

## FOOTBALL PREVIEWS

# Ducks embark on 1st season under Lanning with yet unnamed QB

BY ANNE M. PETERSON

Associated Press

EUGENE — Oregon first-year coach Dan Lanning isn't dropping any clues about his starting quarterback this season.

"If I felt like it gave us a competitive advantage to tell you, I would," Lanning said. "I don't."

Fall camp has been a battle behind closed doors between transfer Bo Nix and redshirt freshmen Ty Thompson and Jay Butterfield. Nix, a fourth-year junior, is widely considered the favorite to start for the No. 11 Ducks, who have undergone quite a makeover in the offseason.

Former coach Mario Cristobal has moved on, quarterback Anthony Brown is now with the Baltimore Ravens, and defensive end Kayvon Thibodeaux was the fifth overall pick in the NFL draft by the New York Giants.

Nix transferred to Oregon from Auburn, where he was a three-year starter. The former five-star recruit started the first 34 games of his career before a season-ending ankle injury last November.

Nix threw for 2,294 yards with 11 touchdowns and three interceptions last season. He also ran for four touchdowns.

Thompson played in three games last season as a true freshman behind starter Anthony Brown. He passed for 87 total yards with two touchdowns and one interception.

"Oregon quarterbacks, just like any quarterback, the most important thing you can do is be right with the football, take care of the football because possessions and limiting turnovers is the most important thing," Thompson said. "Making good decisions, putting the ball in the right spot."

## Oregon trail

Lanning came to Oregon after Mario Cristobal went home to Miami. Cristobal went 35-13 as head coach of the Ducks, winning the Pac-12 championship twice during



Sean Meagher/The Oregonian

**Oregon quarterbacks Bo Nix (No. 10) and Ty Thompson (No. 13) throw during Ducks spring football practice in Eugene, Oregon on Tuesday, April 5, 2022.**

his tenure.

Lanning, 35, came from Georgia, where he was defensive coordinator and linebackers coach for the last three seasons. The Bulldogs had the top-ranked defense in the nation last season when they won the national championship.

As for his goals, Lanning tipped his hat to Oregon's old "Win The Day" mantra from former coach Chip Kelly's tenure.

"Our goal right now is to win today. I know that's an old phrase that's been said here a lot but it's really true. We're looking for investments. Each day, we're putting money in the bank. We want to be able to capitalize on those investments down the road," he said. "That's where it starts. Focusing on Oregon."

## Remembering Spencer

The Ducks are still reeling from the loss of tight end Spencer Webb, who died after striking his head during an offseason outing at a popular swimming spot in Eugene.

Webb, who had a large following on TikTok, was expected to compete for a starting role this season. In his career with the Ducks, he had 31 receptions for 296 yards and four touchdowns.

"Spencer was a really unselfish guy, and he always cared about the team. Everybody

saw that," said linebacker Justin Flowe. "It really hurt when Spencer passed. When he passed, everybody just wanted to make everything about the team and just the culture and everything, we made it even more just for Spencer, because we really loved him."

## Recapping

Early on last season, the Ducks climbed into the national championship conversation with a 35-28 victory over then-No. 3 Ohio State. But they stumbled at the finish — a 38-7 drubbing by Utah in the second-to-last game of the regular season, and a second loss to the Utes in the Pac-12 Championship game.

After Cristobal left, assistant Bryan McClendon served as interim coach to lead the Ducks into the Alamo Bowl. Oregon lost 47-32 to Oklahoma State finishing the season 10-4 and ranked No. 22 in the final AP Top 25.

## Season ahead

There's intrigue for the Ducks right at the start when they play Lanning's old team, Georgia, at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta on Sept. 3.

Oregon plays No. 25 BYU on Sept 17 before embarking on the Pac-12 season. They host No. 7 Utah — the team that beat them in the Pac-12 championship game last season — on Nov. 19.

# Oregon State puts 2nd straight bowl on list of season goals

BY ANNE M. PETERSON

Associated Press

CORVALLIS — After reaching their first bowl game since 2013 last season, the Oregon State Beavers want more.

"We're not a finished product by any stretch," coach Jonathan Smith said. "But over the four years being here as the head coach, really proud of the development we've had, the competitiveness, winning more games than we lost last year."

Oregon State has steadily risen under Smith: It went 2-10 in his first season, 2018. Last season, the Beavers finished 7-6 — their first winning record in eight seasons.

While the Beavers fell in the LA Bowl to Utah State, Smith recognizes the progress made and that they need to build on it.

Some of the keys to success have moved on, including receiver Trevon Bradford, running back B.J. Baylor and leading tackler Avery Roberts.

But Chance Nolan is back and likely to be the starting quarterback again. And the lineup includes promising freshman running back Damien Martinez, who impressed at the team's spring game, and last season's top returner, Deshaun Fenwick.

