

Minnesota brings bruising offense to bowl in El Paso

Minnesota's effective ground attack will be on display against Oregon in the Sun Bowl in late December

By Jon Roetman
Sports Reporter

There's nothing fancy about Minnesota's style of offense.

The Golden Gophers (9-3 overall, 5-3 Big-10 Conference) have pounded their way to a top 25 — they're 24th — ranking with the nation's third-best ground attack, which averages 293.3 yards per contest.

While Minnesota's smash-mouth style of a run game has driven many opponents into the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome AstroTurf, it will have a difficult time finding holes in an Oregon defense that ranks 12th in the country against the run.

The game will match nation's third best rushing offense against the country's 12th-ranked rush defense.

It's time to line them up and see which team has more heart.

If Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti didn't already know Minnesota was dangerous on the ground, he was enlightened by members of the Michigan coaching staff.

The Michigan coaches "said Minnesota can run the ball against anybody," Bellotti said. "They're that talented."

While there are certainly worse positions to be in than a trip to the Sun Bowl, Minnesota had much higher hopes early in the season. The Gophers entered an Oct. 10 showdown against Michigan with a 6-0 record and the nation's No. 17 ranking. The Gophers dominated the Wolverines at home for three quarters and entered the fourth with a 28-7 lead.

The next 15 minutes all but ended Minnesota's Bowl Championship Series hopes as Michigan outscored the Gophers 31-7, with the final blow coming on a 33-yard field goal by Garrett Rivas with 47 seconds remaining. Another home loss the following week to Michigan State officially put an end to BCS hopes.

Minnesota won its next three games but dropped its season finale to Iowa, 40-22.

Gopher defensive coordinator Greg Hudson said the team is just happy to be playing in a bowl game.

"We're excited to play in the Sun Bowl," Hudson said. "It's an opportunity to extend our season."

Despite ending their conference schedule on a sour note, the Gophers have the weapons to put a dent in Oregon's holiday season. Minnesota's backfield is loaded with talented running backs. Sophomore Marion Barber has rushed for a team leading 1,159 yards and 17 touchdowns while touching the ball on



Craig Houtz Centre Daily Times

Minnesota's Laurence Maroney (22) and Greg Eslinger (61) celebrate the Golden Gophers' 20-14 victory against Penn State on Sept. 27. The Golden Gophers finished fifth in the Big Ten Conference with a 9-3 overall record and 5-3 in their conference.

only 30 percent of the team's rushing attempts.

The Gophers have also gotten a strong contribution from freshman Laurence Maroney, whose 990 yards would place him at the top of the list at seven other Big-10 schools. Senior Thomas Tapeh has added 530 yards and eight touchdowns.

"Our tailbacks, they'll go around you or they'll go through you," Hudson said. "They handle the success they've had very well. They're very humble."

Minnesota can also get it done through the air — the Gophers are

second in the nation in total offense at 501.4 yards per game. Senior quarterback Asad Abdul-Khalik has thrown for 2,229 yards and 17 touchdowns while compiling the nation's fourth-highest passer efficiency rating (165.65).

The Gophers receiving corps is led by sophomore Jared Ellerson, who has 909 yards and five touchdowns on 44 receptions. Senior Aaron Hosack has caught 45 balls for 707 yards and eight touchdowns.

"I didn't know how good of a team they were until I looked at their stats," Bellotti said. "It's a daunting

task (playing the Gophers)."

On the other side of the ball, Minnesota ranks in the top 30 in rush defense, pass efficiency defense and total defense. The Gophers are also 10th in the nation in punt returns.

The Dec. 31 match up will also be a chance for Minnesota to avenge its 24-20 loss to Oregon in the 1999 Sun Bowl.

Minnesota "is going to be one of the best teams we've ever played in a bowl game," Bellotti said.

Contact the sports reporter at jonroetman@dailyemerald.com.

SPORTS BRIEF

Sun Bowl tickets expected to last

The University's Athletics Department was allotted 8,000 tickets for the Sun Bowl on Dec. 31, but it doesn't expect to sell them all.

Tickets for the game went on sale at the Casanova Center's Oregon athletic ticket office on Dec. 3, the day after the Oregon football team received the invitation to El Paso, Texas.

"I wouldn't say we're expecting to sell them all, but as many as possible," assistant ticket manager Laura Jorgensen said.

Reserved seats will be sold for \$35 each, plus a \$15-per-order processing fee. Students will not be offered a discounted price.

The tickets are cheaper than last

year's Seattle Bowl, which totaled \$63, but Jorgensen still isn't expecting to sell a great deal because of the distance of travel.

Through www.ticketmaster.com, tickets come as cheap as \$12 for general admission and range as high as \$55 for the best seats.

The seats offered by the University are on the East side of the Sun Bowl Stadium in sections 18, 19, 20 and 24, 25, 26.

Tickets may also be purchased through the University by phone at (541) 346-4461 or 1-800-WEB-FOOT, as well as the Ducks' official Web site at www.goducks.com.

The University of Oregon Alumni Association is offering a package deal much like it has in the past.

The deluxe package includes round-trip charter air service, two nights accommodation, luggage

handling, pre-game party passes and more, yet it does not include tickets to the game. Prices begin at \$969 per person.

"We're going to have a good crowd," said Dan Rodriguez, executive director of the Alumni Association. "We're expecting a good representation of Duck fans. Everybody can go on our tours. We take alumni and friends."

The Alumni Association does offer a cheaper tour with prices beginning at \$449. The "Land Only Tour" includes nearly all the amenities of the "Air/Land Tour," except for flight accommodations.

"We work real close with the athletics in serving the needs of alumni," Rodriguez said.

The game against Minnesotastarts at noon MST.

— Jesse Thomas

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Oregon can learn a lot about itself in El Paso.

Will Clemens be able to continue his mastery of the offense? Will he be able to find wide receivers Samie Parker and Demetrius Williams like he has recently, or will a defense from the Big Ten Conference stifle those passing routes?

How about that young secondary? Will Justin Phinisee and Co. be able to stand up to a more physical offense, one that routinely plays against tough defenses like Ohio State, Michigan and Iowa?

Then there's that Oregon offensive line. Four of the five members that anchor the line — minus Dan Weaver — will return next season. Two years ago, the group was called too small, too insignificant to stop the Colorado

defensive lineman.

The result? A stifling running game made possible by an athletic group. Can the Ducks repeat that performance in late December?

Despite what happens, the game represents a chance for the Ducks to make a name for themselves on national television.

"I was excited to go where it's a little warmer than Eugene," linebacker Jerry Matson said. "It will be a lot warmer than the Seattle Bowl, that's for sure."

"We have a different mindset on this team than versus the Seattle Bowl (team). Our record is better than last year and we have a better outlook. We're looking to compete against a better team."

That about sums it up.

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

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