

AP Sports

Beavers miss out on bowl game; Riley reassesses

By
Anne M. Peterson
AP Sports Writer

CORVALLIS, Ore. (AP) — Oregon State coach Mike Riley is facing a growing chorus of questions about whether his old-school offense can cut it in the Pac-12.

Even Riley seems to be having his doubts.

The Beavers went 5-7 overall this season and just 2-7 in the conference. The season ended with a thud in the Civil War, a 47-19 loss to No. 3 Oregon.

Riley is just 2-12 in his last 14 conference games dating back to last season. This season he had a talented quarterback in Sean Mannion, a perfect fit in the Beavers’ pro-style offense, who set the all-time conference record for career passing yards with 13,600 and a school record for touchdown passes with 83.

But Mannion couldn’t carry a team that ranked 76th in the nation in total defense, allowing opponents an average of just over

406 yards, and 70th for total offense, with an average of 393.5 yards.

“We’ll evaluate all the parts of the football end of it — what we do strategically, and how we can change to make us better,” Riley said. “We do that every year. But obviously right now it’s real important to take a good, hard look at that.”

While the “Fire Mike Riley” movement is momentarily loud, it’s not very realistic.

Riley has seven years left on his contract and Oregon State really can’t afford to pay him off. And there’s the matter of location: It’s hard to fault Riley for the challenges of recruiting top players to Corvallis.

With the help of Nike and Phil Knight, rival Oregon has been able to draw players to Eugene with luxurious facilities. Winning has helped immeasurably, too.

A more similar case in point is Washington State, where Mike Leach hasn’t been able to win more than four conference games in each of his three seasons since arriving in Pullman to make over the Cougars.

Riley, if anything, has proven that he is

a master of finding kids that aren’t heavily recruited and turning them into stars. Mannion is the latest example. And plenty of recent Beavers are seeing success in the NFL, including receiver Markus Wheaton of the Steelers, guard Andy Levitre of the Titans, defensive tackle Stephen Paea of the Bears and cornerback Keenan Lewis of the Saints.

Oregon State’s two conference wins this season came against Colorado and, almost surprisingly, then-No. 7 Arizona State. It was the high point of the Beavers’ season and another in a string of big upsets in Corvallis that the team has become known for.

But the Beavers lost close games at home to California and Washington State. In both games, Oregon State had the lead going into the fourth quarter.

“We’ll look back at a lot of probably what we could say are missed opportunities. We would have liked to have done a way better job of keeping some of that momentum from the Arizona State game,” Riley said. “We’d like to turn the clock back and play some of those other games where we were ahead in the

fourth quarter and finish them better.”

For now, without a bowl game to prepare for, all Oregon State has is the future. Nine of 11 starters on defense were seniors, so that will no doubt be a focus for Riley and his staff in the coming months.

Luke Del Rio, son of former NFL linebacker and current Denver Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, appears poised to take over for Mannion at quarterback. Del Rio is mobile, and Oregon State could try to capitalize on that skillset by introducing more spread offense elements.

And the Beavers have a good recent record of rebounding: After going 3-9 in 2011, the team went 9-4 the next season.

“I think the future is very bright,” Mannion said. “We had a lot of young guys playing this year, especially on offense and have all gotten better as the year has gone on. This is a great program with a great coaching staff, from top to bottom, and the players work very hard. ... I have total faith that everyone will continue to work hard.”

Arizona has a history of thwarting Mariota

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For Arizona, it hasn’t been a matter of stopping Marcus Mariota, just throwing him a bit off-kilter.

The Wildcats have defeated the Ducks in each of the last two seasons and coach Rich Rodriguez said that’s because Arizona has been able to slow Oregon’s star quarterback with three things: turnovers, effort and luck.

“If you look back at his stats, he got a lot of yards and big plays, but we got a couple turnovers. Some of it was great individual effort and some of it was a little bit of luck,” Rodriguez said. “If you go back to this game or even the game last season, he still got his yards, and he is still going to get his yards and make his plays.”

It appears all but certain at this point that Mariota will be among the Heisman Trophy finalists when they

are announced on Dec. 8. But first the No. 3 Ducks (11-1, 8-1) must play the No. 8 Wildcats (10-2, 7-2) in the Pac-12 championship game on Friday night.

The mobile junior from Hawaii has thrown for at least one touchdown in each of the first 38 games he’s played in at Oregon, an FBS-level record. He’s only lost four games as Oregon’s starter, but two of those came against Arizona.

He set a Pac-12 record this season with 48 total touchdowns, including 36 via pass, 11 keepers and one TD reception. He leads the nation with nine games of four or more touchdowns this season. His 36 touchdown passes are also an Oregon record.

Overall, Mariota has completed 229 of 334 passes for 3,470 yards and just two interceptions, and he’s the Ducks’ second-leading rusher with 636 yards.

“I think Marcus has been

one of the best quarterbacks in the country since he made his first start,” Rodriguez said.

Arizona has been one of the schools to get to him. The Wildcats have intercepted him three times and forced him to fumble three times over the past three seasons.

Earlier this season, Mariota passed for 276 yards and a pair of touchdowns in a 31-24 loss to Arizona at Autzen Stadium. The Wildcats’ victory had more to do with their ability to stop Oregon’s rush than anything, but Scooby Wright sacked Mariota and stripped him of the ball for a turnover with 2:11 to play. It would be Oregon’s final drive of the game.

“It was a good play by him,” Mariota said at the time. “They ran some coverage that we weren’t really expecting, and I was just trying to make the play. My instincts always lead the ball to go low, and he kind of just ripped it away.”

Arizona routed the Ducks 42-16 last year in Tucson. Mariota threw for 308 yards and two touchdowns, but also had two interceptions.

His first came on Oregon’s first play from scrimmage, when Bralon Addison dropped a pass near the sideline. Arizona cornerback Shaquille Richardson snared the carom and flipped it back to Wright as he was falling out of bounds. Ka’Deem Carey followed with a 6-yard touchdown run to kick start the upset. .

Afterward Mariota said: “It hurts. I haven’t been blown out like this in my life.”

In Mariota’s first year — and Chip Kelly’s last with the Ducks — Oregon blanked Arizona 49-0 at Autzen. Then a redshirt freshman, Mariota threw for 260 yards and two touchdowns, but he was intercepted once.

The Wildcats earned a spot in the league championship game last

Friday when UCLA fell to Stanford and Arizona defeated rival Arizona State 42-35 in the Territorial Cup. The victory lifted the Wildcats four spots in the AP Top 25.

The Ducks closed out the regular season on Saturday with a 47-19 victory over Oregon State in the Civil War rivalry game. Oregon, while at No. 3 in the AP rankings, was No. 2 in the College Football Playoff rankings.

Should the Ducks defeat Arizona for the Pac-12 crown, they’ll assuredly be one of the four teams included in the first playoffs.

Mariota is going to treat it like any other game.

“We’re just going to play our game. Arizona did a great job setting and dictating tempo in the last meeting,” he said. “If we go out and execute to the best of our abilities and execute the game plans that are put in front of us, we should hopefully be successful.”

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