"We feel like we have a veteran group that has learned now what it takes to win. We've got a lot of those guys back," Smith said. "I'm looking forward to seeing what we can do this year, understanding how competitive, especially this league, is."

## Maturity matters

Although there has been a quarterback competition in fall camp, the starting nod will almost assuredly go to Nolan.

A redshirt junior, Nolan started in 12 games for the Beavers last season, throwing 2,677 yards for 19 touchdowns. He had a 64.2%



Leon Neuschwander for The Oregonian, File

**Oregon State's Chance Nolan looks to pass as the Beavers take on the Arizona State Sun Devils in a Pac-12 football game on Saturday, Nov. 20, 2021, at Reser Stadium in Corvallis. Oregon State won 24-10.**

completion rate.

"What I love about Chance is how competitive he is. I think he displays that in his style of play," Smith said. "Being competitive in the pocket but also extending the play, getting some extra yards, gaining first downs."

The question is who will back him up. The top candidates are Tristan Gebbia, who started in four games in 2020 but didn't play last season because of an injury, and redshirt freshman Ben Gulbranson, also sidelined last season with an injury.

## Road woes

The Beavers beat USC at the Coliseum last year, which was Oregon State's first road win over the Trojans since 1960.

The problem was that it was also Oregon State's lone road victory.

The schedule this year includes a tough game at No. 7 Utah, but the Beavers get to host the Trojans and the No. 11 Oregon Ducks.

## Construction zone

Oregon State's Reser Stadium is in the midst of a \$161 million makeover, with construction to go on throughout the season.

The west side of the stadium is now a steel skeleton that will eventually become

three tiers of new seating. A new \$5 million video scoreboard should be working by the team's opener against Boise State on Sept. 3.

"It will be a little bit different for us in a stadium that is half-built ... Playing a season in about half a stadium filled," Smith said. "But we're really looking forward to, when (construction) finishes ... to be in one of the best football facilities and stadiums in the country."

Oregon State expects the stadium to be completed by June 2023.

## Mountain West woes

The Beavers open the season against a pair of Mountain West opponents, first at home against Boise State before a game at Fresno State.

Last season, Mountain West teams were 6-5 against Pac-12 teams, including Utah State's victory over the Beavers in the LA Bowl. It was the third time since 1999 and first since 2008 that the conference has had a winning record over the Pac-12.

Additionally, the Mountain West champion has won four of the past five bowl games against the Pac-12.

The competition between the two leagues should garner more attention as Pac-12 faces an uncertain future with realignment.

# NFL looks like its old self entering 3rd season of the COVID-19 era

BY TERESA M. WALKER

AP Pro Football Writer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Derrick Henry has been seen jogging on the field with his daughter after practice. Green Bay Packers are once again borrowing kids' bicycles for rides to practice. Fans are rubbing elbows with their favorite players to get those coveted autographs.

Yes, the NFL is looking and acting like it's essentially back to normal going into its third season dealing with COVID-19.

There are no more trailers or tents for testing, and masks are rare. In fact, the protocols devised and tweaked by the league and the NFL Players Association in 2020 and 2021 were suspended last March.

The NFL seems to be following the lead of the CDC, which dropped social distancing and quarantine requirements last week with an estimated 95% of Americans 16 and older acquiring some level of immunity from vaccinations or infections.

The league still wants anyone with possible symptoms to speak up and wear a mask after contact with someone with COVID-19. A positive test still means isolating at home for at least five days.

"I think we are always concerned about everybody's safety, ours and the health of our families," Tennessee Titans coach Mike Vrabel said, adding that 2½ years into the pandemic: "Hopefully we are past that."

The biggest changes have been the easiest to notice at training camps across the NFL: Fans are back and close enough to high-five and shake hands with players, no longer kept at a distance and happy to resume preseason traditions.

Players are happy to have fans fully back, grateful for the energy boost during the monotonous routine and long days of camp.

"It's huge," Packers running back Aaron Jones said. "The fans are everything. They're what makes football go, and I would say this is one of the

best traditions in football, the bike rides. I've had my same little bike rider since I came in, got to bring my son to practice with me as well, so it's special to me."

The Packers were among the teams that allowed fans to watch training camp practices in 2021 at a distance, though no interaction with players was allowed.

Cheers are very welcome after the relative silence the past two years when the only sounds were pads thudding, coaches yelling and occasionally music over speakers to simulate fan noise. Families of players, coaches and team staffers couldn't attend either, preventing them from stealing a few minutes at work with their kids or spouses.

Henry's daughter Valentina, now 2, is the perfect age to enjoy racing her father to an end zone after an early practice at camp. The two-time NFL rushing champ said it's the kind of moment his daughter can look at when older.

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