

a flying machine

Junior Jason Willis, a former walk-on, is shining and smiling in his role as the Ducks' top receiver so far this season

By Adam Jude
Oregon Daily Emerald

You don't need X-ray vision to see the smile pouring out of Jason Willis's helmet when his favorite play is called.

The junior wide receiver is no longer surprised when quarterback Joey Harrington calls out the "fly sweep" in the huddle. But before Willis became synonymous with end-around, the former high school running back was just content with contributing any way he could. And contribute he did in Oregon's 35-30 victory over Texas in the Holiday Bowl last season.

"It was a shock to me," Willis said of the play call which led to his four-yard touchdown run Dec. 29. "I was in the huddle, and he called the play and I was like 'Wow, this is coming to me, I gotta get in there.' And I did. I couldn't believe it. It was just an unbelievable feeling.

"Hopefully there'll be more to come."

It's hard to imagine Willis doing more, but if he gets his way, there will be much more to come for the former walk-on.

Along with his knack for running, Willis, since joining the

Ducks in 1998, has developed great hands. The 6-foot-1, 190-pound junior leads the team with 15 receptions and 191 yards.

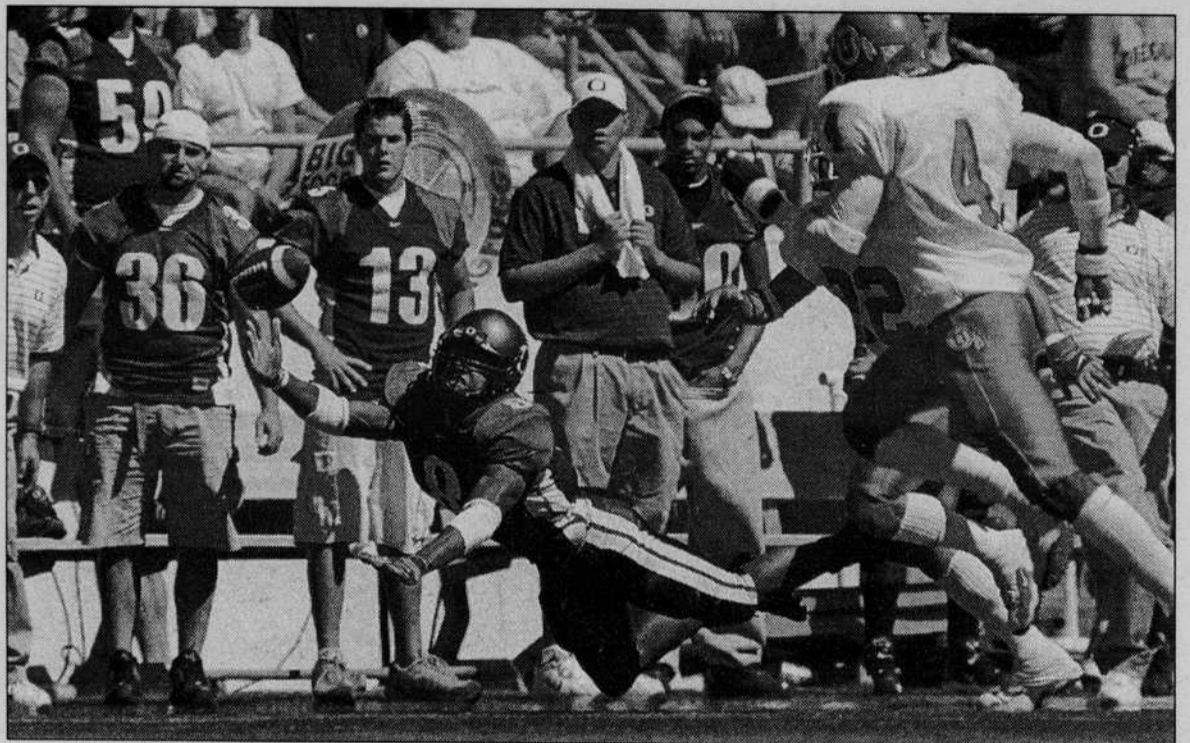
"I think I'm finally coming on now, I've improved over the years and finally coming up and making my spot," Willis said.

Along with his regular duty as a "possession receiver" in a high-powered offense, Willis also makes his mark on special teams.

"With [receiver] Keenan [Howry] and Joey coming in as the go-to people, I'm just trying to be a possession receiver," Willis said. "I'm just trying to fill in the spot that Marshan [Tucker, Oregon's leading receiver last year] left behind. As far as special teams, I think that's a big part of our team. Special teams win games and I want to contribute in any way I can."

If everything had ended up as originally planned, Oregon would be trying to prevent Willis from catching the ball instead of throwing to him. Out of Saint Bernard High School in Compton, Calif., Willis made an oral commitment to be a defensive back for Arizona State.

The day before he was scheduled to sign, however, Willis found out that he could not sign with the



Adam Amato Emerald

Junior Jason Willis, the Ducks' top receiver this season, makes a diving attempt in Oregon's 24-10 win over Utah on Sept. 8.

Sun Devils because the school had some problems with recruiting. Luckily, though, Willis was accepted to Oregon on academic merits, he said.

The No. 3 receiver last season, Willis has proven to his coaches and teammates that he belongs on the field every down.

"His success hasn't surprised me," senior fullback Josh Line said. "He's just had to play behind people who are superstars and it's his time to shine. I'm not surprised by anything he's done because I've seen him do it throughout his whole career here in practice and in games. I'm excited for him."

Howry, a starting receiver the last two seasons, knows better than anyone that Willis deserves every

bit of success and recognition that he gets.

"He means a great deal to this team," Howry said. "He's one of those rare players that gets everything done. He's unbelievable."

And although the entire offense has yet to come together like many expected it to in the preseason, Howry said the receiving corps has gelled better than any group he's been a part of.

"This has never happened before so early in the season," Howry said. "The last two years I've been here both receivers have never really played together in the same games. All of the receivers have really stepped it up this year, especially Jason."

If Harrington hopes to stay in

the Heisman Trophy race and if the Ducks hope to accomplish their goal of reaching the national championship, Willis, Howry and the entire supporting cast must lift the offense to the next level.

"Offensively, we just need to come together consistently and we'll be unstoppable," Willis said. "As far as backs, I think we have the best backfield in the nation. The receiving corps, right now we're not carrying the team, but we are stepping it up and making some big plays."

If Willis's first two games are any indication of how big he will be, the Ducks seemed to be well on their way to fulfilling some of their lofty goals.

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