

■ Arizona State notes

ASU sports steady running attack and tough defense

Sun Devils aim for fourth consecutive series win against the Ducks

BY SCOTT J. ADAMS
SPORTS REPORTER

Arizona State joined Oregon as one of the only two teams in the nation this season to hold a halftime lead over No. 1 USC. Like the Ducks, the No. 17 Sun Devils could not compensate for second-half adjustments made by the Trojans. They fell 38-28.

Following a win over Stanford last weekend, Oregon quarterback Kellen Clemens said he and his teammates have put the loss to USC behind them. Wideout Derek Hagan of the Sun Devils followed suit on Monday.

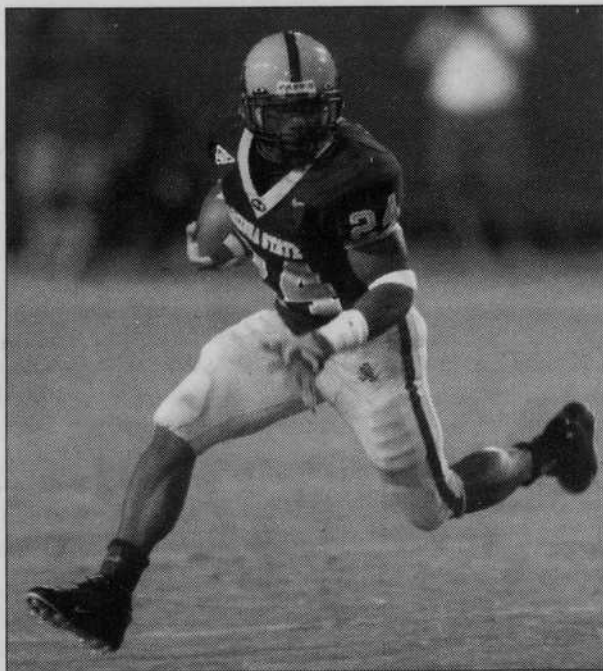
"We put the game behind us already," Hagan said. "We know that if we finished the game we would have come out on top."

Keller played with heart against the Trojans, but his five interceptions sealed Arizona State's fate. Keller threw for 347 yards and two touchdowns in the game and is expected by Hagan to bounce back this week against the Ducks.

"I think (Keller) will be fine," Hagan said. "Sam is just one of those guys; when things go wrong he'll keep playing and just put it behind him."

Hagan has been Keller's most reliable target this season. The senior had 10 grabs against the Trojans, good for 162 yards. He may be one of the most dangerous receivers the Oregon secondary will face this season.

Arizona State's rushing attack has been consistent this season, utilizing a tailback-by-committee system directed by head coach Dirk Koetter. Sophomore Rudy Burgess, freshman Keegan Herring and junior Randy Hill have created a steady balance at tailback and helped the Sun Devils to fourth-place in the Pacific-10 Conference with 852 total rushing yards. Under running-game coordinator Brent Myers, the Arizona State backfield has been successful carrying the ball out of singleback sets, similar to what Oregon uses. Also like Oregon, the Sun Devils use an H-Back to contribute to running and passing plays.



COURTESY

Freshman running back Keegan Herring has rushed for five touchdowns and 6.9 yards per carry this season for the Sun Devils.

Sacks aplenty

Going into the season, there were many doubts about whether Arizona State's defense would be able to force quarterbacks out of the pocket and create sacks. Thus far, the defense has been a pressure cooker, led by the Sun Devils' young but suffocating defensive line. Last Saturday, senior linebacker Jamar Williams sacked USC quarterback Matt Leinart in the second quarter forcing the Trojans to settle for a field goal. It was the first of five sacks recorded by the Sun Devils that afternoon, the most made by a USC opponent since Stanford put Leinart to the turf six times in 2004. Arizona State's defense is third in the conference in sacks with 14, but has been suspect to both the run and pass this season. They rank eighth in the Pac-10 in passing defense and ninth in rushing defense. They have surrendered almost 1,000 yards on the ground and gave up 100 rushing yards to both Reggie Bush and LenDale White of USC.

Score early if you can

Oregon may be in for a frustrating first quarter if Arizona State's defense plays as stingy as it has lately. The Sun Devils already have four games this

season in which they have held their opponents scoreless in the first quarter. They managed to do so last week against USC and have outscored the opposition 35-7 in the opening frame thus far.

No slack on special teams

Arizona State ranks third in the conference in both average kickoff (24.5) and punt returns (15.3) yards. Junior Terry Richardson put the Sun Devils on the board first against USC with an 84-yard punt return for a touchdown. Richardson's efforts earned him honors as the Pac-10 Special Teams Player of the Week. Junior placekicker Jesse Ainsworth leads the team in scoring (36) and is a perfect 30-30 in PATs.

Seniors love the Ducks

The Arizona State seniors may be 0-4 against USC, but they are 3-0 against Oregon and would love to graduate with a perfect record over the Ducks. The Oregon seniors are anxious to notch their first win in their last game against the Sun Devils. Starting with last year, Arizona State has beaten Oregon by scores of 28-13, 59-14 in 2003 and 45-42 in 2002.

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