

Preview

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know they need to stop "playing to the level of our competition," as Smith put it.

"We need to stop that," Smith said. "We need to come out ready to rumble this weekend."

Oregon has played three close games this season, but with three wins. Oregon beat Wisconsin 31-28 in its first game and unranked Utah 24-10 in game two before its emotional win over USC.

"We're not where we need to be in any aspect of our game, and I see that as a positive considering we're 3-0," Bellotti said.

The Ducks have traditionally avoided letdowns after emotional games. In 1999, after a tough one-touchdown loss to Michigan State, Oregon blew out Texas-El Paso the following week, 47-28, and Nevada 72-10 a week after. Despite losing to Wisconsin last season, Oregon regrouped and blew out Idaho 42-13. In a similar situation to the one Oregon now faces, the Ducks won a close overtime game at Fresno State

in 1996, and came back to cream Nevada 44-30 the following week.

Still, despite the history, rankings and tradition, Oregon will not look past Utah State this weekend.

"A win like [USC] just brings us more together," said freshman placekicker Jared Siegel, the hero of last Saturday's win. "Hopefully the team will put things together more consistently, and it won't come down to my kick."

Offensively, quarterback Joey Harrington leads the conference with 110 pass attempts, completing a respectable 56 percent of those,

but is seventh in the conference with 222 yards per game. His Heisman status has declined some, and a big day against the Aggies would no doubt help in his quest to head to New York in December.

Bellotti said converting on third downs and establishing a better running game are essential this weekend.

Utah State features one of the nation's top wide receivers in Kevin Curtis, who is averaging 10.7 catches per game, best in the nation. The Aggies star running back, Emmett White, is also a major threat

"Coming into the game (against USC), we emphasized stopping the run," said sophomore safety Keith Lewis, who leads the Pac-10 with 35 tackles through three games. "[USC running back Sultan] McCullough came in here with a big head, talking a lot of trash, saying he was going to stuff the ball down our throats. And look what happened."

What happened is Lewis and the Duck defense allowed McCullough just 31 yards on 20 carries, by far Oregon's best performance of the season.

The Ducks will need more of the same to stop White and the Aggies.

Smith

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met, rub off the eye black and turn his attention toward Fife.

Because it's important, make that imperative, for Fife to get some actual game experience. After all, he is the back-up quarterback of the sixth-ranked team in the country and he's yet to take one snap this season.

In the spring of 2000, his 14 of 17 passing for 186 yards in the annual Spring Game at Autzen Stadium helped win him the third-string quarterback gig behind Harrington and A.J. Feeley (now a third-stringer with the NFL's Philadelphia Eagles).

And in the spring of 2001, his 16 of 27 passing for 273 yards and three touchdowns in the Spring Game at Hillsboro Stadium solidified his status as the No. 2 signal-caller and gave head coach Mike Bellotti reassuring confidence in his abilities.

But spring ball and fall ball are drastically different. Fife is well aware of this. And he's excited to possibly find out how big a difference that is come Saturday night.

"It'd be neat to get in there and do something that the guys haven't seen before in practice and hear them say, 'Whoa, where'd that Fife guy come from?'" Fife said. "I've thought a lot about playing this week, but I don't want to jinx myself. I'm ready though."

"Anybody who's a gamer wants to get in there and contribute."

Of course, it's not just about letting the back-ups get more playing time. After each win, players and coaches will tell you, over and over again, how excited they are just to get the win. Leading by a mere six points in the fourth quarter against Utah at home doesn't matter, they say, because the goal was to win and that's what they did.

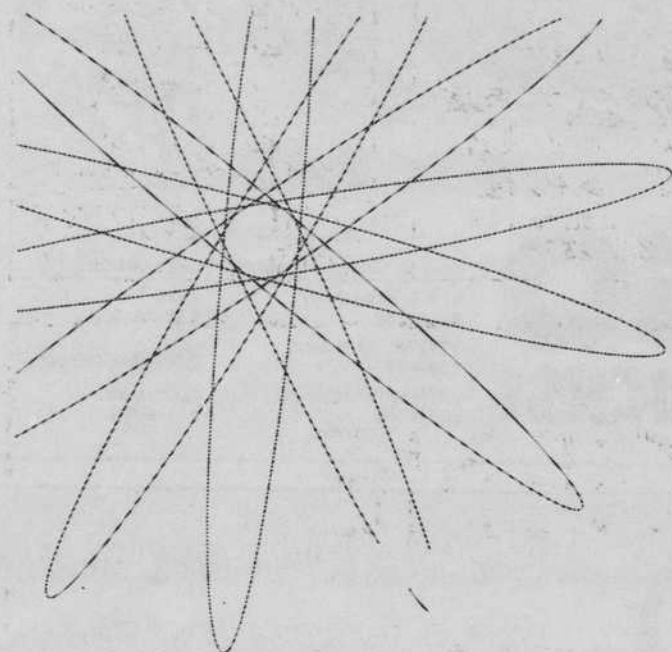
Which is fine, but let's be serious in regards to this week. When you're ranked as high as the Ducks are and you're playing an 0-3 team from the Big West Conference, you should come away with a big win.

There will no doubt be many other Pacific-10 conference nail-biters in the weeks to come to worry about. Saturday shouldn't be one of those games.

Harrington said it best in his weekly diary with The Oregonian on Monday when he wrote, "I need to apologize to my grandpa. I've put him through too many close games and for all of his support, I need to reward him with a game in which he can sit back and relax."

Believe me, my grandpa would appreciate that, too.

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