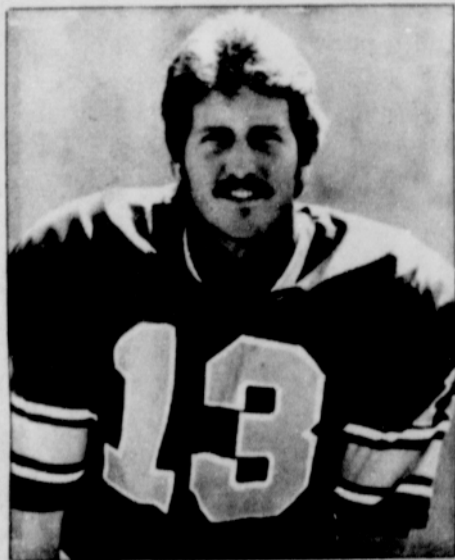


OREGON

Improvement object for subdued Ducks

EUGENE — It was a hot summer day as 95 muscle-bound bodies clad in yellow, green and white practice jerseys sweated through a heavy workout at their practice field along the Willamette River.

Joggers and bikers coming across the Autzen Stadium footbridge stopped by to check out this year's version of the University of Oregon football team. The players looked good. The linemen looked big, strong and mean; the backs, trim and swift. It seemed like a group that could go places.



KEVIN LUSK
Back to full strength

But then again, looks aren't everything. Same time last year, the Ducks had the look of a team destined for great things — ranked 15th nationally in preseason polls, coming off a 6-3-2 season and even talking about a longshot chance at the Rose Bowl.

When the curtain went up, Oregon fell flat on its face.

This year, the Ducks are keeping quiet. They're picked by football magazines like Street & Smith and GamePlan to finish as low as ninth in the Pac-10.

And that suits them fine.

Oregon is interested in improvement, which begins with upgrading the unproductive offense it had last year. Consequently, the Ducks have switched from an I formation to a split-back setup.

The key position is quarterback. "We need to have better play from that position than a year ago," says Oregon coach Rich Brooks, now in his sixth season of guiding the Duck grid fortunes.

"We have more competition at quarterback than we've had in a long time."

Senior Kevin Lusk is the returning starter, the man who was the target of much blame for the 2-9 fiasco of last season. He was injured for part of the campaign and played inconsistently when he managed to get on the field.

Lusk is No. 1 going in and appears quicker than ever. The knee injury that hampered him a year ago has apparently healed.

"I feel 100 percent healthy," he says.

Mike Owens and Mike Jorgensen should give Lusk a good fight, but the one to watch for, insiders say, is Dana Hill, the heralded

freshman from Pomona, Calif.

These days, however, the player getting the most attention by far is freshman Kevin Wilhite, the star running back from Rancho Cordova, Calif. Wilhite (6-0, 190) surprised everyone by passing up the University of Washington at the last minute to sign with Oregon. Wilhite made the choice because the Ducks will afford him the chance to compete in the school's track program.

Wilhite arrives with the tinge of one of the top three recruits in the country. He also ran the nation's fastest high school 200 meters, a 20.81 during his junior year.

While Brooks must be overjoyed to have Wilhite on hand, he is not so excited about the press, which has hounded the freshman since he entered camp. Wilhite injured a hamstring on the first day of practice and now will be behind the rest of the team when he returns. That should be in time for the season opener Sept. 4 against Arizona State.

Though Wilhite is a star, he's also a freshman and must learn the plays like anyone else.

"He's not the big story right now," Brooks insists. "He's hurt. He's a freshman who has never played at this level. We don't have any idea of how he plays. When he shows he is good enough, he'll get a good opportunity."

Even without Wilhite, Brooks has a strong running corps. Senior Dwight Robertson (6-1, 195), redshirted last year but is back and has the fullback position. The tailback spot will go to junior Harry Billups (5-11, 190), at least at first.

Other running backs on hand are Eugene King, Terrance Jones, Ladarja Johnson and Todd Bland.

For receivers, the Ducks have senior Greg Moser and junior Osborn Thompson back. In addition, Choo Choo Young, converted from his running back spot, will also be depended upon. Mark James, who would have brought speed to the returning lineup, has quit football because of a kidney ailment.

Brooks' biggest worries are in the offensive line, which was almost non-existent a year ago.

Other than junior guard Gary Zimmerman (6-6, 250), the Duck line is untested. Ryan Zinke (6-3, 235) gets the nod at center and Paul Sanborn (6-3, 265) should be the other guard. Ron Teed (6-6, 231) was lost in the first week of practice because of a neck injury and will not return to the team.

