

Oregon QB Marcus Mariota wins Heisman Trophy

By
Ralph Russo
AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Marcus Mariota wrote it all down, every word of his Heisman Trophy acceptance speech. It was a good thing, too, because getting through it might have been tougher than sprinting away from a linebacker or tossing a touchdown pass for Oregon’s understated star.

The junior quarterback became the Ducks’ first Heisman winner going away Saturday night, capping a three-year climb to college football’s most prestigious individual award.

“I’m humbled to be standing here today,” Mariota said moments after he was announced as the winner.

Mariota isn’t a bigger talker, but he steadily worked through his speech, thanking his teammates, teachers, friends and his home state of Hawaii. He finally hit a snag when it came time to thank his mother and father. He needed to take two deep breaths and still he got choked up.

“I had to give thanks to so many people because where I am today, it’s all do to all those people,” Mariota said later. “It’s hard not to get emotional. It’s been a long journey. My emotions got the best of me.”

A pinpoint passer with wide-receiver speed, Mariota came into this season as the favorite to win the 80th Heisman and delivered a performance that turned the presentation ceremony at a theater in Times Square into a foregone conclusion.

Mariota had twice as many points (2,534) as second-place finisher Melvin Gordon (1,250), the record-breaking running back from Wisconsin. The other finalist, Alabama receiver Amari Cooper, was third.

Mariota received the second-highest percentage of possible points (90.92) in Heisman history, behind only Ohio State quarterback Troy Smith, who had 91.63 in 2006. Southern California tailback Reggie Bush received 91.77 percent of possible points in 2005, but his victory was later vacated for violating NCAA rules.

Mariota, the first Hawaii native to win the Heisman, has accounted for a Pac-12-record 53 touchdowns (38 passing, 14 rushing and one receiving) while directing the Ducks’ warp-speed spread offense.

“In Hawaii, if one person is successful, the entire state is successful,” he said, draped in leis at his news conference.

It will be a matchup of Heisman-winning quarterbacks in the College Football Playoff’s Rose Bowl semifinal Jan. 1 with Mariota and the Ducks facing Florida State and Jameis Winston.

“I’m just looking forward to getting back on the field and playing again,” Mariota said. “We do have a team goal.”

In an era when so many Heisman winners seemingly come from out of nowhere — the last two were the first freshmen winners — Mariota’s rise was slow and steady.

Three of the last four Heisman winners were in their first seasons as starters, including Cam Newton, who won the award in his only season at Auburn after transferring from a junior college. Before Newton, three straight sophomores won the award (Tim Tebow of Florida, Sam Bradford of Oklahoma and Mark Ingram of Alabama). Tebow was the first sophomore winner.

Like Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel and Winston, the previous two winners, Mariota started as a redshirt freshman. It quickly established himself as a star, but unlike Johnny Football and Famous Jameis, Mariota wasn’t the face of college football

in his first season.

In his second season he put up numbers that rivaled those of Heisman finalist quarterbacks Winston, Manziel, AJ McCarron and Jordan Lynch, but when it came time to vote for the Heisman, Mariota was forgotten. He didn’t even finish in the top 10 in 2013.

This season Mariota would not be ignored.

He leads the nation in passer rating (186.2), is fifth in total offense (342.5 yards per game) and has led the Ducks to a Pac-12 title with a chance to play for their first national championship.

Of course, patience and poise have defined Mariota’s career. He didn’t start for his high school team until he was a senior — then led Saint Louis in Honolulu to a state title.

A quiet leader with a nice-guy reputation, Mariota brought no off-field baggage to this Heisman ceremony. After a season beset by off-field troubles, including a school hearing into sexual assault allegations, Winston wasn’t a finalist this time around. He finished sixth.

Oregon’s only Heisman finalists before Mariota were quarterback Joey Harrington in 2001 and running back LaMichael James in 2010.

“If you have your punch list of things as a program, the most iconic individual award would be the Heisman Trophy. But like Marcus said, I know he’d trade all that to win as a team,” Oregon coach Mark Helfrich said.

For Harrington, Oregon, with Nike’s help, put up a billboard in Times Square to promote their Heisman candidate.

