



JERRY THOMPSON
Editor
DUCKS ILLUSTRATED

Analyze That!

Unlikely Sophomoric Heroes See the Light

He had not started a game in over a year and had played only sparse minutes at cornerback this year. Nevertheless, sophomore Marques Binns and all 163 pounds of him sopping wet, had as his main assignment to cover the #2 pass receiver in the nation, Geoff McArthur. Binns had played against McArthur in high school, but McArthur, the prep star from Los Angeles, was two classes ahead of Binns. Not only had the Duck secondary struggled again this year but Binns virtually symbolized the even worse times the cornerbacks had last year as he and another freshman, Aaron Gipson, were thrown to the wolves. Going into the Cal game it looked like the McArthur-Binns battle was a mismatch made in "Bear heaven".

He had been ordained as the next tight end at "tight end U". He had all the necessary physical tools but after 9 games and some nagging injuries, sophomore Tim Day had caught only 11 passes all season. Against Washington the previous week he didn't even have one reception.

He had showed flashes of brilliance with two 80-plus yard touchdowns, stepping into the starting position at wide receiver after Keith Allen went down for the season in fall camp. Still, one couldn't be sure what to expect with sophomore Demetrius Williams, who at times would drop the ball either thrown to him or while running for extra yards. Could he make the clutch catch?

He, like Williams, had got off to a great start against Mississippi State. Despite rotating with Jason Fife for the first 6 games, it looked like sophomore Kellen Clemens had been given the team going into the 7th game against Arizona State. But he threw two interceptions in the opening minutes of the game and his team was quickly down 14-0. He had come back against Washington and helped the Ducks lead the Huskies 10-0 only to see the bottom fall out, punctuated by an embarrassing and unlucky play where the ball fell out of his hands into the waiting arms of a Washington linebacker who ran it in for 6. Against Cal he was pulled after his first two series where he was 1 for 6 and twice missed wide open receivers. Senior Jason Fife came in and threw some picture-perfect passes, a huge 32 yarder to Williams on a 3rd & 17 and a 13-yard beauty to Samie Parker to even the game at 7-7. Fans were beginning to dream about a future with Johnny DuRocher calling the signals, not Kellen Clemens.

He had been the offensive coordinator for Fresno State's high octane offense and coached David Carr, the number one

quarterback taken in the NFL draft in 2002. He replaced Jeff Tedford at Oregon in 2002, but the offense struggled mightily last year in the second half of the season and the second half of games. This year the pattern repeated itself with "sophomore" coordinator Andy Ludwig again devising the offense. He had used more "no huddle", shotgun, and different formations, but the fans were becoming very restless. After 54 minutes against Cal the Ducks had managed only 7 points and another defeat was imminent.

The Duck defense had played valiantly all night holding a very balanced Cal team (those teams usually give Oregon fits) to only 10 points after nearly 50 minutes. With the score 10-7 Cal had the ball first and goal from the 3. Amazingly a few plays later it was 3rd and 18 and it looked like the much maligned defense with Binns and company had dodged another bullet. Cal would likely kick a field goal to make it 13-7 and Oregon would still be just one big play away from taking the lead. Instead, Cal went for all the marbles and scored a "dagger in your heart" touchdown to go up 17-7 with 10 minutes to play. The Oregon offense got the ball two more times but that resulted in 5 plays and out and 3 plays and out which included a twenty minute "lights out" with half the stadium in darkness. The sportswriters had their headline virtually written for them: "Lights Go Out on the Ducks" or something similar.

Somehow, with 6:35 left to go, Ludwig felt inspired to put Clemens back in. Immediately it was like the lights had come back on for the sophomores. Kellen

was sharp, connecting on 4 of 5 passes including a lucky forward carom to freshman Kyle Weatherspoon for 15 yards. The last in the series was to Day who left three Bears in his wake (see cover) on his way to a 31 yard TD. The defense stopped the Bears and another sophomore, Justin Phinisee, returned a punt 13 yards and a apparent clip was not called. The breaks were going Oregon's way. Then came a big 4th and 2 from the Cal 35. The Ducks chose not to try a 52 yard field goal for the tie. The game was on the line. Clemens rolled out and hit Williams in the flat. He and Demetrius had made the clutch play! Moments later, yet another sophomore, Terrence Whitehead strolled into the end zone on a very gutsy option-pitch call by Ludwig. The Ducks had pulled off an almost incomprehensible comeback.

