

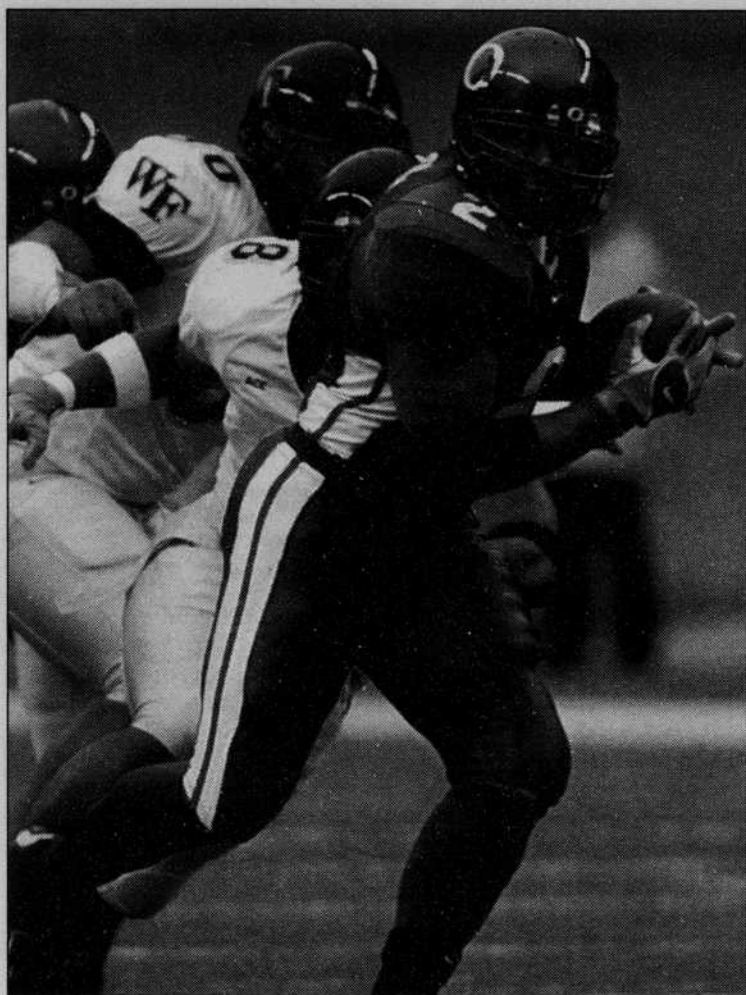
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SPORTS

Best bet
NCAA basketball:
UConn at Oklahoma
5 p.m., ESPN2

Tuesday, January 7, 2003

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Duck season



Adam Amato Emerald

Onterio Smith's future is still up in the air, but his knee injury midway through the season hurt the Ducks' offense in the second half of the year.

The Oregon football team reflects on a season that ended with a monumental second-half slide

Peter Hockaday

Sports Editor

Four numbers to tell the story.

6-0.

1-6.

Those first two numbers? That's how Oregon started the 2002 football season.

Those last two? That's how the Ducks finished.

Put them together and it's 7-6. That's after years when Oregon fans saw the numbers soar, from 6-5 in 1996, to 7-5, 8-4, 9-3, 10-2 and 11-1 in the subsequent years.

And after six games of the 2002 season, it looked like the Ducks were going to soar again, perhaps even higher than before.

But then it all came crashing down, as a freshman Arizona State quarterback led a second-half charge that opened the floodgates for offenses playing the Ducks over the rest of the season, right down to lowly Wake Forest in the Seattle Bowl. Then Oregon's star running back went down with an injury, and the offense wouldn't come back from a deficit to win for the rest of the year.

