

Duck worship starts Saturday

Put on your Saturday best, Duck Faithful. It's time for church.

Autzen Stadium is the name of this temple, and the first service is this Saturday at 3:30 p.m. The subject of this Saturday's service: How to exorcise those Mississippi State demons.

Public address announcer Don Esig will give the readings. Head coach Mike Bellotti will deliver the sermon.



Peter Hockaday
Two minutes for crosschecking

He is a sublime preacher, guiding the Faithful with his choices, leading by example.

No suit and tie is required if you're a member of the congregation, only green pants and a bright yellow T-shirt. Or a green-sequined hat. Or a flashing button. Or simply a green-and-yellow barrel.

The gaudier the better in this house of holiness.

Speaking of the house, this church has been recently upgraded to cathedral, complete with green stained-glass on the south side. The cathedral is now fit to host a Super Bowl, or at least a Civil War, with pride. And yet the architects of this struc-

ture managed to keep its spirit, so that crowds will still swell with furious happiness when their team takes the field.

Like any good religion, Duck football has legend and myth swirling like clouds around it. Someday current students will tailgate with their children at Autzen, spewing stories of titanic signal-callers named Akili

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and Joey, incredible defensive monsters named Patu, Mallard, Bauman and Mitchell, whirling dervishes named Onterio and Droughns and Morris. They will talk of the "increasing win, declining loss" years.

"First, there was the 7-5 season of 1997," these sequined-hat historians will say. "Then there was the 8-4 year of 1998. Then 9-3, 10-2, 11-1, and in 2002..."

Well, that phrase will have to be finished in the coming months, won't it? Like a good religion, there is uncertainty and doubt about the

future of this Oregon church.

But no matter what happens, the Faithful will be along for the ride. The fans, who linebacker Kevin Mitchell calls "the best fans in the world," will show up no matter what; they proved that by showing up in droves for last season's Civil War, in the pouring rain.

Well, it was mostly students who waited in pouring rain for tickets last winter. And it was the students who stood on uncovered benches, some without protection against the elements, and screamed when Keenan Howry returned that punt return, and screamed when Oregon won the game to all but lock up a BCS bowl berth.

And it's the students who will do it again this year, who will look on enviously as many paying fans across the field rush for cover in the brand-new club room.

See, for students, this football really is a religion. Most students spend all day, every day, associating with the University of Oregon. On Saturdays, they give something back, in the form of some lung power and by standing for three hours.

Hug a student. They are the blood coursing through this university's veins. Amen.

Contact the sports editor at peterhockaday@dailymerald.com.

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outside of our control," the coach said. "I've said for many years, 'keep things under your control,' and you do that by winning football games, taking those decisions out of other people's hands and keeping them in our own."

"I feel really good about the chemistry of this group of young men. Many of them have been through the wars, they are veterans, they know how to win close games."

The Ducks and Bellotti can only hope that a favorable schedule—one that includes eight home games—will help them toward their goal of an undefeated season. Mississippi State was 3-8 last season. Fresno State, the Ducks' Week 2 opponent, was 11-3 but lost star quarterback David Carr to the NFL. Idaho won only one game last year. Portland State was 7-3 last season but had losses to Southwest Texas State and Idaho State. Oregon then opens Pac-10 play at Arizona, where the Ducks beat the Wildcats 63-28 last year.

Despite the optimism about the team's strengths, the Ducks still have questions that need to be answered in the first set of preseason games. The most obvious is at quarterback, where Jason Fife will be launched under the microscope on Saturday. Waiting in the wings is rocket-armed



Adam Amato Emerald

Jared Siegel (25) and the Ducks will try to defend last year's Pac-10 title.

Kellen Clemens, who is battling Fife for the starting job.

In the secondary, Bellotti has the unenviable task of replacing NFL draft picks Rashad Bauman and Steve Smith, both cornerbacks. Steven Moore is a virtual lock on one side, but the other will feature a tandem of young players vying for the spot.

"It's in the coaches' hands right

now," Moore said. "I'm just trying to hold my spot down, do my job."

The questions should be answered soon in the season. But one key question will hang over the 2002 Duck squad all year.

Can they stay hungry?

Contact the sports editor at peterhockaday@dailymerald.com.

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