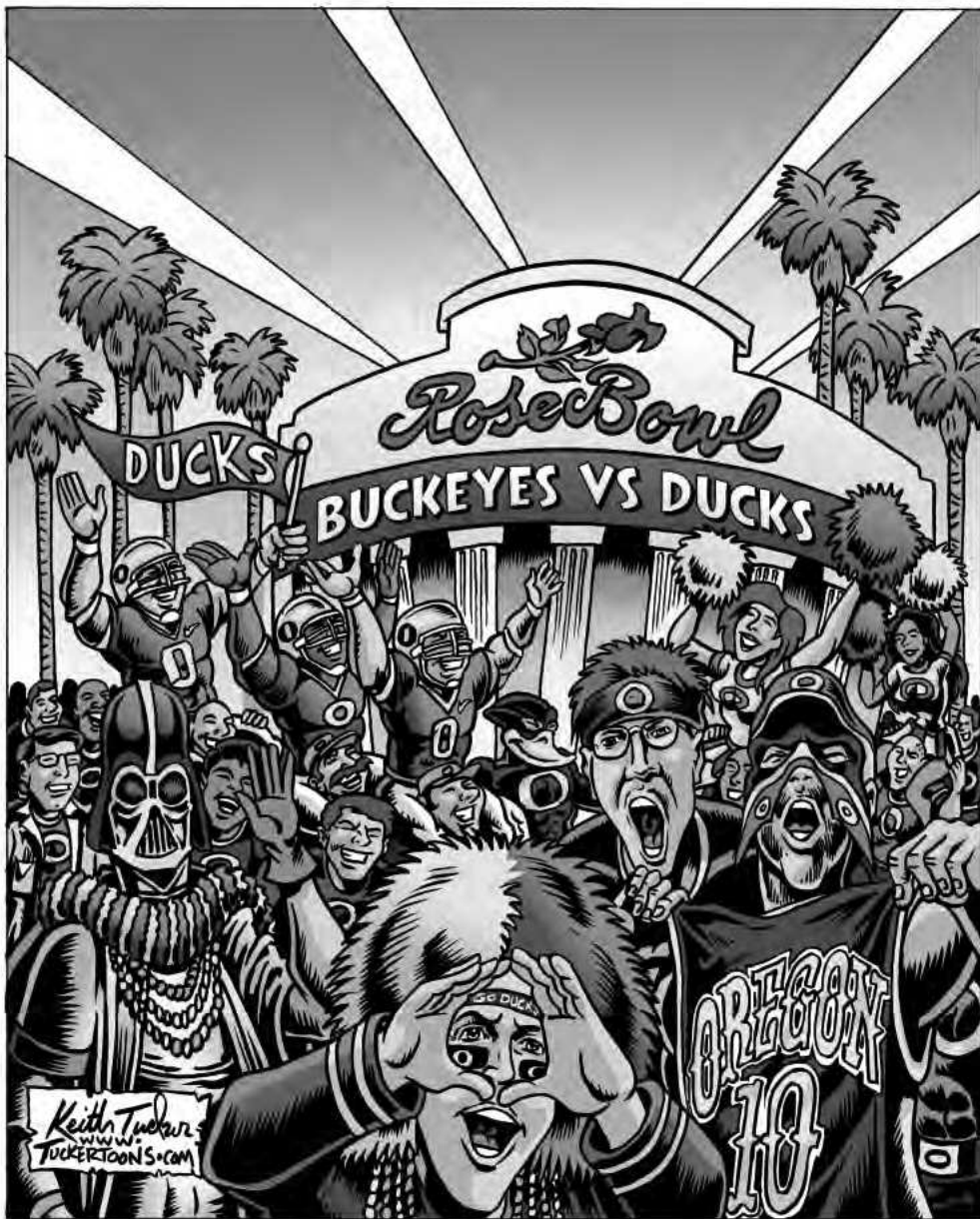


MAD LOVE FOR THE DUCKS

'YOU CAN'T REALLY EXPLAIN IT AT ALL' BUT HERE GOES ... BY RICK LEVIN



Happy New Year to you — because, after all is said and done, everything's coming up roses, isn't it? That's right. A rose is a rose is a rose, and even the reddest rose sports a thorn or two. Red is also the color of blood, but they don't call it the Blood Bowl, do they? No — they call it the Rose Bowl, the bowl to beat all bowl games, the first ever, the pater familias, the "Granddaddy of Them All." Would a bowl game by any other name smell so sweet?

I've got a joke for you: A Duck walks into a Pasadena bar, and the bartender yells: "Duck!" So everyone hits the floor.