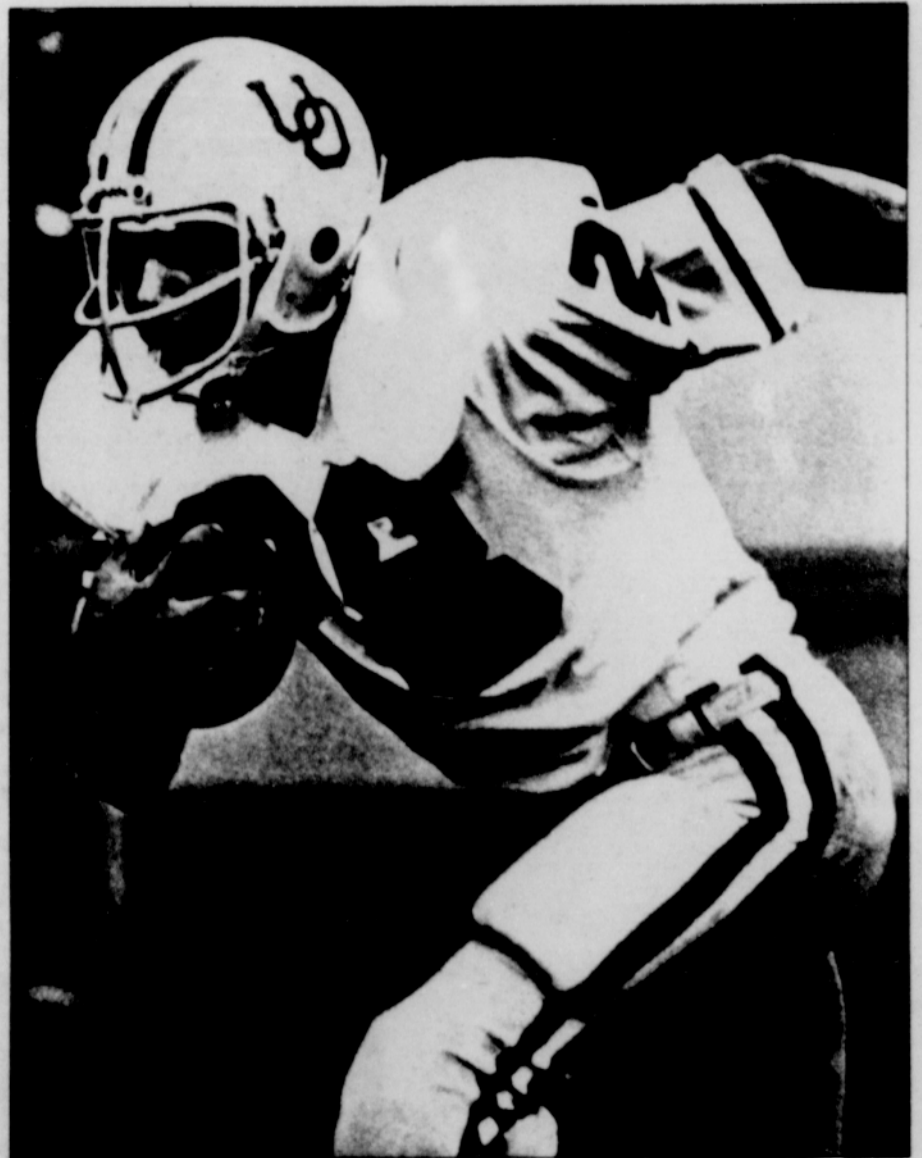
Defense, the Ducks' forte the past three years, will again be the team's foundation this time around.

The defensive line will see Bill Lowder (6-4, 251), Michael Gray (6-4, 260) and Steve Johnson (6-5, 245) battle for the tackle spots. Mike Walter (6-4, 226) and Steve Baack (6-4, 230) will have the end positions.

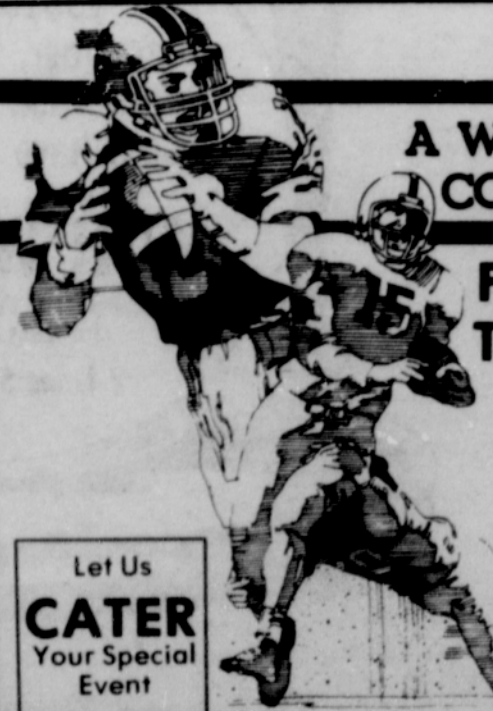
The linebacking crew will depend heavily on the health of Chris Cosgrove (6-3, 225), the senior middleman. If he's healthy, the Ducks could be very tough indeed. Dwight Ford (6-2, 206) and Cliff Gibson (6-3, 218) are at the outside spots.

Cornerback Steve Brown is the lone returning starter in the secondary. The rest of the secondary is inexperienced, but with the depth of past seasons, the Ducks could come up with a winning combination.

BOB LEUNG



Steve Brown brings experience to Oregon secondary.



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