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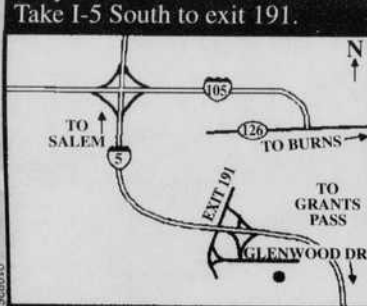
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■ Game of the week

Elite quarterbacks square off when ASU travels to Cal

In Saturday's game, the play callers will be the main focus on the field

BY ALEX TAM
FREELANCE SPORTS REPORTER

A battle of two of the top quarterbacks in the Pacific-10 Conference will take place this weekend.

California's Aaron Rodgers and Arizona State's Andrew Walter square off in one of the most intriguing matchups of the conference season when No. 7 California (5-1 overall, 3-1 Pac-10) hosts No. 20 Arizona State (6-1, 3-1) in Berkeley, Calif., 7 p.m. Saturday.

Walter said it is always a pleasure to play against another quality quarterback who is also considered a prospect to play on Sundays in the NFL.

"Absolutely, it's always a fun thing," Walter said. "Any time you play against a guy who gets a lot of attention from the media — it's very fun to play against those guys."

Walter, a senior, was named the Pac-10 Offensive Player of the Week after throwing 415 yards and passing for a career-high six touchdowns to lead Arizona State to a 48-42 come-from-behind victory against UCLA last week. Walter is now one touchdown pass away from tying the legendary John Elway for the Pac-10 all-time mark of 77.

"I am someone who can make the big throw when the game is on the line," Walter said. "Anything that needs to be done, I'll do it."

Walter said that his counterpart this weekend is just as good and is a very fundamentally sound quarterback who has played great within the California offensive system in his career.

"(Rodgers) uses timing within the system, and he plays awesome," Walter said. "He does everything they ask of him, I'm sure. He's had a great couple of seasons."

Dating back to last season, Rodgers has passed for a total of 4,279 yards and has thrown 28 touchdowns and just nine interceptions. In last week's 38-0 victory over Arizona, Rodgers passed for 235 yards and three touchdowns to lead a California offense that averages 40.8 points and more than 509 yards per game.

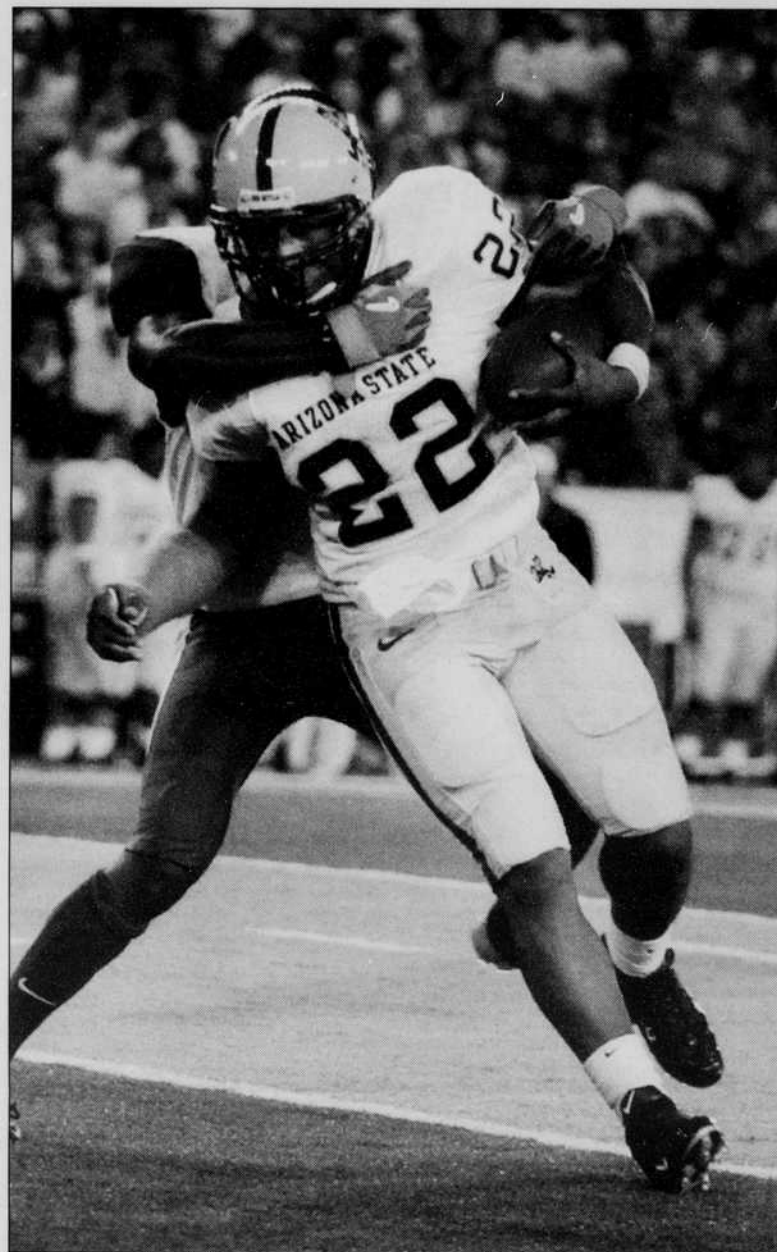
The difference between the two quarterbacks, however, has been a consistent rushing game (or lack thereof) that can help take the pressure off during the game.

