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IN BRIEF

Haloti Ngata opts to
leave Oregon for NFL

Oregon junior defensive tackle Haloti Ngata, who became the Ducks' first defensive lineman in 18 years to win the team's Most Valuable Player award, has opted to forego his final year of eligibility in order to enter the National Football League's draft to be held April 29-30.

The 6-foot-5, 338-pound Ngata also became Oregon's first consensus All-American in 43 years after finishing with 61 tackles in 2005, including a career-high 11 tackles in this season's 27-20 overtime win against California. He recorded at least one tackle for a loss in nine of Oregon's 12 games this season and established a school record seven blocked kicks during his tenure.

The Salt Lake City native was named the Pacific-10 Conference's Co-Defensive Player of the Year and was one of three finalists for the

Outland Trophy, awarded annually to the nation's top interior lineman. He also finished as one of the final five nominees for the Bronko Nagurski Trophy for the nation's most outstanding defensive player.

Ngata is Oregon's fifth player ever to leave early for the NFL draft. He joins defensive back Kenny Wheaton (1997), running back Onterio Smith (2003), tight end George Wrihster (2003) and defensive tackle Igor Olshansky (2004).

Luke Andrews

Football notes

Last-minute excitement
not new to Holiday Bowl

The bowl was the last game for 13 Oregon seniors
who led the program to its third-ever 10-win season

BY LUKE ANDREWS
SPORTS REPORTER

SAN DIEGO — The magic of the Oregon Ducks in 2005 fell inches short and into the arms of Clint Ingram in the 28th Holiday Bowl as Oklahoma survived a late scare and hung on to win 17-14 over the then-sixth-ranked Ducks.

Oregon entered the game a winner in its last seven games, three of which were decided by late touchdowns.

However, in typical Holiday Bowl fashion, the Ducks and Sooners battled until the late interception by Ingram sealed the victory for the Sooners, their sixth win in their last seven games. It was the 19th time in the 28-year history of the bowl that the game has been decided in the final two minutes.

Down 17-7 in the fourth quarter, Oregon, led by a host of standout seniors, began the march back, starting with senior strong safety Anthony Trucks. Trucks forced and recovered a fumble by Oklahoma's Adrian Peterson as Peterson lunged toward the goal line.

Two possessions later, Brady Leaf helped the Ducks convert two fourth downs (one by penalty), then found senior tight end Tim Day for a 3-yard touchdown — his first of the season — cutting the score to 17-14.

Oregon got the ball back for its final drive attempt with 3:04 to play after senior Justin Phinisee broke up Oklahoma quarterback Rhett Bomar's pass attempt on third down.

After the punt, Leaf marched the Ducks from their own 22-yard line down to the Sooners' 20, highlighted by senior running back Terrence Whitehead's 37-yard catch and run into Oklahoma territory. The catch gave Whitehead 134 receptions for his career — sixth best overall in school history.

But Ingram intercepted Leaf later in the drive as Leaf attempted to loft a pass to senior wideout Demetrius Williams near the endzone.

The pass, and game, ended the careers of 13 Oregon seniors who helped

the Ducks turn a 5-6 season last year into a 10-2 record this season. The starting seniors include Trucks, the co-defensive player of the game, Devan Long, Ian Reynoso, Darius Sanders, Day, Phinisee, Whitehead and senior cornerback Aaron Gipson.

"We didn't want to give up," said All-Pac-10 selection Gipson. "We wanted to show a lot of heart. We just tried to play hard. Every senior at every position just tried to take care of their group; not a lot of outspoken guys, but a lot of guys handling things amongst themselves. That got the job done this year."

Many of the seniors came to Eugene in 2002, the year following a monumental win for the program in the Fiesta Bowl over Colorado.

"I think it's a special group," Oregon coach Mike Bellotti said. "They have done an amazing job this year of competing, of pulling together, of supporting each other and of believing in each other."

Ducks flounder until
the end of the second half

Clinging to a 7-3 lead at the break, Oregon became the eighth team in the last nine Holiday Bowl games to lose after leading at halftime. The Ducks tallied negative nine total yards in the third quarter and, at one point in the fourth quarter, had gained four total yards in the second half. Meanwhile, after limiting Oklahoma's Peterson to eight yards on eight carries in the first half, the sophomore back came alive in the third quarter, gaining 51 yards on eight carries.

"You have to credit Oklahoma, they have an amazing running back," Phinisee said. "He did his thing today, but for the most part, we feel good about our defense."

Peterson finished the game with 84 yards on 23 carries.

Bellotti digs deep into
his bag of football tricks

Bellotti has become accustomed to pulling out all the stops during

bowl season. In the Ducks' last trip to San Diego for the 2000 Holiday Bowl against Texas, Bellotti called a reverse pass that resulted in an 18-yard touchdown reception by then-quarterback Joey Harrington from wideout Keenan Howry.

Bellotti again revealed his trickster mentality, calling five unorthodox plays, including a reverse pass from wideout Garren Strong to quarterback Dennis Dixon that fell incomplete.

The Ducks also attempted a fake field goal, which resulted in a pass interference penalty and first down, a fake punt that also resulted in a first down, a flea flicker that fell incomplete and a reverse toss to Williams that marked the game's first touchdown.

"You get three weeks — it's like drawing in the dirt. I was very pleased and proud that, one, we were courageous enough to use them and two, they worked," Bellotti said.

Dragich shines for Oregon

Junior punter Matt Dragich produced his biggest game statistically in the bowl game. The junior college transfer, in addition to a season-high 45.1 average on eight punts including a 56 yarder, ran 20 yards on a fake punt during Oregon's first possession.

The carry was his first career run and his eight punts were a season and career high, surpassing his seven punts against California.

Sooners and Ducks
becoming rivals

The 2005 Holiday Bowl marked the second of three consecutive years that Oregon and Oklahoma will meet. Last season in Norman, Okla., the Sooners defeated the Ducks 31-7. The two teams will meet next season on Sept. 16 in Eugene. Oklahoma now owns the all-time series against Oregon, 6-0.

"My compliments to Oregon," Oklahoma coach Bob Stoops said. "I really respect them and the way they play. I like the way they coach and we have a great rivalry started here that we'll continue next season."

Oregon has now lost three straight bowl games.

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