You know, being a sports fan can be a tough, crappy job, existentially speaking, but there's something particularly hellish about being a hard-core fan of Duck football. Or should I say: Fanatic? Along with the spectator-related anxiety intrinsic to any athletic competition — which can range from casual worry, to nail-biting anticipation, to the outright post-traumatic pathos of having your week blown to shit over a single loss — being a loyal patriot of the UO's pigskin franchise means always hoping for the best and expecting the worst.

It's not a matter of the Kool-Aid cup being half full or half empty. That's not even the issue. It's about knowing exactly what's in the cup, and liking what's in the cup regardless, and realizing the damn cup can tip over at any moment, and that, either way, you'll wind up drinking the stuff every time — good, bad, bitter or straight-up poisonous.

WE'VE ALL GOTTA DUCK WHEN THE SHIT HITS THE FAN

Duck fans learn at an early age to recite and to believe in — way deep down in their yellow-and-green DNA — that same catechism repeated at the end of every season by old-school Red Sox fans: "There's always next year." Being a Duck fan means being wry and cynical and hopeful and fragile and thick-skinned all at once. It means calling horseshit on every ESPN sportscaster's pet truism, especially that new cliché about teams "controlling their own destiny," knowing that such egregiously perpetuated hogwash ranks right up there with Richard Gere's ass gerbil and Iraq having weapons of mass destruction.

Consider, for instance, the indignity of the Ducks losing the 1958 Rose Bowl by a field goal to Ohio State, the Buckeye team that just the year before had been suspended after head coach Woody Hayes admitted loaning walking-around money to his players (Hayes, named NCAA coach of the year in '58, went down in flames when, at the age of 65, he punched a Clemson player in the throat before turning to swing at one of his own players at the 1978 Gator Bowl ... and the ironies just keep piling up). Including this year's appearance, the Ducks have been to the Rose Bowl a total of five times since 1917, when they beat Penn Quakers 14-0. They dropped a bouquet for Harvard — *Harvard!* — three years later, and haven't won a Tournament of Roses since.

But, really, there's no reason to reach that far back in college football history to strike fear and loathing in the hearts

of Duck fans, is there? This new century holds plenty of painful examples of the weird combination of thyroidal expectation and fatalistic doom that seems to define Duck football. How about the 2001 season, when a Joey Harrington-led squad, having suffered but a single loss all season, was systematically screwed out of a national title bid by a BCS ranking system that went so ape-shit the NCAA was forced to retool it the very next year? Need we mention how, in 2004, UO quarterback Kellen Clemens suffered a late-season ankle injury at the hands of Arizona ... and then, just three years later, how fans watched the Wildcats strike again against a No. 2 ranked team, taking out QB Dennis Dixon and thereby dashing any Ducky hopes for a Rose Bowl-bound national title? The tears shed by Dixon on the sideline, once the magnitude of his wrenched knee hit home, captured perfectly the sense of pathos, not to mention the pure heartbreak, of Duck devotees everywhere.

And then, alas, there was the punch heard around the world. Heard, and seen. As that great Teutonic sportscaster Friedrich Nietzsche warned, "Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." *Ouch!* — ain't that the truth? When, in the season opener, UO senior running back LeGarrette Blount capped off an execrable rushing performance by coldcocking a Boise State linebacker in front of a national television audience — and then, thanks to YouTube, again and again in front of the whole fucking world — Duck fans would have been forgiven a

quick trip to grandma's medicine cabinet. *Here we go again*, said the collective Id, as the Superego of Duckdom cracked down, set a stiff upper lip and said, with that grit-toothed asceticism native to the Northwest: *We'll recover. Wait and see.*

"There is always some madness in love," Nietzsche also said, "but there is also always some reason in madness." If mad love of the Ducks kept fans true after the Boise State punch out, such madness, in retrospect, proved reasonable. For — miracle of miracles — the Ducks did recover, and then some. Thanks to the clustering clamp-down of an underrated defense, which carried the team through some rickety ball control early in the season — and followed, in no particular order, by the rapid maturation of quarterback Jeremiah Masoli, the breakthrough of running back LaMichael James and the Zen leadership of Chip Kelly, who was voted Pac 10 Coach of the Year — the Ducks transformed the perfect shit storm of their game-one debacle into a winning season, characterized by increasing domination and marred only by one rather stinky loss to Stanford in Palo Alto. Along the way they defeated four nationally-ranked teams, including California (No. 6), USC (No. 4) and, to end the season, a feisty Oregon State squad (No. 13) that took them down to the wire.

The atmosphere in Autzen Stadium before and during the Trojan game was intense, in a funereal sort of way — neither hopeful nor pessimistic nor celebratory nor excited. There was instead this heavy electrical thrum and raw emotional crackle that felt way too serious for the occasion.