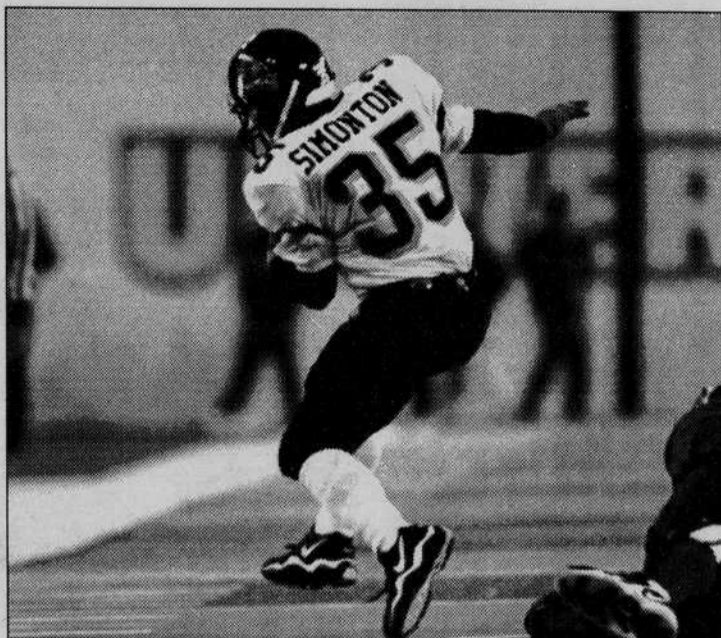
This season, the Pittsburg, Calif., native is the eighth-leading rusher in the nation and seventh in scoring. Simonton was fourth in the nation at one point before a 73-yard performance against Arizona brought his numbers down.

The 5-foot-7, 175-pound tailback is a finalist for the Doak Walker Award, the honor for the top running back in the nation, and the Football Magazine Offensive Player of the Year award. Simonton, although a dark horse, has also been lauded by many as a candidate for the Heisman Trophy.

Simonton is one of the reasons why the eighth-ranked Beavers are 9-1 on the season and in position to play in the Rose Bowl for the first time since 1965. Oregon State's turnaround from a Pac-10 doormat into a top-10 team began when Simonton and quarterback Jonathan Smith arrived in Corvallis three years ago.

Then-Oregon State head coach Mike Riley recruited Simonton out of Pittsburg High School in California to begin his rebuilding process of the Beaver program. Riley was the only Pac-10 coach to knock on Simonton's door, which was a major factor in his coming to Corvallis.

Although Riley has since left for the NFL, the foundation he laid



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Ken Simonton is dancing on the line between staying at OSU or joining the NFL.

down has helped Oregon State get where it is today. During Simonton's career in Corvallis, Oregon State has won five, seven and nine games in successive years. Simonton's statistics have grown too, from 1,028 yards as a freshman to 1,329 last year. He is on pace to record 1,545.6 yards this season.

"He's the guts of this football team," Oregon State running backs coach Dan Cozzetto said. "The things he does are unbelievable for his size. He possesses the gift of knowing how to get into the end zone. He hasn't gained all his yards by being average."

If Oregon State does play in the Rose Bowl this season and Simonton does garner one of the highly touted postseason awards, Simonton won't have much left to do at Oregon State next year.

Is the National Football League draft up next for Simonton? Who knows.

"As a businessman, I'll weigh my options," Simonton told Sports Illustrated. "I have every intention of coming back, but if [the NFL] is speaking my language..."

"If you put him through those tests the NFL scouts do, maybe he doesn't do so well," Oregon State head coach Dennis Erickson said. "But when you see him on video and coach him live, he fascinates you more every time you see him."

If Simonton stays at Oregon State for his senior year, he could risk an injury or hit a senior slump, hurting his chances as a first-round pick. But he is not a lock-in as a first-round pick this year either.

If the Beavers come up short in their quest for the Rose Bowl, Simonton would have an incentive to stay.

Another question to ask is: Would Simonton leave a senior-laden team? The Beavers lose 12 offensive and defensive starters to graduation this spring. Will Simonton be the 13th and leave Erickson with a big hole at tailback?

Simonton is shorter than what most professional scouts are looking for. His speed in the 40-yard dash is good, but not great, at 4.42 seconds.

One of Simonton's outspoken goals is to play in the NFL, but whether he plays next year or in 2002 is the question that remains to be answered.

"As fun as business can be, it'd be a little more fun if I had another zero at the end of my paycheck at the end of every month," Simonton said at the weekly Oregon State luncheon. "I still only get \$600 a month. I still have to deal with the pain, but it's fun though. It's still a business. Winning and losing — you've still got to prepare and focus the same way, so for me, you know, it's more cameras."

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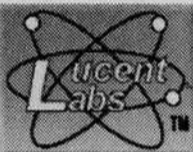
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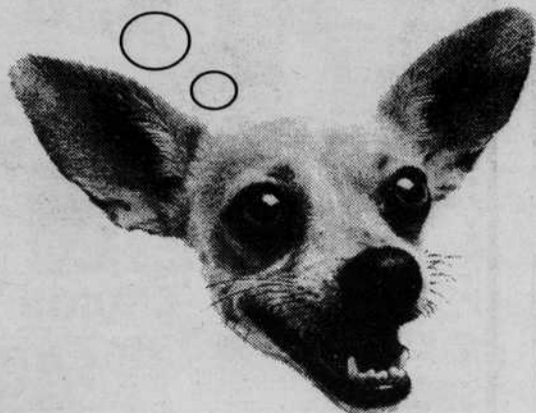
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