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X's & O's...

Searching for their Lost Mojo, '03 Ducks to feature Diversity, Versatility & Disguise

Can you remember the feeling? The pounding headache, the nausea, your unsteady shuffle, as you tried to get up and move on last year? No, we're not talking about the post New Year's eve celebration, but the dreaded "Seattle Bowl Hangover" which afflicted Duck fans by the thousands. Oregon had just lost badly to a mediocre Wake Forest team in the same ways they had floundered over the last half of the 2002 season: giving up big pass plays, unable to convert third down chances on offense, and as a team, displaying little fire and hustle. "We certainly lost our swagger and lost our confidence down the stretch," observed Head Coach Mike Bellotti. Such were the symptoms of a thoroughly wretched malady that took the fun out of football--and made for a long winter. Fortunately, for Oregon's legions, Bellotti conducted a "gut check," in the off-season, challenging both players and coaches to look within for answers to questions that must be solved if the Ducks are to regain their status in the elite Pac-10 Conference.

Coming into the opener this Saturday against Mississippi State in Starkville, what is clear is that the Ducks have strength "up the middle," with pro-sized offensive and defensive lines. That's a good place to start putting together a solid football team. The kicking game features Jared Siegel, one of the best place kickers in the nation and the newest punter, probably Paul Martinez, a freshman, with the lack of consistency which typifies a first-year player. The Ducks have two good quarterbacks (compared to WSU, Stanford, Cal, UCLA and USC, which currently have none), a blazing wide receiver, three studly running backs, and a defensive team with speed, athleticism, and a burning desire to put the hangover of '02 to rest.

What Went Wrong Last Year, & What Will Fix It?

OFFENSE:

1. Poor third-down conversion, particularly in the last half of the season. Answer, Andy Ludwig, Offensive Coordinator: "Kellen Clemens is making better decisions and better understanding the scheme and how we're attacking defenses... Jason Fife is throwing the ball with more repetitive accuracy." Coach Bellotti: "We're looking to enhance our completion

and yardage per attempt percentage, and to give our quarterback more options..."

2. The running game, built mostly around Onterio Smith, was nil after he was injured in the last half of the season. Answer, Bellotti: "We have four guys who all are going to contribute this year..." Running Back Coach Gary Campbell: "Terrence Whitehead, Chris Vincent, Ryan Shaw all have a good chance of being the starter."

DEFENSE:

1. Too many big plays given up, often by corners in one-on-one pass coverage. Answer: Nick Aliotti, Defensive Coordinator: "We have made some changes: coverage things to give our corners some help at times." John Neal, Secondary Coach: "I've heard a lot of negativism about (corners) and people are wrong. We can win championships with them here and they know that now." Bellotti: "Our pass rush needs to be better and our variation of zone and man coverage needs to be better."

2. Pass rush was inconsistent and not a factor in putting pressure on opponents' offenses. Answer: Steve Greatwood, Defensive Line Coach: "Coverage and pass rush are tied together...we have some athletic guys who can get up the field and get after the quarterback a little better. Bellotti: "We have athleticism and the best size we've ever had in our defensive line."

TEAM:

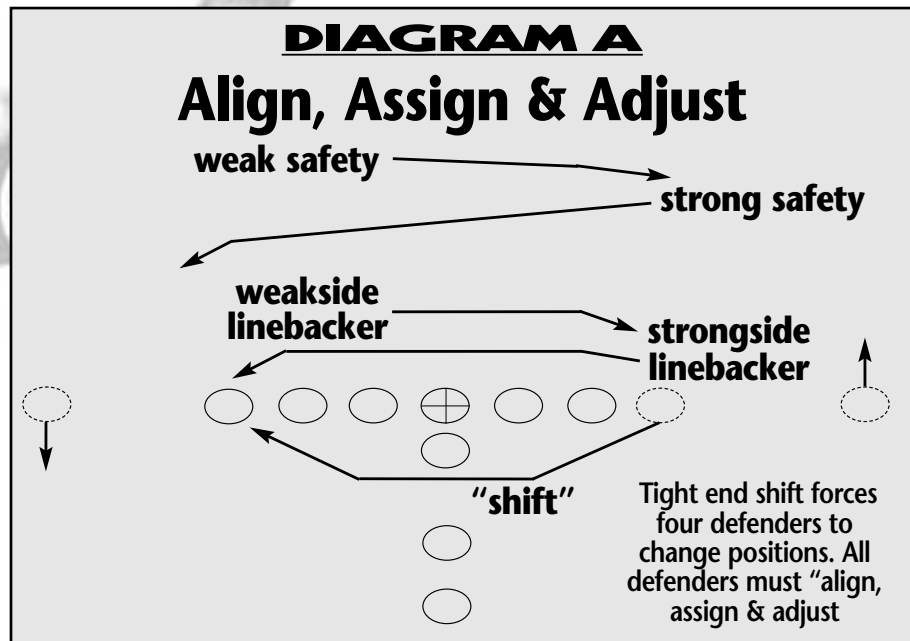
1. The Ducks didn't hustle on defense and looked demoralized on both sides of the ball. Answer: Bellotti: "We had lost some leaders from the year before and that's an easy excuse to make, but I don't make them, and we have to create that leadership." At a preseason media conference Bellotti talked of speaking with every player individually in the off season, getting their ideas for what needed to turn things around. "I feel good about the leaders we have on our team, and the number of newer guys who are also stepping up to that role. We all enjoyed the role of the being the "hunted," but after last year, we're now the hunter, and we will have to earn back the respect we had before. We need to be hungry."

