

Smith

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can while at Grant High in Sacramento, Calif. Oregon was one of his finalists, but the lure of 1998 national champion Tennessee was too much to resist. As a Volunteer, he went on to gain 189 yards on 31 carries as a freshman and much was expected of him before his bad decisions forced him off the team.

"Yeah, that's behind me," Smith said. "The day it happened, I left. And the next day came and I just looked forward from that day on, and continue to try to just keep all that in the past."

He came to Eugene in August and sat through the mandatory red-shirt year after transferring and participated on the Oregon scout team. Smith's role throughout last season would be to simulate the running back of the Ducks' opposition in their next game.

"Last year meant a whole lot to me because I felt like I had a chance to come out and make the defense better by just being the guy they were going against that week," Smith said. "And getting the experience to be a spectator at Autzen Stadium was unbelievable. So I know that being a player out there on the field is going to be amazing."

The surprising thing about that last statement is that he came from a Tennessee team that played in a stadium that consistently held 100,000-plus fans, while Autzen only seats around 40,000 fans.

Smith, who will be a sophomore in the fall, has clearly been caught up in the Oregon football hype and soaked up every bit of the Ducks' first ever 10-win season in 2000.

Now, it's also clear that Smith's new Duck teammates are caught up in the ever-growing Onterio Smith hype.



Onterio Smith (2) has been impressive in his outings during Oregon's scrimmages. Smith went for 38-yards on this run Thursday.

Adam Amato Emerald

"He's an awesome back and I've seen some of things he can do and it's amazing," said fellow tailback Allan Amundson. "I can't wait to see him when things are live. He's so quick, so strong and so powerful. We can all learn from him."

Smith will join Amundson and senior Maurice Morris in a backfield that will be as talented as any in the nation.

"We have three talented and very capable running backs," senior quarterback Joey Harrington said. "Onterio has a great attitude and he comes out every day and works his butt off. He's buying some playing time."

Added wide receiver Jason Willis: "That'll be a lethal combination with Mauricé and Onterio."

First things first for Smith, though, and that's finishing off the spring season strong, which concludes with the annual Spring Game at 1 p.m. Saturday at Hillsboro Stadium near Portland. Smith's mom, uncle and grandma will fly up from Sacramento to see him play.

Smith has been hampered by a tight hamstring that he pulled over spring break and says he's only "75-80 percent." But the injury didn't stop him from taking off on an im-

pressive 38-yard jaunt in Oregon's third scrimmage.

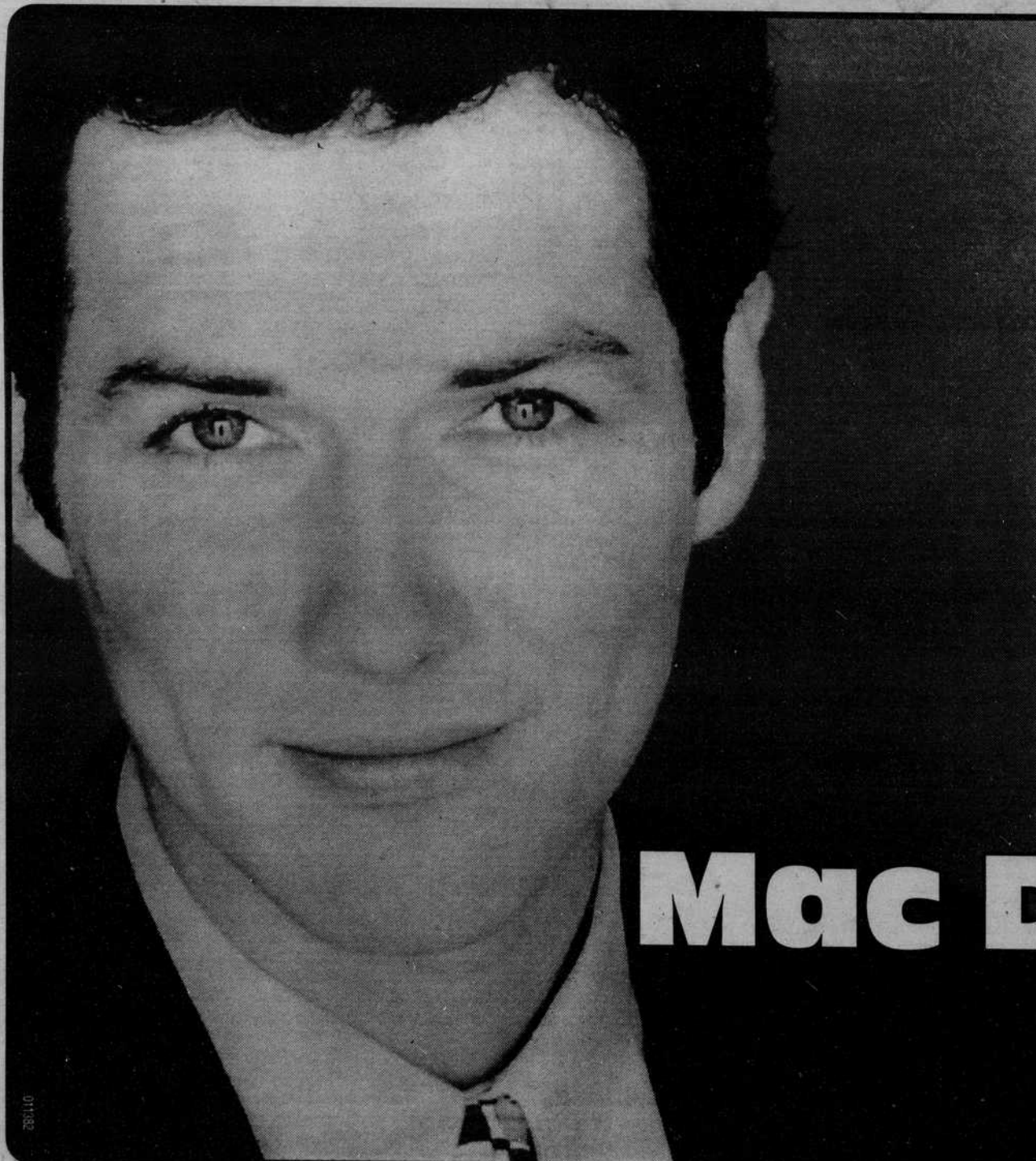
"Onterio is not full speed, but he's getting more comfortable with the offense," Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said. "He's a tough runner with good vision who has the ability to cut back. When he gets to full speed, I think he can be a complete back."

The bounce in Smith's step is evident when he comes to practice every day. The tone of his voice is one of true excitement and the positive attitude that he brings to the table is contagious, according to Amundson.

Smith knows this is his opportunity to prove to himself and to many others that he has learned from his mistakes and matured a great deal over the past year.

"I'm just getting back into the groove of things and that's the good thing about it: I'm back at a top college playing the game that I love," Smith said. "I'm actually better off being here in Eugene and playing with the quality group of guys that I am."

"People here seem to love me, I don't know why. But I'm just glad they're loving me instead of hating me."



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