

## COLLEGE FOOTBALL | OREGON STATE BEAVERS

## Defense steps up in 1st spring scrimmage

BY NICK DASCHEL

The Oregonian  
Jonathan Smith is a former quarterback and a veteran offensive coach, but the Oregon State coach knows it will take both sides of the ball for the Beavers to prosper in 2021.

Following Saturday's first extended scrimmage of the spring, it was noteworthy the first specific thing to emerge from Smith's post-practice comments was defense.

The Beavers' defense has slowly emerged during its three years under Smith, but still has some work to do to become a difference maker. Is that day coming in September?

"Defensively, they made it hard. Guys were flying around and made some plays," Smith said. "A lot of them have been around. We're bigger and stronger. They know the scheme and they're tackling physical."

One defensive emphasis this spring is improving the takeaway total, an OSU weakness for years. Smith said cornerback Rejzohn Wright and linebacker Michael Erhart had interceptions during the scrimmage.

Smith said there's been progress on the takeaway front through six spring practices.

"We're playing more physical defensively. I liked watching them live tackle today. There's a lot of physical tackles," he said.

"We've made a point of that (because) that's how you create some turnovers to getting the ball out just being physical."

The position group that has the most opportunity and competition is defensive secondary, where the Beavers look to replace a pair of starting cornerbacks and create depth for the often-used nickel package.



Leon Neuschwander/For The Oregonian/TNS file  
**Oregon State defensive back Jaydon Grant (3) comes down with an interception against Washington State in the 2020 Pac-12 football season opener in Corvallis in November. Grant has been a standout in spring practice for a defense that is looking to force more turnovers.**

Wright, Alex Austin and Kansas transfer Elijah Jones are among the corners who have caught Smith's eye.

"It's getting to the point where we feel like we might have three or four starting corners, and finding the first two up will be interesting," Smith said.

As for the safety and nickel positions, Smith noted junior Jaydon Grant is "having a great spring ball," while sophomore Kitan Oladapo and Wynston Russell were emerging playmakers.

Smith said the three quar-

terbacks saw plenty of action during the 100-plus play scrimmage. He estimated second-year freshman Ben Gulbranson and third-year sophomore Chance Nolan took about 30 snaps each with the starting unit. Each has a year of training in OSU's offense, and Smith said it's showing. They're throwing the ball well, though Smith said given the high number of receivers the Beavers are running through drills, it doesn't always look crisp.

Smith singled out true

freshman quarterback Sam Vidlak for his ability to create and finish some plays during the scrimmage.

As for injury updates, starting center Nathan Eldridge is probably out for the rest of the spring because of wrist injury to his snapping hand. Smith said it's possible they might give Eldridge some action elsewhere toward the end of camp. Linebacker Avery Roberts (arm) is involved in light drills, but isn't participating in scrimmages or live tackling.

More than anything, Smith is happy to see sunshine following a pandemic-riddled year where things were often gloomy.

"It was almost 80 degrees out there. Felt awesome. Spring is coming," Smith said. "Football is getting back to normalcy."

*"We're playing more physical defensively. We've made a point of that (because) that's how you create some turnovers to getting the ball out just being physical."*

— Jonathan Smith, Oregon State football coach

## NFL Draft

Continued from B1

"I've been dreaming about this moment since I was a little kid running around the house with a helmet, hitting the couch," Jackson said after two dozen scouts watched his solo act.

"It was a really good turnout for one guy," Jackson said. "I'm grateful they all showed up and I got to put on a show for them."

Pro days took on added significance this spring with the NFL scouting combine scrapped and team visits prohibited because of the coronavirus.

"It definitely would have been cool to go out to Indy, get that weeklong experience of what the combine is like, just watching that as a kid all the time," Sherman said.

The combine allowed teams to get timely medical reports and allowed for uniform test-



Andy Nelson/The (Eugene) Register-Guard, file

**Oregon offensive tackle Penei Sewell.**

ing and timing of prospects, who could see how they stacked up against their peers in their draft class and even historically. That wasn't the case this year.

Teams had to send scouts, coaches and general managers across the country for any of the 103 college pro days that

replaced this year's combine in Indianapolis. Teams also weren't allowed private film sessions, workouts, or dinners with prospects. That left Zoom calls and all-star games, and ratcheted up the pressure on pro days.

"Not being able to actually meet or see them in person until you get here, yeah, it's nerve-racking," Oklahoma State receiver Tylan Wallace said at his pro day.

"I would say there was a little bit more pressure on us because this was our only interview for the job," said Auburn receiver Anthony Schwartz.

Pro days past often served as a mulligan for a poor showing at the combine.

