

Senior free safety Keith Lewis earned the Ducks' Defensive Player of the Week award after his performance in the Sept. 6 game against Nevada.  
Mark McCambridge Senior Photographer

# Cork in the Bottle

Keith Lewis has bounced back from a sub-par 2002 season to be the senior leader of the secondary

By Hank Hager  
Sports Editor

If Keith Lewis ever enrolled in a public speaking course at Oregon, you can bet he'd be one of the best in the class.

Of course, after you've taken on an entire Washington football team, there shouldn't be much in your way.

The senior, who sometimes lets more than his play on the field do his talking, is a brash — but aggressive — free safety who has carved a niche in the Duck program. Much like since-departed Rashad Bauman, Lewis isn't afraid to talk up his game and try to induce his opponent into retaliating.

Against the Huskies last season, Lewis ate his words and was even silenced by Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti before the Ducks lost 42-14. But, normally, his chatter on the field leads to Oregon's defensive stops, and for him, big-time interceptions.

"That's just his personality," senior cornerback Steven Moore said. "It's just something he does. We just take it in stride. He talks, but it's all fun — as long as he can back it up, which he does — so there's no problem."

Lewis has emerged as the cornerstone of the Oregon defense, and he can be considered one of the best members of any secondary in the Pacific-10 Conference.

His numbers speak for themselves: A career-high 88 tackles in 2001, and five interceptions last season. Entering this season, Lewis had accounted for 191 tackles, including 11.5 for a loss, and eight interceptions while starting 24 games.

This year, he has collected 14 tackles and two interceptions as the Ducks have shown that last season's defensive misplays were more of a fluke than the norm.

"If the defense puts together a complete game, I know I will have done

my best," Lewis said. "Until then, I'm not satisfied."

A key example of his importance to the secondary can be traced back to the 2001 season. The Ducks, 6-0 entering their Oct. 20 game with Stanford, fell to the Cardinal, 49-42.

Lewis, however, didn't get a chance to step on the field that day. Then a sophomore and the team's leading tackler at that point, he had suffered a severe ankle sprain the week before in Oregon's 48-7 victory over California.

Back then, Bauman led the defense. But with the loss, Lewis showed his importance to the outcome of games.

"It was just heartbreaking," Lewis said of the loss. "Everything just seemed to fall apart. It killed me. That probably right there will stick with me for the rest of my life. Just not being able to play in that game when we were that close to the national championship game."

Last season, he was hampered by injuries for most of the year. A foot injury slowed his speed and range on the field, even though he had a career-high five interceptions.

Combine the injury with the lack of experience in the team's secondary — Moore and whoever else played corner were in their first season of starts — and you've got a recipe for disaster.

Disaster was exactly what the team got. Another 6-0 start fell into the depths of a 7-6 finish.

This year is a different mentality for the Ducks. The 7-6 year is remembered, but not dwelled upon.

"I feel re-energized, for the most part," Lewis said. "I just feel good. Hopefully I'll get an injury-free season. There's always the bings and bangs, but for the most part, I've been healthy this year."

When Lewis suffered through last season, injuries and all, a decision on his future became clearer. While Onterio Smith and George Wrihster decided a senior year at Oregon was not valuable enough and left early for the NFL, Lewis thought otherwise.

The defense had been maligned for most of the year, and he hadn't been in tip-top shape. Also, his speed had been in decline, so his physical abili-

ties after last season would not have been well-represented.

"I think it was pretty easy of a decision," Lewis said, "me not finishing the way I wanted to finish last year. And not just me personally, but also for the team. To come in a winner, then leave a loser was not the way I wanted to leave, anyway. I think we have a lot to prove this year."

The Oregon defense is happy to have him back.

Moore and Lewis are the senior leaders, while sophomore Justin Phinisee and junior Marley Tucker round out a group that has everything to prove, and really nothing to lose this season.

After finishing 115th in the nation out of 117 Division I teams last season in yards allowed per game, the group is allowing 225 yards per game this season. That figure puts them at 80th in the nation — not a great ranking — but one that is far improved from last season.

Don't doubt Lewis' presence for that difference.

He has "meant a lot (to the defense this year)," Phinisee said. "Everybody knows Keith. The free safety is important in this defense. He's kind of like the cork in a bottle. If he's not there, then everything spills out."

"He knows the corners are going to fight for him more. Last year, everything was on the corner's shoulders and he was looking out for us, helping us in a time of need. But this year he knows we're capable of one-on-ones, and so he can do his job a little bit more."

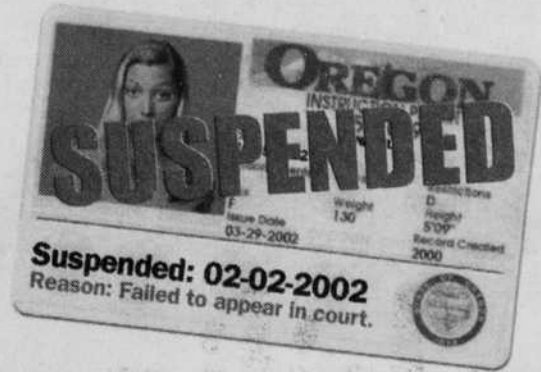
Now, the hard part starts for Lewis and the Oregon secondary. Michigan, led by quarterback John Navarre and an up-and-coming receiver in Braylon Edwards, comes to Autzen Stadium to test Oregon's 3-0 record.

The secondary has shown its ability to play with confidence this season. Lewis, who is tied for second on the team in tackles, has been a beneficiary of its improved capabilities.

But the game against the Wolverines is like nothing any current Duck

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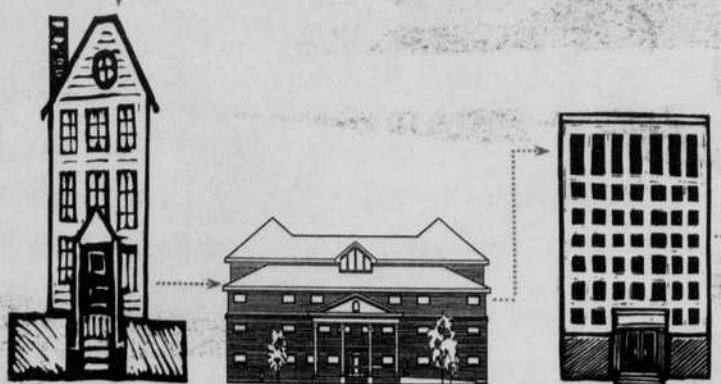
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