Arizona State's rushing game has been anything but spectacular, as the running backs have been mustering just 2.9 yards per carry. That mark ranks next to last in the Pac-10, just ahead of Oregon State, which averages a mediocre 2.7 yards per carry.

The Sun Devils' running game has been decimated by injuries to tailbacks Cornell Candidate and Randy Hill and the suspension of Loren Wade from the team. Last week, Arizona State had to rely on redshirt freshman Preston Jones, who compiled just 76 yards in 16 carries.

"It's a very interesting situation. We've been just like the Bad News Bears, putting whoever we have left back there," Walter said. "We don't know who is going to be in the backfield from week to week."

Meanwhile, California's rushing game is the best in the Pac-10 and ranks ninth in the country. Behind starting tailback J.J. Arrington, the Golden Bears have run for 1,473 yards this season as a team and hold an impressive 5.9 yards per carry.



DANIELLE HICKEY | PHOTO EDITOR

Arizona State tailback Hakim Hill is expected to return to the lineup after serving a one-game suspension. The leading rusher was suspended for a weight-room incident on Oct. 17.

The 5-foot-11, 210-pound Arrington has garnered 918 yards and scored 10 touchdowns in only six games so far this year. He is also on pace to smash the single-season rushing record at California held by Chuck Muncie, who had 1,460 yards in 1975. Arrington is on pace for 1,683 yards this season.

Arizona State head coach Dirk Koetter said California's running game is so good that backup running back Marshawn Lynch, who is a true freshman, is averaging a gaudy 7.6 yards per carry and averages 42 yards per game.

"They have an awesome 1-2 punch," Koetter said. "Arrington has the speed to go all the way and the power to break tackles and hit the holes quick. Lynch is one of those guys that breaks a lot of tackles and runs hard."

Koetter said that California is not just a one dimensional team with a great offense, but possesses one of the best defenses as well. The Golden Bears' defense ranks first in the Pac-10 and 9th in the country, giving up only 268 yards of offense and 14.3 points per game this season.

"They are very sound, they don't beat themselves," Koetter said. "They are an excellent tackling team on defense, they get off blocks very well, they will blitz you, play a soft zone, they mix it up, and they play extremely hard."

However, Koetter said he feels his team is prepared and ready to continue its season-long success on an offense that averages 32 points per game.

"They are going to present some challenges, but what a great position

for us, what a great opportunity for us," Koetter said. "I think our guys are pretty confident in what we are going to do."

California head coach Jeff Tedford said he recognizes that his opponent this weekend also possesses a strong defense that gave up just 12.8 points per game through the first five games of this season. Leading the Sun Devils' defensive unit is its linebacking crew, consisting of juniors Dale Robinson and Jamar Williams and senior Justin Burks. The trio has accounted for more than one-third of the team's tackles, accumulating 159 total tackles combined.

However, in the last two games, Arizona State's defense has struggled after surrendering a combined 87 points to UCLA and USC.

"Defensively, they fly around, they're very athletic, and they're physical up front," said Tedford, a former offensive coordinator at Oregon. "They have a very good linebacking core, (who are) very good tacklers. It's a good matchup."

When Tedford was asked about whether this weekend's game will be the biggest challenge of the season, he said there is "no question about it."

"Every game is critical — as they all are — but as you go through, the games in October and November are the ones that usually stick in your mind," Tedford said. "These are the ones that we really have to be ready for down the stretch here, no question."

Alex Tam is a freelance reporter for the Daily Emerald

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