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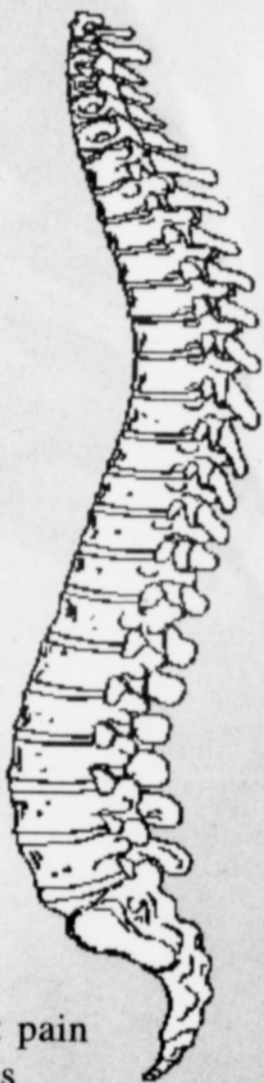
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# Championship Showdown

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Heisman Trophy hopeful Jeremiah Masoli was kicked off the team.

The Tigers were even further back, second in their own state to Nick Saban's defending national champions at Alabama and No. 22 in the nation. Plus, they were breaking in a junior college transfer at quarterback.

Oregon never missed Masoli as coach Chip Kelly simply plugged Darron Thomas into his fast-paced spread offense and watched his team lead the nation in scoring.

The fashion plates of college football, thanks to the ever-changing uniforms provided by alum and Nike founder Phil Knight, Oregon reached No. 1 in the rankings for the first time this season and emphatically replaced USC as the Pac-10's team to beat with its second straight conference title.

As for Auburn, that JUCO transfer turned out to be the story of the year on and off the field.

Cam Newton has been peerless as a player, the nation's top-rated passer and its 15th-best runner.

"I think cam Newton can play for anybody, including the NFL," Kelly said. "He can throw it and he can run it. He's the top football player in the country."

By the time he gets to Arizona, Newton will most likely have the Heisman Trophy to prove it.

"There were several moments (this season) where we said this guy is going to be different from most," second-year Auburn coach Gene Chizik said.

It's just as likely unanswered questions about an NCAA investigation into Newton's recruitment will be following the Tigers to Glendale, too.

The NCAA determined Newton's father, Cecil, tried to peddle his son to Mississippi State for cash, but said there was no evidence Cam or Auburn knew about it.

So when the ruling came down last week, Cam Newton avoided punishment and the sports governing body let the QB play on. He denied any wrongdoing after the SEC championship game Saturday.

While the NCAA will keep on looking into the pay-to-play scheme, there's no reason to believe his status will change between now and the championship game.

With Newton on one side and Duckstailback LaMichael James, another Heisman hopeful, on the other, this has the makings of one wild championship.

Who says defense wins?

The Ducks are averaging 537.5 yards per game and 49

points. James leads the nation in rushing in an offense that is simple yet breathtaking.

Kelly, who five years ago was offensive coordinator at New Hampshire, has taken high-speed football to a new level. In their season-ending, 37-20 victory against Oregon State on Saturday, none of the Ducks' six scoring drives lasted longer than 2 minutes, 43 seconds.

Newton and the Tigers like to play fast, too.

"We're different but I think we have some similar philosophies," Kelly said. "They obviously run their quarterback a whole heck of lot more than we do."

Auburn's spread averages 498 yards per game and the Tigers are averaging 43 points.

They were never better than Saturday at the Georgia Dome. Newton threw four touchdown passes and ran for two more scores in a 56-17 demolition of South Carolina to win the Southeastern Conference championship.

As has become customary, the SEC champion moves on to play for the national title. The Tigers will try to make it five straight BCS titles for the country's best conference.

The Ducks will try to become the first Pac-10 team other than USC to finish the season No. 1 in both the AP and coaches' polls.

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