I asked Binns after the game how he had been able to handle McArthur who had just 5 catches for 42 yards. The ever confident Marques had told McArthur from the get go that he wasn't going to let him score. Binns said McArthur respected that and he told Binns that other cornerbacks would play him with fear in their eyes. Now the Ducks at 6 and 4 need to play fearlessly and finish with two big wins. It was hoped that the goal line stand against Stanford would be a defining moment for the rest of the season, but the Washington debacle followed. Maybe this time the comeback will inspire the team enough that they will take care of the Bruins and return home for the Civil War at 7 and 4. Amazingly Oregon has a real opportunity to turn what looked to be a "lights out" season into one to light the way for the program for years to come. **O**



STEVE TANNEN
Feature Writer
DUCKS ILLUSTRATED

Mallard Musings

Salvaged Season?

I must confess to a very high level of concern when Kellen Clemens led the offense onto the field at Autzen with 6:29 left in the game. Not much had transpired the first eighty-five percent of the evening to warrant optimism. As a matter of fact nothing had taken place during late summer or early fall during the 4th quarter to make me a believer. Fortunately history tells us what has happened not what will take place. The defense seemed to draw a spark from the drive to make it 17-14, stuffed the Bears and the punt return team set up the Ducks in business at the Cal 43. With the horrifying results against the Washington schools and at Tempe, the reality remains Oregon could win out and sew up 3rd place in conference. Let's take it a step further to a complete cry for gridiron therapy. If USC qualifies for the Bowl Championship Series title game that could mean the U of O would return to the Holiday or Sun Bowl. The "glass half empty" in me says, this shows how mediocre the Pac-10 is in 2003.

I know we have the photos and credible documentation as evidence, but did Oregon really beat Michigan? This team is now ranked in the top 5 and gunning for a Rose Bowl berth. The NFL

has achieved it. The NCAA is giving serious chase. Parity. It's like the major sports version of communism. All are equal. This season I'll buy Oklahoma for sure, and quite possibly USC but the rest are extremely fallible. The difference between the 50 or so teams who will win between 6 to 8 games is a missed field goal, or a defensive stop here or there and not much more.

The Ducks of 2002 were tagged as "paper tigers" with the season ending skid. We've got to put the 03 Bruins in there. Their best win was against Cal and one of the touchdowns came on a missed field goal return. They barely broke 225 total yards. UCLA struggled to move the ball against that inviting Arizona defense eeking out a 24-21 win with 7 points coming on a long INT return for a touchdown. The scary thing is these guys led the Pac-10 to start November. Make a note of this team down the road as they rely on a lot of young guys and have hung tough through some injuries. The top Bruin cover corner Matt Ware and defensive line terror Rodney Leslie have missed a lot of time. The only senior on offense who figures in the regular rotation is flanker Ryan Smith. The two quarterbacks, Matt Moore & Drew Olson, are sophomores. The starting five on the offensive line average 8 career starts. First year coach Karl Dorrell is doing an admirable job but lacks consistent play-makers. He'll make sure this group doesn't look past the Ducks to the LA-LA land showdown with Southern Cal.

It's time for some questions. On

Oregon's game winning drive, Tim Day makes a 4-yard catch down to the California 12 with 1:15 left in regulation. This is lock field goal range and you have multiple opportunities to try for the touchdown. Why did the Ducks call time-out? Let the clock run down to 40 or 45 seconds and leave the Golden Bears with either no time or Hail Mary time. They took possession with 47-seconds left and ran 5 plays! That was not strong time management.

Am I the only one who wonders why tight end Tim Day is not a more focal point of the whole offensive approach?

This school has become an NFL breeding ground at the position and Day certainly seems gifted. A guy like that is a match-up horror for a linebacker who might not have the wheels or safety who can't handle a 270-pound bull in the open field! In 10 games he has just 15 catches. On that brilliant 31-yard TD ramble to start the comeback Saturday night it just made you want him to get the rock more. Just asking! **O**

Steve hosts **SportsTalk** on KPNW Radio AM1120, Eugene, Monday-Friday, 4-6 p.m.

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