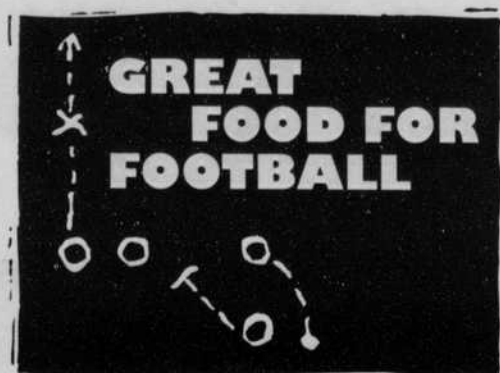




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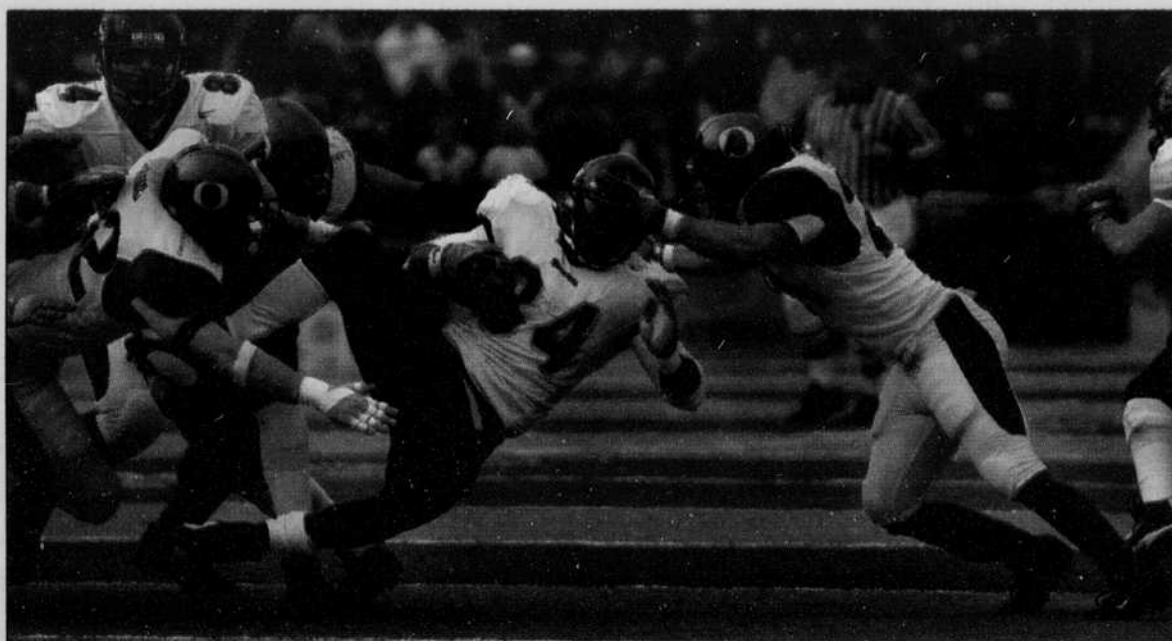
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Oregon Daily Emerald

GAME DAY

Monday, December 8, 2003

Sports Editor: Hank Hager



Adam Amato Photo Editor

The Ducks' defense held opponents to fewer than 25 points in eight games this season, including a 34-20 Civil War victory.

Oregon, Golden Gophers readying for battle of the Sun

The Ducks are set to head to the Sun Bowl against Minnesota, an old foe

By Hank Hager
Sports Editor

It has been four years since Oregon took to the desert in western Texas.

My, how things have stayed the same.

The Ducks are set for the Sun Bowl in El Paso, Texas, on Dec. 31 against an opponent they will remember with fond memories. Minnesota, Oregon's foe in the 1999 version of the bowl, was announced Sunday as the 2003 representative from the Big Ten Conference.

The Ducks defeated the Golden Gophers in 1999, 24-20.

That's of little concern for the Ducks though. The matchup is almost an afterthought, especially

considering what Oregon has been through this season.

"I think (the Sun Bowl) represents a strong comeback," Oregon full-back Matt Floberg said. "We were down midway through the season and for a while there, even going to a bowl was in jeopardy. So to come back and get as good of a bowl as the Sun Bowl is a nice accomplishment for our team."

To think, the Ducks were the seventh-place team in the Pacific-10 Conference last season, relegated to the Seattle Bowl, which is no longer active.

To jump up four spots to third in the Pac-10 is a special achievement for the Ducks, especially after losing in blowouts to Washington State and Arizona State midway through the season.

In other words, it's a whole different Oregon team in the second half of the 2003 season than in the last season and a half.

"The commitment to ourselves and each other, I think that's what pulled us through," Floberg said.

After a 42-10 loss to Washington on Nov. 1, the possibility of a bowl bid was waning for the Ducks, then 5-4 overall. But what Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said may have been the toughest couple of days of practice since he took over the team in 1995 sent the Ducks in a new direction.

Oregon held tough and came back for a 21-17 victory over California, then stomped UCLA before a 34-20 victory over Oregon State, which may have been the defining victory of the 2003 season.

Since then, the Ducks have been sky-high, ready to take on whichever team the Sun Bowl decided to choose.

Enter Minnesota.

"I've heard about what we did in the Sun Bowl 30 times," cornerback

Turn to **PREVIEW**, page 10B

Sun Bowl marks next step in rebuilding of UO football

Back in 1999, the Ducks took a trip to the Sun Bowl in El Paso, Texas, and returned as the only postseason victors in the Pacific-10 Conference.

They had a cadre of players who would later see action in the NFL, most notably Joey Harrington, Keenan Howry and Reuben Droughns. That game, a 24-20 victory over Minnesota, allowed Oregon to finish the season as the No. 19 team in the nation.

That game was a springboard for bigger and better things in the Ducks' world. It led to a berth in the Holiday Bowl the next season and an ultimate prize in 2001. That prize came in the fashion of the Fiesta Bowl, which later proved to be 38-16 win for Oregon over Colorado.

Don't doubt the powers of the Sun Bowl. It has a mystical feeling for all teams involved and that's not just from the sweet Texas air.

OK, so maybe that's a little too much. But for the Ducks of 1999, it proved to be the step in the right direction.

Oregon's bowl appearances were

grouped with jumps in win totals from year-to-year. When the Ducks went to the Sun Bowl, they finished the year with nine victories. The next



Hank Hager
Behind the dish

season there were 10, followed by the 11 Oregon achieved in 2001.

The 2002 season, a rough year when only seven wins came to Eugene, was a step back in the Oregon program.

That's where the Sun Bowl, circa 2003, comes into play. Already at eight wins, the Ducks have the chance to lay the foundation for next season. They can get to nine

wins, one short of magic No. 10 and two above last season's debacle, which, at the time, seemed like it could have led Oregon back to the dark ages of college football.

"What we did this year, that big turnaround, helped us out a lot," defensive lineman Robby Valenzuela said. "It gave us a lot of momentum and gave everyone confidence back instead of staying down the whole time. We picked ourselves up, we fought back and we made a point."

That point is that despite the plush locker room, notoriety for almost mustard-like uniforms and being the poster boys for the arms race of college football, the Ducks are for real and will be a for at least a few more years to come. With the likes of sophomore Kellen Clemens, sophomore Haloti Ngata and a young secondary that is improving each game, Oregon can roll into the next few seasons of Pac-10 football and challenge for the top spots.

The Sun Bowl on Dec. 31 will be a stepping stone for that future and

Turn to **HAGER**, page 8B