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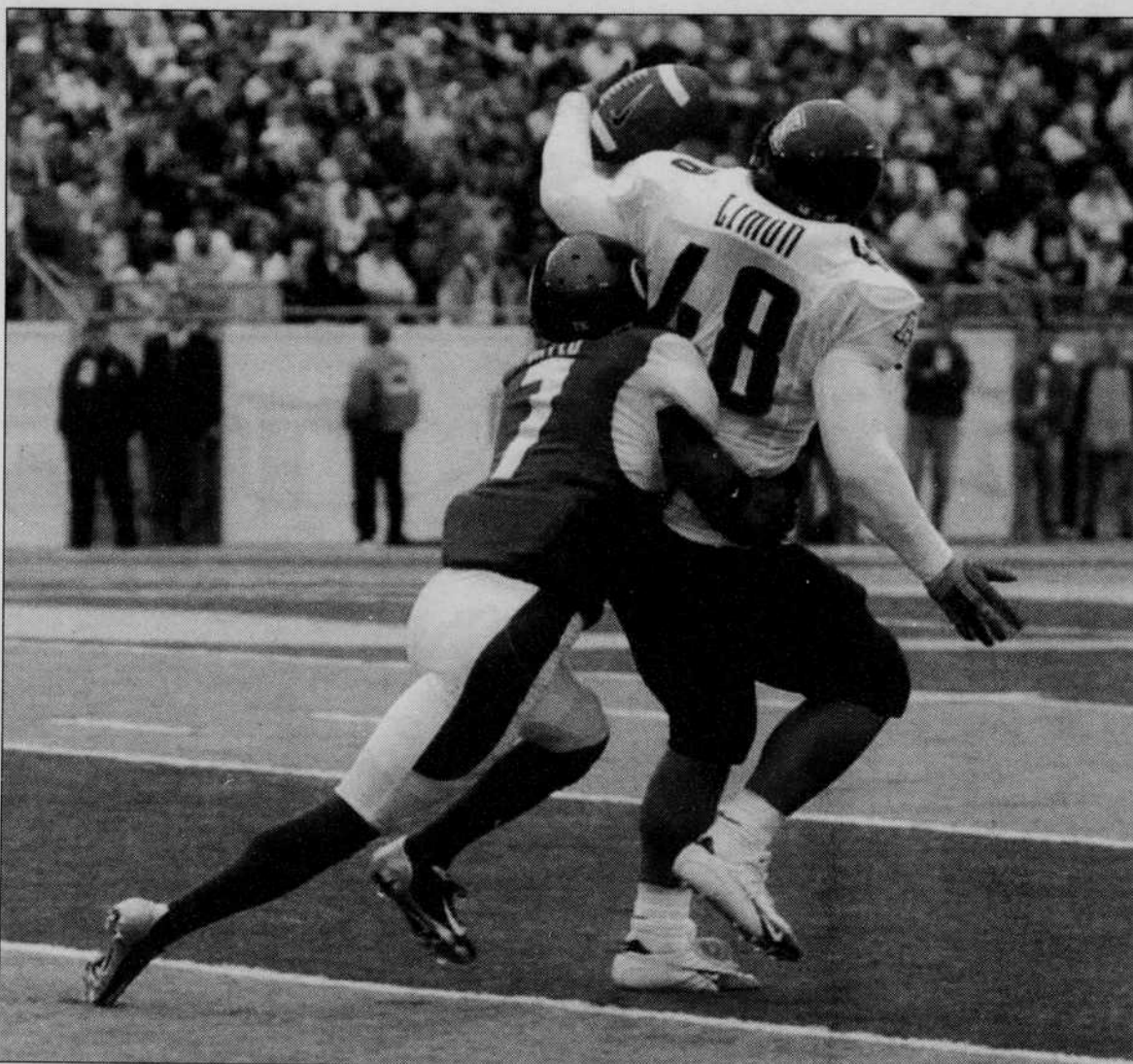
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■ Oregon notes



ERIK R. BISHOFF | PHOTOGRAPHER

Freshman cornerback Jackie Bates (7) attempts to break up a pass intended for Arizona's Pedro Limon during Oregon's win Saturday.

