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UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Big plays and strong defense crucial to beating ASU

Demetrius Williams has returned to form after an injury-plagued 2004

BY SHAWN MILLER
SPORTS EDITOR

There aren't many match-ups between teams averaging more than five touchdowns per game, but that is exactly the situation for No. 25 Oregon (4-1 overall, 1-1 conference) and No. 17 Arizona State (3-2, 1-1) Saturday in Tempe, Ariz.

In order to score, a team needs a fire burner, a receiver that can stretch the field. Arizona State has senior Derek Hagan, while the Ducks boast veteran Demetrius Williams, a senior that is quickly climbing Oregon's all-time charts.

Williams dedicated the off-season to resting a nagging injury and fine-tuning the smaller aspects of the receiving game.

"This is certainly the most conscientiously work effort that Demetrius has put in," Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said. "And probably it was spurred on by the frustration of last year. He got turf toe in the second game and was never healthy. In fact really did play after that anywhere up to his abilities."

Williams suffered a turf toe injury against Oklahoma last year. The injury sidelined him for much of the season and when he was on the field he couldn't plant, pivot or dig without a grimace and a limp.

"We missed him — he was the play maker that we didn't have," Bellotti said. "We lost the ability to have the big play."

That translated into the most disappointing season the football program has had in recent years. The losses and a lack of playing time created the energy for Williams to put in one more repetition and pushed him to commit to one more drill when workouts had ended.

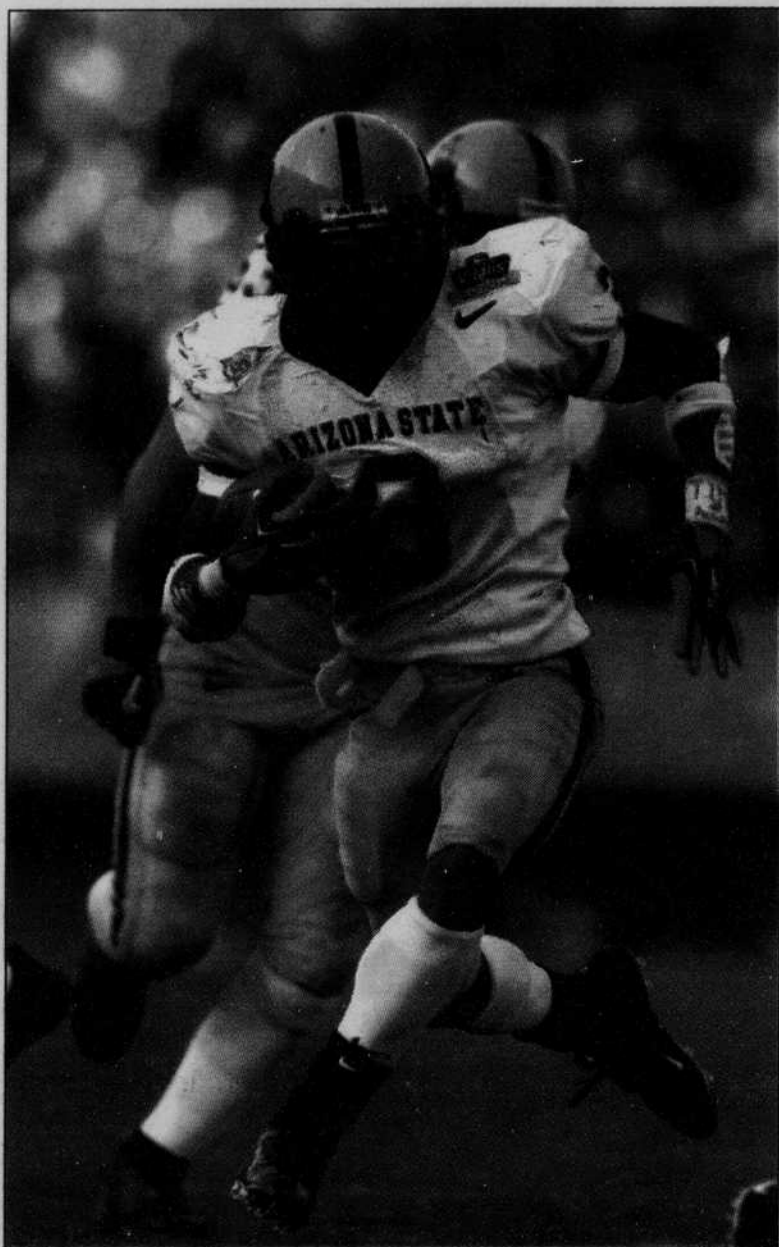
"This year, being Demetrius' senior year ... one, there is a certain greater motivation to be physically fit, especially when you've come off a year when physical injuries hampered your performance. I think that was part of the motivation," Bellotti added. "The second was that he led the conference in yards per catch as sophomore and as a junior he was a non-entity. I think he wanted to help this football team, help this football program and help himself. He's more aggressive, more confident."

The time put in is paying off as Williams has 573 yards receiving and five touchdowns halfway through the season. He ranks sixth on Oregon's all-time receiving yards list with 2,173, fifth on receptions with 136 and owns the school record for career 100-yard receiving games with nine.

With all of the talk about offense this week, the win comes down to which team's defense performs better. The Oregon defense welcomed the return of senior defensive end Devan Long last week, who recorded his first sack of the season after missing three straight games due to a leg injury. Long is amped for the game and the test to see how good the Ducks really are.

"It's a big game, a huge game," Long said. "We've got to go down there and got to have a good game. If we don't do that nobody is going to respect us. Nobody cares if we beat Stanford, nobody cares if we beat Montana. They want to see us beat someone that is an admirable opponent and Arizona State is definitely that."

Arizona State is coming off a 38-28



COURTESY

Arizona State running back Rudy Burgess (3) is second on the team with 219 rushing yards and tied for the team lead with five total touchdowns this season.



Oregon's Terrence Whitehead (24) will return to the starting lineup Saturday at Arizona State. Whitehead missed last week's game at Stanford because of a groin strain.

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loss to top-ranked USC, a game where the Sun Devils led 21-3 at the half. Despite the frustration of nearly ending the Trojans' 25-game winning streak, Arizona State head coach Dirk Koetter insists his team isn't about to suffer another letdown.

"We were all disappointed, frustrated, sore, tired, all the things you expect a team to be after a game like that," Koetter said. "Our guys know what is at stake."

Quarterback Sam Keller, who leads the Pacific-10 Conference in touchdown passes with 18, threw five interceptions against the Trojans and is eager to get back on the field in search of the next completion and to level any doubts of a possible letdown.

"We are going to come out just like

we did after people thought there was going to be a letdown against Northwestern," Keller said of the game following a 35-31 loss to LSU in week two. "We are going to come out and we are going to be firing on all cylinders because that is the kind of team we have."

Both teams are in search of a big win over a ranked opponent — one is looking to solidify itself as a top tier program while the other wants to get rid of the sour taste left over after giving up a potential victory against No. 1 USC.

The answer is whoever wins Saturday. The question remains, who will find what they are looking for?

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