

## OREGON STATE PLAYS HOST TO BOISE STATE

## Beavers, Broncos kick off season

BY JESSE SOWA

Corvallis Gazette-Times

CORVALLIS — A long list of veterans on the Oregon State defense means an equally lengthy list of players who can be leaders, whether doing it by example or with their voices.

The Beavers have 17 players on the defensive depth chart who have been in the program for at least four years and four others in their third campaign as OSU opens its football season Saturday night, Sept. 3 at home against Boise State at Reser Stadium.

The Beavers are hopeful that the experience and leadership turns into more wins on the field, as the team tries to improve on last year's 7-6 record. Oregon State could have as many as nine players with four or more years in the program starting on defense Saturday night.

"We're really trying to be a player-led team. We have a lot of veterans ... so we have a lot of leadership on our team," said Riley Sharp, a red-shirt junior outside linebacker entering his fifth season in Corvallis. "So it's not just one guy or a couple guys. The whole defense is accountable and helps each other out and leads each other in that way."

That player-led mentality and ini-

tiative picked up steam in the off-season. Players were taking responsibility for themselves while also holding their teammates accountable to make sure the work — whether that was in film study, in the weight room or on the field focusing on skill improvement — was getting done.

"There's been a lot less of us having to instruct guys and get guys to do stuff and police guys more. They lead it and we focus on coaching, which is great to do," defensive coordinator Trent Bray said.

Bray says there have been a growing number of players who lead vocally, more than in his previous four years in the program.

He points to Crescent Valley High alum and inside linebacker Omar Speights, who has seen his leadership grow in a different direction.

"A guy like Omar has always been a lead-by-example guy. Much more vocal than he's been in the past," Bray said. "So guys like that are stepping up. Once they put in the work and shown that they do it right, now they're starting to be more vocal about it, which is great."

Sharp added that the team has a good mix of players who lead in one way or the other, which he says is a

plus to have that kind of balance.

Speights, inside linebacker Kyrei Fisher-Morris and safety Jaydon Grant are three of OSU's six full-season captains. Grant and quarterback Tristan Gebbia have been named to those spots for the third time, becoming just the third and fourth players in program history to accomplish that.

It's the first time since 2007 that Oregon State has had six full-season captains. Offensive linemen Brandon Kipper and Jake Levensgood are the others this year.

Grant is in his seventh year in the program. Tackle Cody Anderson is next in years of service on the defense with six. End Isaac Hodgins, insider Jack Colletto, outside linebacker John McCartan, safety Kitan Oladapo and Sharp are all at five.

With so much experience on the field, Alex Austin says it's leadership by committee, with many players taking their turn.

Being a player-led team is something the redshirt sophomore cornerback in his fourth year with the Beavers brought to the discussion when asked about leadership.

"Not having the coaches being the ones to tell us to hold us accountable when we're making a mistake," Austin



Leon Neuschwander for The Oregonian/File

Oregon State's Chance Nolan tries to avoid pressure as the Beavers face the Stanford Cardinal in a Pac-12 football game on Saturday, Nov. 13, 2021, at Reser Stadium in Corvallis.

said. "Every man knows what their assignment is and what they have to do."

Leaders also know their time and place to make an impact. But in the biggest moments this season, Oregon State will lean on a select few to lead the way.

"The back-end guy like Jaydon Grant and Kitan, Omar, just to name a few guys who have been here and played a ton of football for us," Bray said "They're going to bring an expe-

rience that they can talk about and lead guys through. Those guys are definitely important."

Come Saturday and every week for the next few months, the veterans will be asked to continue leading whichever way they know how.

"We know the standard and we know what we have to get done here to win," Austin said. "So we're just trying to continue to build off last year and come in week one and get us the win."

## OREGON OPENS AGAINST DEFENDING NATIONAL CHAMPIONS



Sean Meagher/The Oregonian, File

True freshman defensive back Jahllil Florence (No. 6) runs off the field in celebration after his diving interception as the Oregon Ducks hold their annual spring football game at Autzen Stadium in Eugene on April 23, 2022.

## Georgia D is eager to show it hasn't lost a step

BY PAUL NEWBERRY

Associated Press

ATLANTA — A significant chunk of Georgia's defense for the ages has moved on to the NFL.

Can we expect a major drop-off in 2022?

Don't count on it.

The reigning national champions still have plenty of talent on that side of the line, led by massive lineman Jalen Carter, linebacker Nolan Smith, and defensive backs Kelee Ringo and Christopher Smith.