Oregon didn’t need a billboard to get the word out about Mariota. His play provided all the publicity he needed.

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Scandal-free Heisman ceremony focused on football

By
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NEW YORK (AP) — It was just two guys talking football and posing for pictures with a big bronze trophy.

The day before the Heisman Trophy presentation, Wisconsin running back Melvin Gordon and Alabama wide receiver Amari Cooper answered questions about their sensational seasons, their coaches, their chances to upset Oregon quarterback Marcus Mariota and win college football’s most famous individual award and who might win the national championship.

Cooper wisely passed on making a prediction about how the top-ranked Crimson Tide will do in the College Football Playoff against Ohio State.

Gordon, however, said Friday he’s leaning toward ‘Bama. So much for Big Ten solidarity.

That was about as close to a scandal as you will find at this year’s Heisman ceremony, a welcome

departure from recent years for many fans and voters.

“You hate to think the guy you’re voting for might have done something awful in his personal life away from football,” said Kyle Ringo, a Heisman voter who works for the Boulder Daily Camera in Colorado.

Whether character should count in Heisman voting has been a hot topic in three of the last four years.

Not so much this time around as Mariota, Gordon and Cooper have steered clear of serious public missteps.

“I think character is really important in everything,” Cooper said.

Last season, Florida State quarterback Jameis Winston won the Heisman in a landslide, a little more than a week after a Florida prosecutor decided not to charge him with sexual assault. Winston was accused of rape by female Florida State student.

This year Winston was cited for shoplifting in the offseason and suspended for a game in September for shouting an obscene internet meme in a campus cafeteria.

“Once those events happened, I decided to exclude him this year,” said Gene Frenette, of the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville.

Winston’s numbers have fallen off in his sophomore season, he has 17 interceptions in 13 games compared to 10 in 14 last year, but he also has guided the Seminoles to another unbeaten regular season and a spot in the College Football Playoff semifinals against Oregon and Mariota.

“He’s probably not here because of the off-the-field issues,” Gordon said about Winston before praising the quarterback’s play.

In 2012, Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel came to the Heisman presentation with a preseason arrest on his record that nearly got him thrown off the team before he could become Johnny Football.

Two years before that, Auburn’s Cam Newton was asked if he thought he would get to keep the Heisman at the news conference following his victory. The NCAA had investigated Newton’s recruitment, found his father had tried to peddle his son’s

commitment for money, but cleared the quarterback of any wrongdoing.

“The lack of any off-the-field stuff did make (voting) much easier and I think better for college football in general,” said voter Tim Griffin of the San Antonio Express-News.

A few more things to know before the Heisman Trophy is awarded Saturday night for the 80th time.

MARIOTA VICTORY TOUR

Mariota was not in New York on Friday afternoon because he was picking up another trophy. The junior was in Baltimore for the presentation of the Johnny Unitas Golden Arm Award.

Mariota also has won the Davey O’Brien (best quarterback) and two other player of the awards (Maxwell and Walter Camp).

The last player to win the Heisman, Maxwell and Walter Camp in the same season was Newton in 2010. Before that you would have to go back to the late 1990s when Wisconsin running back Ron Dayne did it in 1999 and Texas running back Ricky Williams did it in 1998.

RARE RECEIVER

Cooper is the first wide receiver

to be a finalist for the Heisman since Pittsburgh’s Larry Fitzgerald in 2003. The last receiver to win was Desmond Howard in 1999.

“I can say it surprises me,” Cooper said. “A lot of receivers have had a lot of success since then, like (Texas Tech’s Michael) Crabtree. I think it all depends on what team you play for. Your team’s record, A lot of things go into that.”

FEATURE BACK

Wisconsin is always loaded at running back and frequently spread carries around. This season, Gordon was the guy with 309 carries.

The junior, who has already said he plans to enter the NFL draft in April, said he prepared in the offseason for the increased workload and it’s paying off.

“Feeling a lot better than I thought I would,” he said. “I got 21 carries in the South Carolina game last year and felt like I couldn’t move for two weeks.”

Actually, it was a career-high 25 in the bowl game against the Gamecocks, a total he has matched or surpassed eight times this season.

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