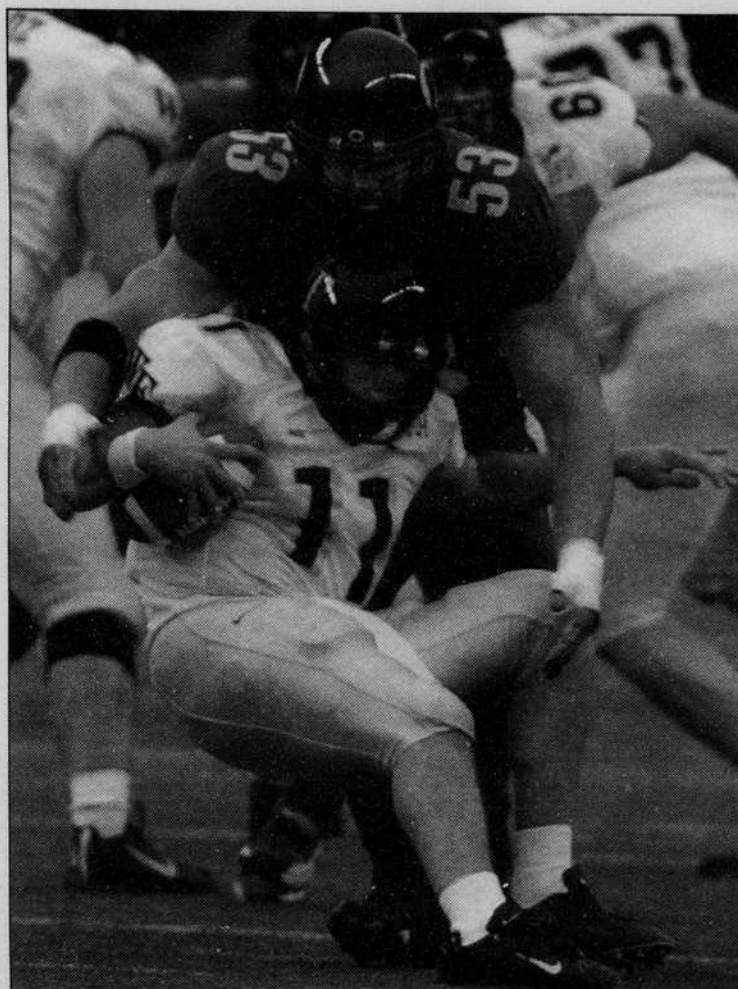
That's a recipe for 1-6 disaster.

"We'll think about this season for a while," quarterback Jason Fife said.

And after a season with such a severe downturn at its end, the Ducks, like Fife, could only think "why?" They couldn't answer that question, but could answer the question of "how?"

Over the first six games of the season,

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Adam Amato Emerald

Igor Olshansky (53) comes up with Oregon's only sack of the Seattle Bowl in the first quarter. Olshansky returns next season to anchor the defensive line.

Ducks must improve defensive secondary

With one of the worst pass defenses in the country, Oregon has much work to do on defense before next season

Adam Jude

Senior Sports Reporter

Maybe it's not such a bad thing that the Oregon defense is losing six starters to graduation.

Then again, it doesn't make the challenge of getting better any easier.

If anything is certain for the Oregon football team, it's that the defense has to improve drastically before next season for the Ducks to even dream about contending for the Pacific-10 Conference title.

Sure, the Oregon offense struggled at the end of the 2002 season, but not as much as the Oregon defensive secondary, which

ranked 115th out of 117 Division I teams by allowing 295 passing yards per game. With two first-year starters at the corners — junior Steven Moore and true freshman Aaron Gipson — the Ducks allowed 33 touchdowns through the air this season, the worst in the nation.

That defensive weakness was never more clear than in the Seattle Bowl on Dec. 30, when Gipson was beaten twice for 57-yard and 63-yard scores in a 38-17 loss to Wake Forest.

"That's the story of our life," senior linebacker David Moretti said after the bowl game. "We've done that a lot this year. We've let teams score points on us that they don't earn. We let them get two 60-yard bombs and spotted them 14 points. If you want to beat a good football team, you can't spot them points."

The Ducks, who finished with six losses, the

most since 1993, hope an offseason of hard work will help its defensive backs. It should help that junior safety Keith Lewis, a second-team all-Pac-10 selection, has said he will stay for his senior season.