They'll get a chance to claim the spotlight when No. 3 Georgia opens the season Saturday, Sept. 3 against No. 11 Oregon in the Chick-fil-A Kickoff Game at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta.

"I've been a Georgia fan all my life," Nolan Smith said. "That's one thing that's always been great around here, the Georgia defense. So I'm 100% not worrying about a drop-off. It's a standard. Just because we had a lot of guys leave last year, it's a standard of Georgia defense that we play at a high level."

Five players off Georgia's defense were drafted in the first round, including top overall pick Travon Walker. Three other defensive standouts were selected in the later rounds.

In all, Georgia had 15 players taken in the draft — a record since the NFL went to a seven-round format.

The guy on the opposite sideline is certainly familiar with Georgia's ability to shut down opponents.

Dan Lanning served the last three years as Smart's co-defensive coordinator. Now, he's making his head coaching debut against a team he knows so well, having succeeded Mario Cristobal.

"There's definitely some feelings of excitement for me to go play a team that I care about and was a big part of for a long time," Lanning conceded.

Georgia coach Kirby Smart, who agreed over the summer to a 10-year contract extension worth more than \$110 million, downplayed the significance of facing a former member of his staff.

He's already done it with two

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— Nolan Smith

## Oregon vs. Georgia

**WHEN:** Saturday, Sept. 3, 12:30 p.m.

**WHERE:** Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta

**TV:** ABC

other ex-assistants, beating Arkansas' Sam Pittman twice as well as knocking off South Carolina's Shane Beamer.

"Neither Dan nor I will be worried about each other during the game," Smart said. "It's not about that."

## EYES ON THE QB

Lanning declined to name a starting quarterback, but the Bulldogs have a pretty good idea who they'll be facing.

Bo Nix transferred to Oregon after starting the past three seasons at Auburn, one of Georgia's biggest Southeastern Conference rivals.

Nix is 0-3 against the Bulldogs.

"I know who the quarterback is going to be," Smart said. "I'm not worried about that."

There are no uncertainties about Georgia's QB.

Coming off a storybook season in which he was picked as offensive MVP in both playoff victories, former walk-on Stetson Bennett is back for his sixth college season.

It's quite a change to be the unquestioned starter after battling for playing time every other year.

"I'm probably a little bit more excited than I was this time last year," Bennett said.

## ONCE A DUCK

Atlanta Falcons quarterback Marcus Mariota, who won the Heisman Trophy at Oregon, will be an honorary captain for his alma mater.

Mariota believes the Ducks, who

are 16½-point underdogs, have a chance to pull off the upset.

"They're gonna be competitive," he said.

Lanning hopes to build a program that turns out more players like Mariota.

"He stands for everything that I think Oregon football stands for," the rookie coach said. "Thrilled that he gets to be around and we get to play in his home stadium."

## THREE-HEADED MONSTER

Georgia's offense has a chance to create all sorts of matchup problems with an elite trio of tight ends.

Brock Bowers is coming off a dynamic freshman season, Darnell Washington is quite a handful at 6-foot-7 and 270 pounds, and Arik Gilbert had a stellar year at LSU before transferring to Georgia.

"It's hard to find a team that has as much talent in their tight end room," Lanning said. "You can call them tight ends, but the reality is they're a matchup issue as wideouts as much as they are at tight end."

## EXPERIENCED LINE

While Oregon has a bunch of new players, including 21 transfers, there's one area where the Ducks have plenty of experience.

All five starters return on the offensive line, providing some much-needed stability amid all the changes.

"It will be key that we play well, play physical," Smart said. "You have to control the line of scrimmage and strike people to be a good football team."

## HONORING WEBB

Oregon will honor Spencer Webb with a helmet sticker of his No. 4 inside a spider web.

Webb died in July after falling and striking his head during an outing at a popular swimming spot in Eugene.

## WASHINGTON STATE FOOTBALL

## Dickert leads 'new Wazzu' into opener against Idaho

BY COLTON CLARK

The Spokesman-Review

PULLMAN — About 10 months ago, Jake Dickert was entrusted with the task of unifying a fractured team.

Now, members of Washington State's football program consider unity and trust to be among the team's greatest assets.

"(The players) understand that our coaching staff and our people are here for them," Dickert said earlier this month during his first preseason as WSU's head coach. "When you understand that, there's a real power in it. We're all in this thing together, creating the best team we can be. It's important to them and they're taking an active role in it."

