

Homecoming usually humbles home-comers

The Ducks look for a reprieve after last week's loss at the 56th homecoming game this week against the Trojans

Hank Hager
Sports Reporter

The Ducks have to forget. They have to forget last week's loss to Arizona State, not only because they need to win their seventh game of the season, but also because for Oregon fans, it is the most special day of the year.

It's homecoming. The Trojans and Ducks square off Saturday in the annual rite afforded to the 56,000 plus Oregon fans that pack Autzen Stadium.

The 56th homecoming game for the Ducks — and 29th at Autzen Stadium — takes place this week as USC invades Eugene.

Homecoming provides the chance for Oregon graduates to return to their former stomping grounds, renew old friendships, and depending on their age, visit Autzen again and see the leaps and bounds the Ducks have made recently.

Students get the opportunity to party with friends and cheer on the Ducks for the sixth time this season.

For the players, well, it's just another game.

"I don't even think anybody's even been thinking about it being homecoming or anything like that, just everyone getting out here and getting the taste out of our mouth," senior wide receiver Keenan Howry said.

Aside from last season's loss, the Ducks have been successful of late in homecoming games. They are 5-1 in their past six games and 8-2 in their past 10. But of those five wins, three have come by four points or less, including a 14-10 defeat of Arizona in 2000 and a 20-17 victory over Arizona State the previous season.

Oregon's homecoming history has been anything but picture perfect. The Ducks are 24-28-3 in homecoming games since 1936, and were struck by five straight losses in the annual game from 1971-74, and then again in 1982 after a six-year hiatus.

From 1975 to 1981, the annual homecoming game was disbanded. The only other time it has failed to take place came during World War



Emerald

Oregon players know the fans give them a boost, especially at homecoming.

II, as the event was not celebrated from 1943-44.

Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti has been especially successful in the annual game, going 5-2. His only losses came last season against Stanford and in 1995 when the Ducks were unsuccessful against Arizona State, 35-24.

Oregon is 1-2 all-time against USC in homecoming games.

In 1950, the Trojans came out on top, 30-21, and again in 1984 USC was just good enough to defeat the Ducks, 19-9.

However, Oregon bested the Trojans in 1998, 17-13, in what started an annual grudge match between the two schools, furthered by last season's 24-22 come-from-behind victory for the Ducks.

"We have to get up for it," junior running back Onterio Smith said of this week's game against the Trojans. "We've got SC coming in. No matter what the records, its going to be a big game regardless."

When asked about the advantage homecoming holds, Fife first thought of the fans.

"Yeah, it helps a little bit," he said. "We're always aware, especially at a home game, that homecoming has that much more energy. We were really proud that the crowd came out for us (last week). They're really loud, they pumped us up a lot when

we needed it, and I think homecoming will just add on to that."

Even better, despite Oregon's mantra that it "never rains at Autzen," precipitation is in the forecast for Eugene on Saturday, possibly heightening Oregon's advantage in the game.

"It doesn't rain very much around (Los Angeles) so it is very unfamiliar to us," USC head coach Pete Carroll said. "We'll kick and catch wet footballs like we always do to prepare, but I don't think you can ever really get used to the ball being wet."

Last season's homecoming game, against Stanford, is something the Ducks would like to forget.

But that might be hard after last week's loss to Arizona State.

The Sun Devils racked up 25 straight points to defeat the Ducks last week, much like last season's defeat at the hands of Stanford when the Cardinal scored 21 in the fourth quarter.

"To me it was almost like identical games," Smith said. "I walked out earlier that morning from the hotel at the DoubleTree and looked at the sky and it was the same overcast in the air again. The way that the game ended last year on an interception. It was almost the same score. We scored 42 points against them last year. It was almost like identical losses."

Contact the sports reporter at hankhager@dailyemerald.com.

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