"Align, Assign, Adjust" Key Component of '03 Offensive Game Plan

As described by Robin Ross, Tight End Coach, "Every time an offensive team lines up in a formation, every defensive player must go through a mental checklist of how they will react to their defensive responsibilities. If the offense shifts, or changes its formation prior to the snap, every player must go through the same checklist again. Add another dimension, after the shift, by having a back, receiver, or tight end go in motion before the

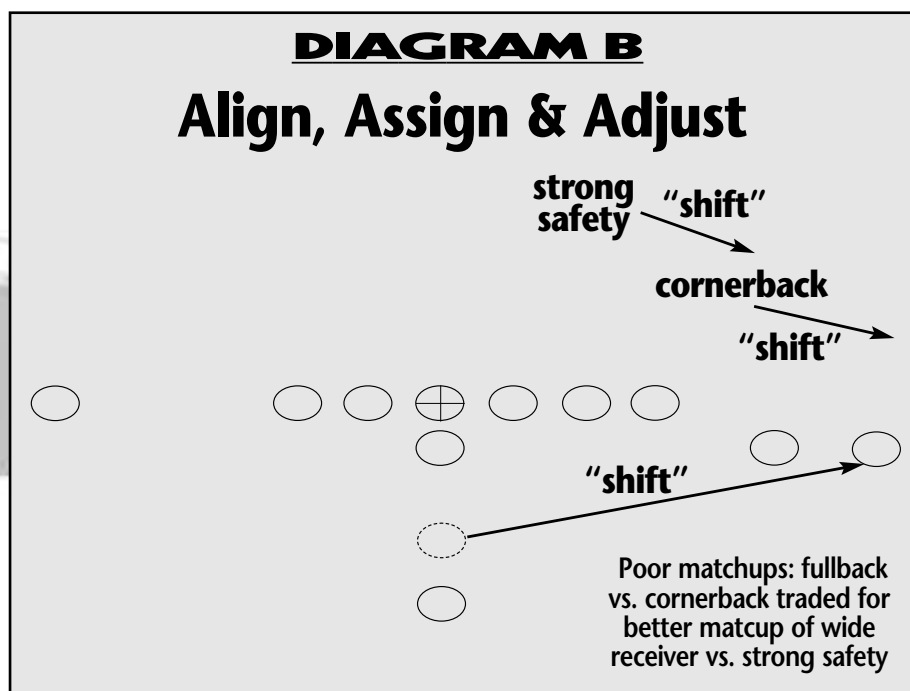
snap count and then entire defense has to repeat the process. Obviously, the more changes you force on the defensive players, the greater their opportunity of making a mistake and allowing a big play for the offense." Coaches in the press box look for the adjustments a defensive coach will make to their fronts and coverages against shifts and

(lines up a strong-side (Sam) linebacker and strong safety on the tight end), so when the tight end shifts, those defenders shift too, which makes two others (weak linebacker (Will) and weak safety) have to shift also. These changes also might impact players who don't have to move, linemen who might have contain responsibilities,



motion. Many times, defenses will be forced to simplify, giving opponents a better idea of what to expect in certain down/distance situations. This may boost the successful percentages in play calling. This is a critical component of the Duck offense going into the opener against Mississippi State, forcing the Bulldogs to "align, assign, and adjust"

linebackers who must cover the option and secondary players who must force sweeps. Defensive players prefer to line up, "lay their ears back" and fly to the football. Shifting offenses slow this down and may lead to frustration and mistakes by the defense. Bellotti has said that at this stage of year



until the very snap of the ball.

Here are two examples of what an offense may gain from shifting. The first (see Diagram A) involves shifting the tight end (the tight end is usually on the strong running side of a formation) from one side of the formation to the other. The defense flip-flops

the offense is not as explosive as it was last year, and this conscious effort to force opponents mistakes into big offensive plays may prove to be an answer to the loss of big-play guys like Onterio Smith, Keenan Howry and George Wrihster.

The second example (see Diagram B)