

Pac-12 appears to continue trend of self-cannibalization

By Anne M. Peterson
The Associated Press

There's talk every season about how the Pac-12 cannibalizes itself.

Just last week, Oregon coach Mario Cristobal used the word following the Ducks' 34-20 loss to Washington State in Pullman. Then Oregon fell 44-15 on the road at Arizona on Saturday, which was marked by dramatic conference upsets.

After the chaos, the Cougars were still the only one-loss Pac-12 team left, and they have only a longshot of making the College Football Playoff.

Conference coaches often point to parity in the Pac-12 as the reason that it's difficult for a league team to rise to the top of the national conversation. And yes, it seems antithetical that parity might be hurting the Pac-12, but the heart of the issue is the schedule.

It's notable that no Pac-12 school has played in the CFP championship game since Oregon faced Ohio State following the 2014-15 season, the first year of the playoff. The ACC and the SEC are the only conferences to have teams represented in the playoffs each year since.

Coincidentally, the three other Power 5 conferences, including the Pac-12, play a nine-game conference schedule, one more than the ACC and SEC.

The nine-game league schedule has been criticized because it's obviously more difficult, and there's less likelihood that a team will



Lance Iversen/AP file photo

Oregon State starting quarterback Conor Blount, left, looks for a receiver against Nevada earlier this season in Reno, Nevada.

finish undefeated — which lowers the odds of getting coveted playoff berths. That challenges a conference where some key matchups are played late.

Stanford coach David Shaw pointed to how some Pac-12 teams will play a grueling stretch of consecutive conference games without an off week, while other conferences schedule less taxing nonconference games later in the year. Late season

nonconference games in the Pac-12 tend to be against higher-profile opponents, like Notre Dame, he said.

"My point, for the longest time, is to make sure all the conferences have very similar ways to schedule," he said. "That's the only way we can truly evaluate or compare."

Washington coach Chris Petersen agreed the tough schedule has an impact, but said ultimately the playoffs should be expanded to

include the possibility of a two-loss team making the field.

"Well, I think if there's that much parity, and you know you're going to have a team with at least two losses and you're out, it definitely hurts you. The answer is, if you're going to take a league that's got a lot of parity and you think it's still a really good league, you've got to take the league champions," he said. "You've got to expand that situation, but we're not there yet."

Parity becomes a focus on a day like last Saturday, when upsets ruled.

— Oregon State pulled off the biggest, winning a conference game for the first time since 2016 with a 41-34 overtime victory on the road at Colorado.

— Unranked Arizona downed the visiting Ducks, giving then-No. 19 Oregon back-to-back losses and three total league losses.

— Arizona State topped USC 38-35, ending the Trojans' 19-game winning streak at the Coliseum and edging Clay Helton closer to the hotseat.

— California defeated Washington 12-10 without scoring an offensive touchdown.

— Washington State's 41-38 win over Stanford was also technically an upset because the Cardinal were a 3-point favorite at home.

Cougars coach Mike Leach also pointed to the nine-game conference slate, while also suggesting the playoffs should be expanded. But he also said he believes the Pac-12 is

really that good.

"I think our conference is the hardest one to win in every week," he said on Tuesday's Pac-12 teleconference.

Ultimately, that parity may end up hurting Washington State because losses are dropping the Cougars' conference opponents out of the rankings. The Pac-12 had five teams in the AP Top 25 last week, and now there are just two.

The taxing nine-game conference schedule could be hurting the Pac-12 more generally in the postseason. Last year, the league went just 1-8 in bowl games.

Critics also point to frequent Thursday and Friday night games, as well as late-night Saturday starts, that are dictated by the Pac-12's television contracts. That means East Coast viewers don't necessarily see key games, putting the league's teams and star players at a disadvantage when it comes to poll voting or postseason award consideration.

Utah coach Kyle Whittingham, whose team popped up to No. 16 in the rankings with a win over UCLA on Friday night, said he can't concern himself too much with how the Pac-12 stacks up against the other conferences.

"Don't really worry about that to be honest with you," Whittingham told reporters Monday. "The Pac-12 is competitive and everybody is beating each other up, but our world is the Pac-12 and so I don't really focus on any other stuff."



Ronald Bond/The Observer

La Grande goalkeeper Christian Waugaman, right, dives to make a save during the first half Tuesday night.

TIGERS

Continued from Page 7A and I think we did that today. We would have liked to have been a little more lucky, maybe have one go in or take a couple more shots, but all in all I'm proud of how they played."

The difference came down to a fortuitous bounce or two. Even Huskies' Head Coach Rafael Pelaez conceded there was a little luck on their side.