But along with rover Rasuli Webster, a three-year starter, the Ducks' secondary will lose its coach. After two years as Oregon's secondary coach, Mike Gillhamer has left for Louisville, where he'll be the defensive coordinator.

In the middle, Oregon loses Moretti, the team's leading tackler this season, and Garret Graham, the starting outside linebacker for most of the season. The lone returning linebacker, junior Kevin Mitchell, knows there's a lot to do before Oregon's first game at Mississippi State on Aug. 30.

"The younger guys coming back, we're just going to have to regroup and learn how to

work and learn how to play with heart, pride and desire — learn how to play football," Mitchell said. "All we do is go to school and play football. School's not that fun. Why not take what's fun and go with it, make it the best time of our lives? We've lost some of that."

What the Ducks have lost in the secondary, they should gain up front — with the intent of not letting their opponents gain anything on the ground. One positive for the Ducks is that they allowed just 106 rushing yards per game in 2002.

The transition to replace starters Seth McEwan and Darrell Wright at the defensive end positions should be fairly smooth because of the late-season emergence of Devan Long and Rod Wright.

At tackle, Oregon has little to worry about. With Igor Olshansky, a sophomore, and

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Ending the season in a cold, Husky-filled Seattle endzone

Any endzone, at a college football game, is generally packed.

In Seahawks Stadium for the Seattle Bowl, the south endzone was mostly empty — save for a few Oregon fans and an equivalent number of Husky Hecklers.

By the end of the game, the Huskies — now converted Wake Forest fans — outnumbered the Ducks left in the endzone.

It was like a bad commercial for Southwest Airlines.

"Want to get away?"

Who didn't?

Well, Wake Forest, I suppose.

Oregon and its fans needed the Seattle Bowl the way a straight-A student needs mono during finals week.

The Seattle Bowl wasn't going to help the Ducks finish above eighth in the Pacific-10 Conference, and it certainly didn't help redshirt junior Onterio Smith with his NFL draft-ability.

Even after surgery, Smith wasn't able to become super-human and single-handedly save the Ducks from the bottom of the Pac-10 barrel.

Oregon fans went to the game for the love of their school and their football team. They went to see the promise of a new season and the end to this one.

Unfortunately, Duck fans were let down before the game even started.

"Priority seating," as was promised by the Athletic Department, equated to 300-level, nosebleed seats offered for the same price as many of the stadium's 100-level seats. If it had rained during the game, those seats would have been the priority because

they are the only ones under a roof.

Was the Athletic Department really worried about Oregon fans getting wet? Chances are, many of the fans at the bowl game were also in attendance at either the 2001 Civil War or this season's contest against the Huskies. Even Seattle weather is rarely as harsh as the weather at Autzen Stadium during those two games. Duck fans can handle harsh weather.

Empty seats — especially when closer and the same price, however, are something Oregon fans don't take lightly.

Unfortunately, the only rain was on the Ducks' parade.

The low-lights started December 28 with the Pike Place Market fish toss.

Anyone could tell Oregon wasn't all excited about being there. Wake Forest brought their cheer squad to the fish toss as well as other members of the team besides those catching salmon. Oregon only sent the four players who

had to befriend the frozen fish.

Wake Forest won the fish toss, as they would the game.

Everywhere Oregon fans went, the Husky Hecklers were sure to go. First to the fish toss, then at the pep rally and finally to the game.

With all the Huskies in attendance, the stands at the Seattle Bowl were more exciting than the game itself.

There must have been almost as many Washington fans as Wake Forest fans, with many of the Huskies migrating to the endzone by halftime.

After one radio station in Seattle encouraged Huskies to attend the game as newly crowned Wake Forest fans, the Demon Deacons must have been more than happy to welcome some locals into the crowd. The trek from North Carolina is pretty long, after all.

From the stands, the game didn't look like a

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Mindi Rice

The girl and the game