Dickert was named acting coach in mid-October after Nick Rolovich and four WSU assistants were fired for failing to comply with a state COVID-19 mandate. The Cougars could have fallen apart. Instead, they rallied to a winning season. Dickert earned his promotion in late November, one day after WSU stomped Washington, then spent his off-season reshaping the program and firmly establishing his principles, setting the stage for the debut of the "New Wazzu" — Dickert's catch-all tagline for his rejuvenated team, which opens a much-anticipated season at 6:30 p.m. Saturday at home against Idaho.

Throughout the past month, Cougar players were asked to define the "New Wazzu," the tenets of Dickert's coaching strategies and the culture he has instituted here. It starts with a "player-led team," receiver Lincoln Victor said, but extends beyond the sport.

"The 'New Wazzu' is all about approaching every day with a new mindset, a will to win and doing the right things all the time, and not just when someone's watching," he said.

"Not just doing the right things on the field, but having integrity off the field and being great young men, because after ball, we're going to be fathers one day, we're going to be guardians, we're going to be out in the world."

"What you learn from here is what you'll take away. The 'New Wazzu' is just our lifestyle, our new routine. You can see it on the field in practice. Everyone shows up with a mindset, ready to play and attack the day."

Many Cougars noted WSU's "player-led" identity under Dickert.

"Us players, us leaders are stepping up and having a voice, because this is a player-led team and the best teams are player-led," senior nickel Armani Marsh said. "Accountability and the little stuff, if it comes from the players, that's how you get a good team."

As a first-time head coach last season, Dickert put faith in his experienced players, trusting them to take on extra leadership responsibilities in keeping the Cougars together through a uniquely difficult situation. As WSU's permanent coach this year, Dickert is granting his veteran players some level of autonomy, trusting them to adopt expanded teaching roles in upholding the team's standards of play and character.

"I'm a big believer in accountability and player-led teams," Dickert said. "It's just an emphasis on them being their best. When players hold themselves accountable,

## WSU vs. Idaho

**WHEN:** Saturday, Sept. 3, 6:30 p.m.

**WHERE:** Martin Stadium, Pullman, Washington

**TV:** Pac-12 Network

that's when you have real power.

"It can be one thing for me to say it, but they're buying into it. They're driving it. I think that's when you have real accountability within a program."

Players seem to appreciate the style of coaching, which emphasizes personal growth and relationship-building while stressing maximum effort "in every aspect of life — being a man off the field, on the field, in the classroom, when it comes to our daily duties as men in the community," edge rusher Brennan Jackson said.

"He just expects and demands excellence from us. He expects us to be that way, because he knows we can. When he talks about our best on and off the field, he really means putting your best foot forward in everything you do. ... When you have a group that really believes in that standard, then you see so many guys start to grow and become men really fast."

Added fellow edge Ron Stone Jr., speaking on the same topic during Pac-12 media day in July: "It's really important that the team has accepted and embraced that belief. That's the difference maker in the 'New Wazzu' and everything we're bringing this year."

Raised in pastoral Wisconsin, Dickert worked primarily in small, tight-knit communities during his climb up the coaching ladder. The 39-year-old made stops at eight programs before he was hired as WSU's defensive coordinator ahead of the 2020 season.

Considering his unpretentious upbringing and folksy personality, Dickert seems suited for Palouse life. He speaks often about his affection for Pullman and the communal nature of the college town surrounded by farmland. It's no surprise that Dickert stresses the importance of camaraderie in his program.

"It's just different (here) — it's just a family, a real family culture," transfer safety Sam Lockett III said. "Everybody's together and there's a whole lot of love. That's one of our core values: love and just being together."

Victor, asked to compare last year's preseason with this one, highlighted the improved "togetherness of the team" ahead of its 2022 season.

"Hopefully, if you're an outsider, it's something you feel when you're around the program," Dickert said. "From our coaches to our players — down to custodians, chefs and administration — we're all a part of being accountable and making this program the best it can be."

Dickert is an energetic presence at practices. He always seems to be on the move, offering hands-on guidance for players regardless of the position group.

"You see how vivacious he is, his personality," running backs coach Mark Atuaia said. "That's exactly the juice we have in our program every day. You have to match it. If the head man is doing it — shoot, you gotta do it, too. It's infectious and it pervades the whole building."