

OREGON

It wasn't long ago Oregon fans felt the Ducks could lose every game in a season. Now there is talk of winning every one.

Oregon won't duck anyone in 1981

Somewhere along the line writing season previews for the University of Oregon football team became a much easier task. It used to be they always turned out sounding like pre-mortem obituaries. You looked for that one stable vital sign, that one blip on the machine. But in the end it was always the same result — taps.

That is the way it used to be.

Now, on the strength of back-to-back winning seasons, there is talk of Pac-10 title contention and bowl possibilities and, oh, won't it be simply dreadful if the Ducks don't win at least seven games. And now the Ducks are redshirting their fifth-leading scorer of all time because they have plenty of other good ones, and wouldn't it be nice to have Dwight Robertson back next year when Reggie Brown is gone?

That's the sort of stuff Oregonians got used to hearing only from Washingtonians or Californians. That sort of talk four years ago might have got you arrested for possession — at the very least for contriving under the influence.

Well, go ahead, shoot off your mouths, folks. It looks like the Ducks are going to back you up. Gee, isn't this fun now? Coach Rich Brooks says this is the best team he has had

since coming to Oregon four years ago. Mind you, last year's team, which whopped both Rose Bowl representative Washington (34-10) and UCLA (20-14) upside the head and tied USC, was no slouch. And, remember, gone from that team is starting quarterback Reggie Ogburn, Vince Goldsmith, the Pac-10's defensive lineman of the year, and eight of their starting compatriots.

But remember also that Brooks wouldn't say the light goes off in his refrigerator when the door closes unless he had been in there and seen for himself. And think back to his first two years when he pretty much said the Ducks would be pretty much awful and they pretty much were. And how the next two years he predicted improvement and respectability, in that order, and got both and more.

In other words, if Brooks says this team is good, then, dang it, it probably is.

To begin with, Kevin Lusk, heir to Ogburn's job, has shown signs of being more than merely capable of filling his predecessor's shoes. Lusk can't run like Ogburn — few could — but he could throw a marshmallow through a brick wall. And there are a few brick walls in the Pac-10.

Lusk is accurate, also, having completed 64 percent (46) of his 72 passes a year ago. And if he isn't the runner Ogburn was, well, who cares? The Ducks have running backs for days and there has to be something for them to do.

The main question mark concerning Lusk is his health. In the spring game he sustained, in Brooks' words, "a partial ligament tear of the small, lateral cartilage" in his knee. As to the prognosis on Lusk's complete recovery in time for the Ducks' opener Sept. 5 at Fresno State, Brooks says simply, "Kevin is coming back very well."

It is quite likely if Oregon had no quarterback at all, it could win a few games by simply snapping the ball to one of its talented backs. Brown, the Duck's best runner of a year ago and fifth in the conference with 775 yards, is back for his senior year. You just know he's good; he had to be, coming out of Malcom X. Shabazz High School in Newark, N.J.

Sophomore redshirt Harry Billups, "the fastest back we have," according to Brooks, will back Brown, while Eugene "Choo Choo" Young and Don Davis back Billups.

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Cornerback Dennis Clay returns to a strong secondary that is just one part of a strong overall Oregon defense.