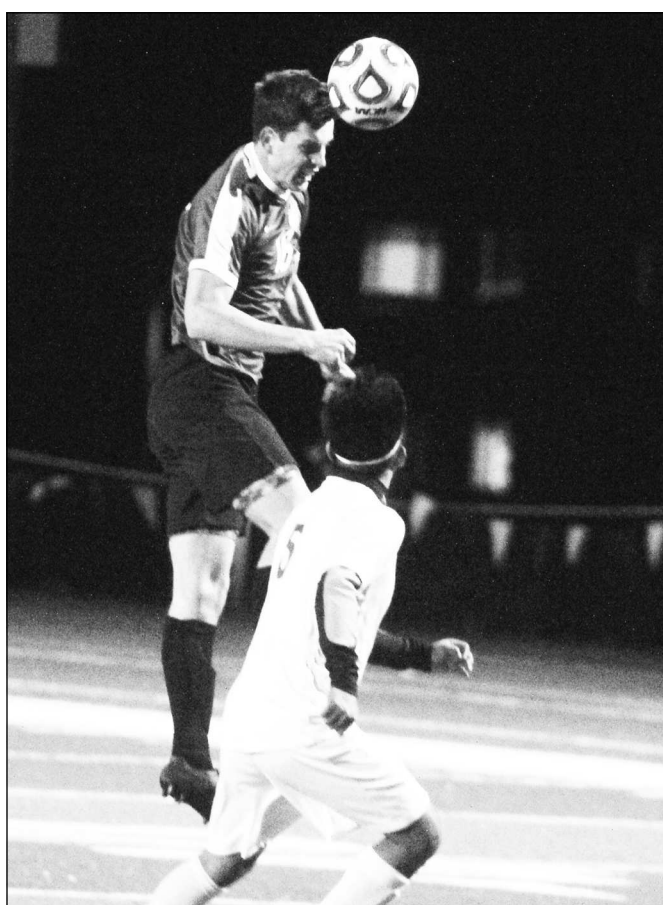
"We can't say we played better than them or they played better than us. The game was even," he said. "We got lucky (that) our shots when in."

The first Huskies goal, which came in the 33rd minute, was off a free kick from near midfield that took a bounce off a La Grande defender and went right to Lopez, who put home a shot from the left side for the 1-0 lead.

"Our positioning was good," Wright said. "They just happened to have a guy standing there (who) ripped off a heck of a shot. That was a nice play."

Close chances defined the second half. The clean play from the first 40 minutes was even cleaner after halftime, with La Grande finishing the final passes on their combinations to set up some additional shots. But a few were just wide, and a couple balls played into the box didn't find a Tiger player.

Agabo finally put in what



Ronald Bond/The Observer

La Grande's Luke Bloodgood connects on a header during the second half Tuesday night.

appeared to be the dagger goal for the Huskies, but La Grande responded quickly.

"I liked our response after both (goals)," Wright said.

Christian Waugaman recorded four saves for the Tigers.

Aaron Corsini, one of La Grande's five seniors who took the field for the final time along with Waugaman, Adam Endress, Scott Remily and Luke Bloodgood, was also proud of his team and spoke on the evenness of the

match.

"A lot of possession on both sides (and) skilled players on both sides. It was good," he said.

The Tigers' season ends at 7-4-2 overall.

"It's been a great season with the team," Ebel said. "I feel like we've steadily gotten better and better. Tonight we played really, really well. They just didn't fall for us."

Added Corsini: "I'm very proud of the team. This was a really good team this season."

EAGLES

Continued from Page 7A control early, building a 18-6 lead after one quarter and extending the margin to 34-19 at the break.

"I think everyone played one of their best games on both sides of the ball," Homan said. "Offensively and defensively everyone worked amazing together."

Kade Kilgore, who grabbed two interceptions, said despite the early lead, the players allowed nerves

to get to them.

"We let nerves control how we played the first half, and came out in the second half, settled in and played our game," he said.

That quickly changed.

Joseph responded with three scores in the third quarter for a 52-19 lead, and the rout was on.

Christman agreed that nerves were part of the first half, and they were dealt with after halftime.

"It's been 10 years since Joseph football was at the state

level or this kind of competition, so once they settled in, they really took control of the game," the coach said.

Kilgore was also 5-for-10 passing for 71 yards with a score. Trey Wandschneider caught two touchdowns and had 78 yards receiving. Guylen Snyder was key on defense with 8.5 tackles and a pick, which he returned 60 yards for a touchdown.

"It was a great team effort with everyone playing and doing what they needed to do," Christman said.

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