

Not enough stewing on the loss, too much stewing on last year

When the media stormed the Casanova Center like a herd of bison last Saturday after Oregon's woolly loss to Arizona State, they may as well have slowly turned on a dimmer switch as they entered the interview room.

Because as the interviews went on, the ratio of references-to-2001 per question shot up like a 70-yard Andrew Walter touchdown pass.

Right, the Ducks seemed to be thinking as the media spun their questions, this is exactly like 2001. Sure, we were 6-0. Yeah, we lost a woolly game to Stanford. Uh-huh, we won out. Great, it's back to the Fiesta Bowl for us.

Well, maybe not exactly like that. There were some near-tears. There were some tough answers. But in general, the scene didn't come close to the bitterness of 2001, when the expectations were high and the loss to Stanford was a seemingly season-crippling injury, one the Ducks couldn't fathom getting over until they beat Washington State. When Joey Harrington answered the media almost exclusively with one-word answers.

The point is, this season's squad is different. Much different. But good teams that lose should deal with losing the same way: They should be devastated. Heart-broken. Kicking walls and chairs and such. Or they will lose again. Once you rationalize losing, it becomes easier to handle.

The Ducks will never be losers with Mike Bellotti at the helm. He is too much of a winner, too much of a bridge-builder. He is perhaps the best coach in the country — other than Bob Stoops at Oklahoma — at culling talent. He runs his squad like an Oregon dairy farm, raising the cattle to replace the fallen cows.

But he's in a fix with this corner-

back issue. Unlike, say, the tight end position, where George Wright stepped nicely into Justin Peele's cleats, or the defensive line, where Eee-gor Olshansky and others stepped up, he was unprepared for the departure of senior stars from the secondary. When Rashad Bauman and Steve Smith were drafted into the NFL — hint No. 1 that they might, possibly, be good at what they did — he was left with a 1960s rock band: Steven Moore and the Freshmen.

Unfortunately, that band was rocked by UCLA and saved by Bob Toledo's truly inept play-calling, and Arizona State did what the Bruins should have done: passed downfield and upfield and midfield and all over the field.

But there is a silver lining to this cloud. And please spare me one more reference to 2001. The silver lining has nothing to do with 2001.

This silver lining has everything to do with how the secondary handled Saturday's loss. Some of the corners didn't even come out of the locker room. Others gave the Harrington-esque one-word answers.

All were devastated.

And this week in practice, the corners faced the hard facts: improve or stay home for New Year's, especially with Pac-10 gunslingers like Cody "Can't" Pickett, Jason "Keep 'em Gessing" Gesser and Carson "Won't get your Palm on my ball" Palmer licking their chops at the thought of Oregon's defense.

Bellotti, true to form, handled it perfectly. Said flat-out that after Saturday's debacle, no secondary position was secure. He's pulling out all the stops, hoping that gives the young guys a chance to go.

It will be interesting to see how the secondary responds to the trail by Sun Devil fire. To see how they get back up when they're knocked down.


And if it's anything like that 2001 season we're all sick of hearing about, the Ducks will come out swinging.

Contact the sports editor at peterhockaday@dailyemerald.com. His views do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.



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