



Adam Amato Photo Editor

Sophomore Kellen Clemens has started all 12 games this season, but has yet to take every snap in a single contest. He has, however, seen most of the action during the past two games against UCLA and Oregon State.

Clemens establishing role as leader of Oregon offense

After a comeback win over California, Kellen Clemens has improved each week

By Hank Hager
Sports Editor

There's a little more than 14 minutes in Oregon's game against California on Nov. 8.

The Autzen Stadium crowd is getting a little worried. Could the Golden Bears, leading by three at that point, send Oregon to its second straight loss and fifth of the season?

All of a sudden, the lights at Autzen go out, plunging the 56,000-plus in attendance into darkness.

That's the night the lights went on for Oregon sophomore quarterback Kellen Clemens.

"I would like to say the end of the Cal game would be the big point where I matured quite a bit," he said. "Personally, I think we matured and came together a lot as a team. I really look at the Cal game, for me personally, for the offense, for the defense, for the special teams, for this entire football team, where things really turned around and came together."

Clemens engineered a nine-play, minute-and-a-half scoring drive that pushed the Ducks up four, 21-17, and gave many in the stadium a flashback to two years ago when Joey Harrington was leading the Oregon offense.

Clemens isn't near that stature just yet; the come-from-behind victory in the fourth quarter was his first and only comeback as leader of the Ducks. But since that game, the leaps and bounds he has made controlling the offense are evident.

Against UCLA a week later, Clemens threw just shy of 200 yards on 21 of 27 passing. Against Oregon State on Nov. 22, he threw for just 125 yards, but ran for 64, stretching the Beavers' defense in the 14-point win.

"I think Kellen by virtue of his performance has become a better leader," Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said. "He has gained and earned the respect of his teammates. It started with the come-from-behind victory against Cal and extended through the UCLA game. Then, in the Oregon State game, his scrambling and decision making in that regard was probably the difference in the game. He didn't throw the ball extremely well. It was not a great game in terms of passing, but overall, his leadership and decision making, and scrambling ability, I think were probably one of the differences in that football game."

It wasn't as though Clemens wasn't performing well at other parts of the season. In Oregon's first four games, he helped lead the team to four wins, throwing zero interceptions in that span. When things went sour against Washington State, he didn't play well, and in subsequent

losses to Utah and Arizona State, defenses read his eyes and made plays.

After games against Stanford and Washington, the pressure fell on Clemens and the rest of the team. Win against the Golden Bears and the season would have a chance at being extended. Lose and the post-season would be in jeopardy.

With the Sun Bowl on the horizon, it's easy to tell which route Clemens and Oregon took.

"I think that I am playing more to (offensive coordinator Andy) Ludwig's system more now," Clemens said. "I think I am playing more to his system and what he wants. I think I have a pretty good grasp of what he wants and what he has in mind when certain plays are called."

That leadership quotient that Bellotti said Clemens has improved on has certainly helped the Ducks en route to a tie for third place in the Pacific-10 Conference. When Clemens and senior Jason Fife were sharing snaps until the UCLA game, rhythm was a factor. Neither was able to establish their control of the offense.

When Clemens was given the reins against UCLA, the leadership quotient jumped.

"He's done a good job as a leader," senior fullback Matt Floberg said. "He's always just had that attitude that he's a natural leader."

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