

On The Sidelines

Oregon backups Dennis Dixon and Brady Leaf face former Duck DuRocher in a battle of the clipboards

BY SCOTT J. ADAMS
SPORTS REPORTER

You can find a talented group of quarterbacks locked in heated competition for depth chart status at just about any school, but it is a rarity to find a group as close-knit as the one found at Oregon.

Aside from vying for playing time behind starting quarterback Kellen Clemens at practice, Oregon's sophomore backups Dennis Dixon and Brady Leaf have become friends while in college. Their rapport off the field has helped their morale at practice, where both are growing more accustomed to playing in Oregon's new spread offense. Both Dixon and Leaf are optimistic about their futures and pleased with the progress they have made.

"I have accomplished a lot while being a backup behind Kellen," Dixon said. "I have to thank him and my line for helping me learn things week by week, day by day. It's coming along and I have to thank them for that."

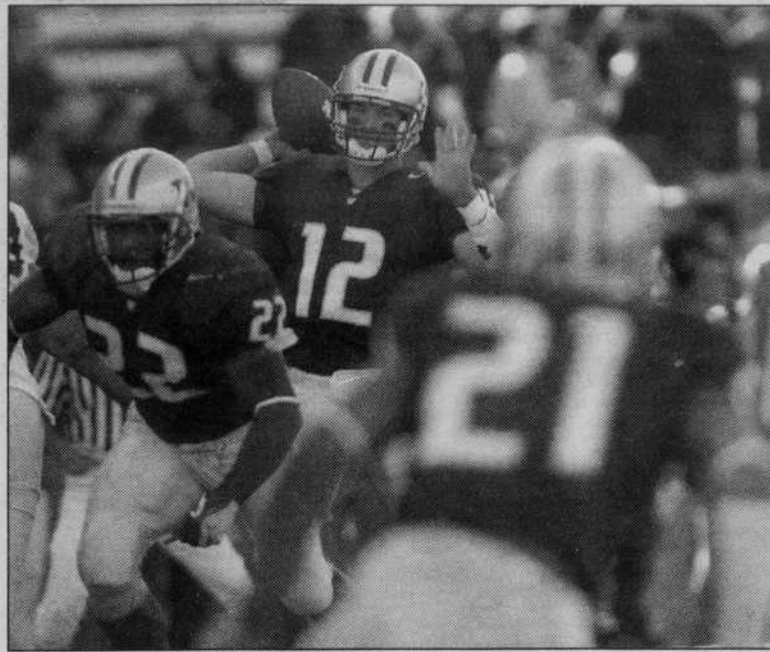
Dixon has seen limited playing time this year, but has made the most of his appearances. In Oregon's season opener against Houston, the San Leandro, Calif., native ran in a touchdown from 1 yard out and orchestrated two lengthy drives late in the game. Fans saw Dixon's versatility against USC, where in one drive he amassed more than 20 yards both through the air and

on the ground. Dixon has all the attributes necessary to play as the 'new-aged' quarterback; he can run-and-shoot out of the pocket and cut past defenders running the option. He has been content holding a clipboard on the sideline this season, patiently honing his skills for next year, a year in which he aims to pick up where Clemens leaves off.

"My expectations for next season are to fulfill some big shoes," Dixon said. "It's going to take a lot of work in the summertime and everything, but I think I'm ready for the challenge."

Replacing senior Clemens as starting quarterback will indeed be a challenge for Dixon, as he will also have to fend off his friend Leaf. Leaf's style as a pocket-passer may not be as flashy as Dixon's, but it has served him well. He has seen time on the field this year as Oregon's holder, and like Dixon he has lofty aspirations heading into spring camp. Leaf has learned much from both Clemens and Dixon and enjoys his time playing alongside them.

"I have learned from Kellen to keep my composure," Leaf said. "We're learning new things week in and week out on the field and during film, and he's helped me along through a lot of it. I'm going to take the role that I can on this team next year, and although I'm going to be fighting with Dennis next year for the starting role, I just need to take what's there for me."



COURTESY

Washington quarterback Johnny DuRocher (12) throws over the middle against Idaho. The former Duck sits second on the Huskies' depth chart.

Leaf appreciates the rapport he has with the other quarterbacks.

"Me, Kellen and Dennis have a great relationship with one another," Leaf said. "We all get along fine and things are great between us."

Dixon earned his second-string spot in the offseason, impressing both head coach Mike Bellotti and offensive coordinator Gary Crowton with his dominating physical ability. The lanky quarterback shows great similarity in appearance and potential to Texas' Vince Young and Missouri's Brad

Smith. Dixon currently holds the school record for the fastest 40-yard dash among quarterbacks. His 4.51 recorded last winter was enough to surpass former quarterback Akili Smith, who held the record for the past eight years. Dixon has committed himself to being as ready as possible to jump in for Clemens during a game should he be needed.

"I make sure that I'm on my game because I know I'm a play away from being a starter, so I have to be ready,"

QUARTERBACKS, page 7B



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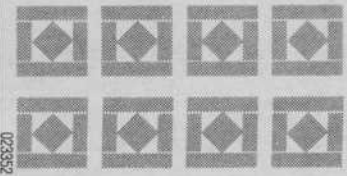
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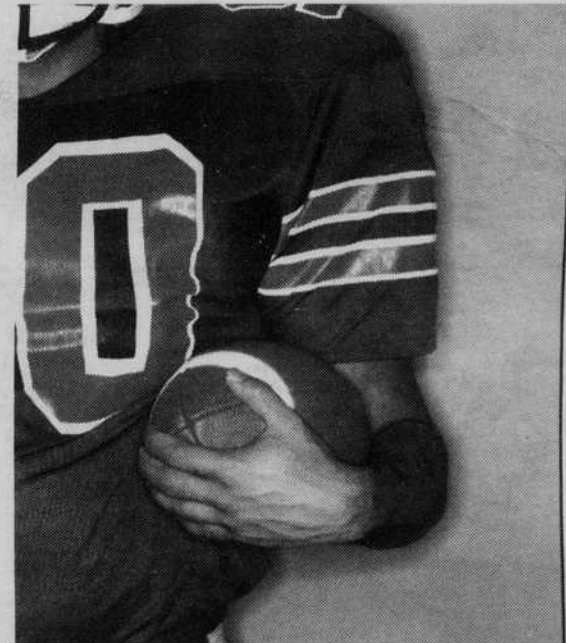
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