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DANIELLE HICKEY | PHOTO EDITOR

Kellen Clemens (11), seen here against Arizona State last week, looks to improve on the Ducks' 64.7 scoring percent average in the red zone.

Red zone vital for Oregon offense to duck fourth loss

Reaching the end zone has become a priority for a struggling offense

BY JON ROETMAN
SENIOR SPORTS REPORTER

The Oregon football team is running out of chances.

With a 1-3 start and bowl hopes fading fast, the Ducks are in serious need of a win against Washington State in Martin Stadium on Saturday. If Oregon is to come out of Pullman victorious, a sputtering Duck offense will need to shrug off heavy criticism and start producing.

Oregon (1-3 overall, 0-1 Pacific-10 Conference) has dropped its last two meetings to Washington State (3-1, 1-0), including last season's 55-16 embarrassment at Autzen Stadium. The Cougars won 32-21 in 2002 during the Ducks' last trip to Pullman.

If Oregon is to avoid a three-game losing streak to Washington State, it needs to capitalize in the red zone. The Ducks penetrated Arizona State's 20-yard line four times last week, coming away with two field goals and only one touchdown. Oregon can't let any more scoring opportunities slip away, especially during a conference road game.

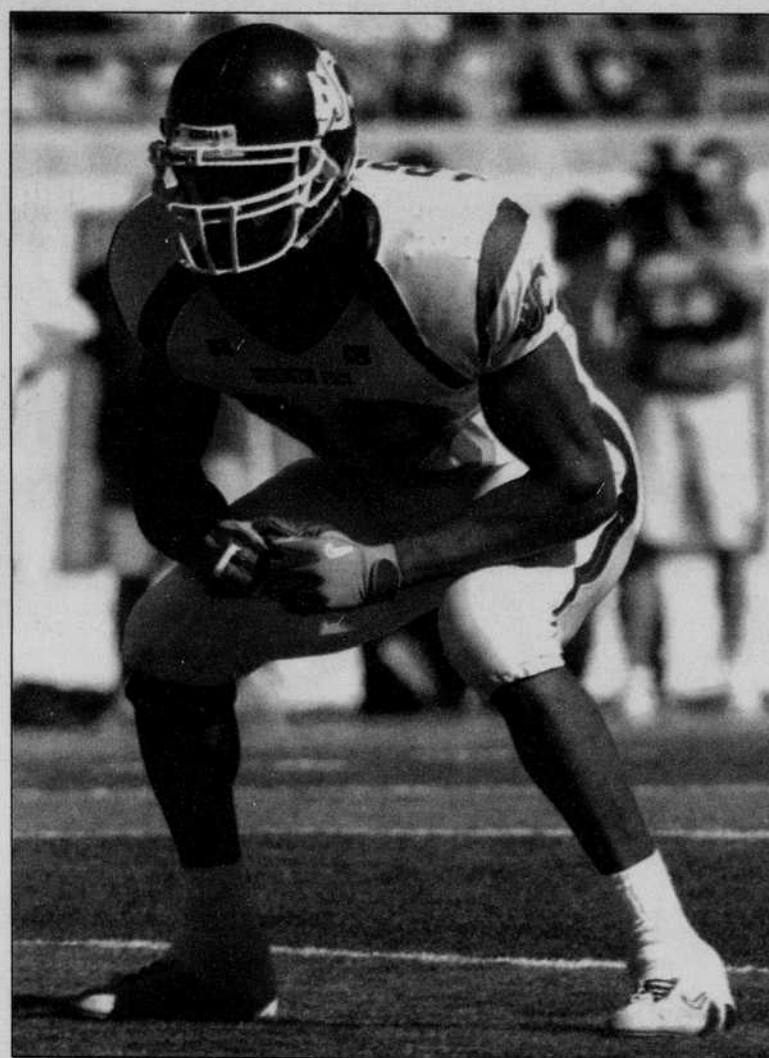
"We move the ball well, but we stutter in the red zone," Oregon quarterback Kellen Clemens said. "We just need to work on getting some better plays (called there)."

Pass protection is another issue that Oregon needs to solve quickly. Clemens was sacked six times last week against Arizona State and spent most of the game looking out of his ear hole.

Further complicating the situation is the loss of starting right tackle Robin Knebel, who suffered a high ankle sprain in last week's game. Knebel's injury places a greater emphasis on tight ends and running backs to step up and help with protection.

"You hate to give up six sacks, but the (offensive) linemen aren't the only guys out there pass blocking," guard Nick Steitz said. "It's a collective effort. A lot of the protections are designed to have the ball gone quick and ASU did a great job covering. It's definitely a number you don't want to see, and it kind of fires us up."

Protecting Clemens is the first step



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Washington State's Abdullah Hamza anchors WSU's second-ranked Pac-10 pass defense, which allows only 158.75 yards per game.

toward opening up an Oregon offense that has grown stagnant. The Ducks haven't been able to stretch the field with the deep passing game and have yet to establish a big-play receiver. Demetrius Williams, who was expected to be Oregon's top pass-catching threat after the departure of Samie Parker, has suffered through a nagging turf toe injury that has slowed his production.

Williams has 15 receptions for 212 yards this season and owns the only touchdown scored by a wide receiver this year.

When receivers have gotten open, Clemens has struggled to find them. The Burns native has completed 59 percent of his passes for 830 yards

and eight touchdowns this year, but head coach Mike Bellotti said he wants more dependable play from the quarterback position.

"We're getting inconsistent play by Kellen Clemens," Bellotti said. "I think he's a great leader, a very good athlete and a good quarterback. He's made some great things happen when things break down, but he hasn't been as effective as I need him to be when things don't break down, and he's aware of that."

Bellotti also said true freshman Dennis Dixon is likely to see playing time against the Cougars. In limited action, Dixon has completed six of 11 passes for 73 yards and possesses the

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