New look secondary gaining respect in conference play

Freshman Jackie Bates helps a much antagonized group ascend to 23rd in the nation in pass defense

BY BRIAN SMITH
 SPORTS REPORTER

Anybody that has watched the Ducks in the past few years knows that their pass defense left much to be desired.

In 2002, Oregon ranked 115 out of the 117 Division I schools with a 291.15 yards per game average. Last year, the Ducks finished 105th in the nation in pass defense and ranked 50th in total defense, giving up an average of 367 yards per game.

The Ducks have turned around this year. After six games, Oregon is ranked 23rd in the nation in pass defense (174.50 yards per game) and 25th in total defense (303.33 yards per game).

The secondary is led by often maligned Aaron Gipson, who has stepped up his game and now leads the Ducks in interceptions with three — including two last week against Arizona. Another unexpected contributor has been freshman Jackie Bates from De La Salle High School. Bates, like Gipson has been thrown

into the Duck secondary as a true freshman. He grabbed the first interception of his career last week against Arizona and has 11 tackles, including one for a loss.

Knebel returns from minor ankle injury

Oregon's offensive line will receive a boost this week when Robin Knebel returns from an ankle injury he suffered against Arizona State on Oct. 2.

The senior offensive lineman will try to shore up a line that has ceded 13 sacks in the previous three games and ranks last in the Pacific-10 Conference in sacks allowed with 20.

Oregon has been forced to shuffle the right side of the line all year long, rotating Knebel, Ian Reynoso, Michael DeLaGrange, Shawn Flanagan and Geoff Schwartz to fill the right guard and right tackle positions.

In his weekly press conference, Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti expressed concern over the interior of the line.

"I don't know if they improved,"

Bellotti said, "but they played well enough to win. I was not as happy at times with our play at center and right guard."

Knebel's return will help answer questions on the right side of the line.

Knebel is tied for third in career starts with DeLaGrange at 17. Only Adam Snyder and Nick Steitz have more, with 30 and 31, respectively.

"Robin will help us in that regard," Bellotti said. "He has played a third to half the time at center this year, and it allows us more flexibility with our interior positions."

Turnovers a deciding factor

Another intangible issue of the game is the turnover margin. According to Bellotti, there is no greater indicator toward wins and losses in college football than turnover margin, which does not bode well for the Ducks if that is the case. They are currently ranked 86th in the nation in that category with a -.67 per game average (11 takeaways, 15 turnovers). Stanford, comparatively, is tied for 17th nationally and third in the Pac-10 with a turnover margin of +1.0 (14 takeaways, 8 turnovers).

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Gipson: Pupil to teacher in two seasons

Continued from page 3B

than a physical one.

"Aaron Gipson was somewhat psychologically scarred after his freshman season," Bellotti said. "He went through a period where he was uncertain and he pouted a bit."

Gipson even went to Bellotti's office to see where his place on the team was and, according to Gipson, Bellotti didn't know.

"In the end I decided it takes a stronger man to stay and overcome something than run away," Gipson said.

Redemption

Now in his junior year, Gipson has turned the naysayers into believers.

"Everybody is saying that Aaron Gipson is so good now," senior Jerry Matson said. "He was good when he first came here. If only people saw me play as a freshman. I was probably in trouble 20-times more than any other defensive back you've ever seen."

Gipson now gives advice to Jackie Bates, a true freshman corner who is in nearly the same position Gipson faced.

"I always talk to him and let him

know that he is good," Gipson said. "He's a lot further along than I was when I was a freshman."

But that's the type of teammate Gipson is, always looking to make others better while knowing he's going to stay on the field.

"Coach Radcliffe told me at the end of my sophomore year that I had to make sure I'm the best one on the field and don't let them take you off," Gipson said. "From then on I took that attitude."

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