"So, with pro day being the one shot for everything this year, I feel like it just added a lot of pressure for everybody," said Oklahoma edge rusher Ronnie Perkins.

Dozens of prospects such as Colorado State's Jackson also had something extra to prove after opting out of the 2020 season because of COVID-19. Unless they played in the Senior Bowl, their pro days marked their only chance to knock off the rust from their long layoffs, show off their pre-sculpted bodies from their pre-draft training — some of which was started last fall — and prove they are still passionate about football.

"The next time I have an opportunity to step between those lines," said Oregon offensive tackle and opt out Penei Sewell, "I'm going to make

*"The next time I have an opportunity to step between those lines I'm going to make the most of it and I'm coming with everything I have."*

— Oregon offensive tackle Penei Sewell

the most of it and I'm coming with everything I have."

What everyone seemed to miss from the combine were the head-to-head comparisons during position drills and the uniform 40-yard dash at Lucas Oil Stadium.

"I do not know how I ran today," Georgia Tech defensive back Jaylin Askew said. "Nobody told me anything."

"I don't have any numbers, I apologize," said Northwestern linebacker Paddy Fisher. "I was trying to find some after we finished our position drills but all the scouts had left."

Arkansas cornerback Jerry Jacobs swore he ran a 4.38.

"Everybody got a different time, though," he said. "Some scouts got 4.4. Some scouts had me at 4.5. ... But honestly, I know my speed and I know what I can do."

Do NFL teams, though? There was even some uncertainty in the weight room.

"I wish I had somebody counting for me," Auburn linebacker K.J. Britt said after getting 24 reps on the 225-pound bench press.

Wisconsin O-lineman Cole Van Lanen didn't mind the combine cancellation — "I got an extra two weeks of training" — nor was he bothered by the Badgers' pro day restrictions.

"I would have loved to be here with my family and my agents, the people who support me, and experience this with them," Van Lanen said.

"But you've got to make the most of it. It's just like a game. You don't realize the crowd that's there. You're there to perform. You block everything out and you perform, and that's kind of what this was, too."



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

**Oregon High Desert Storm head coach Keith Evans blows his whistle to start a drill during practice at the Deschutes County fairgrounds Friday.**

## Storm

Continued from B1

Jones was not sure if he would play another season, but Evans asked if he had one more left in him.

"It is one thing to have a lot of good players, but it is another thing to bring it all together and have everyone working on the same wavelength and towards the same goal," said Jones. "I can offer the experience of going through camp, letting guys know that they have to continue to work hard, and play with consistency?"

A small handful of players have played ball together. But for many of these players, this is the first time they have played arena league football or have been to Oregon. A small group of players got to experience a uniquely Oregon experience within the first day of being in the state.

While driving with a couple of players, assistant general manager Nick Moss stopped at a gas station to refuel. The players in the car were caught off guard, even shocked, a gas attendant came to the car to pump the gas, said Moss.

The chance to play professional football brought William Crest to Central Oregon from the east coast. Crest is a Baltimore native and played his college football at West Virginia and most of his knowledge of Oregon comes from following the University of Oregon football program.

He never got the chance to play for the Ducks, but is

*"We got 18 practices before we go to Idaho, and the goal is to get that win."*

— Keith Evans, Oregon High Desert Storm head coach

happy to finally make it to the west coast.

"You always hear about the Oregon program so much and I wanted to go there," said Crest. "But Oregon is lovely. I'm grateful to be here and grateful for the people who invested in me. Now I'm going to invest into this community and this state."

Less than three weeks away from their first game, the Storm must narrow down the roster to 21 active players who will suit up for games. While currently on the team for training camp, there is still no guarantee that they will land on the active roster. But players are excited for the chance to compete and continue the game they have played most of their lives.

"This is an opportunity for me to get back in the game," said Crest. "I want to be an asset to this team."

For Jones, playing his final season, he wants to end his arena career the same way he started it — with a championship.

"I love the game, I breathe the game, I miss the game, been training for months for this," said Jones. "I decided to go out on that limb and try and win another championship and go out the right way."

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Vasha Hunt/AP file

**Auburn linebacker K.J. Britt lines up against Alabama State in Auburn, Alabama, in 2018.**



Sean Meagher/The Oregonian

**Timber Joey hoists a slab after the Timbers go up 5-0 on C.D. Marathón in a CONCACAF Champions League match in Portland Tuesday night.**

## Timbers

Continued from B1

"We know the venue, we know the challenges there, but now the opposition is different," Timbers coach Giovanni Savarese said. "It's a team also that's trying to adapt to a new situation. I'm sure that, knowing Marc, he'll prepare the team well for what they're going to encounter there for this season."

The Timbers should be well prepared for MLS play, having already played two matches in the CONCACAF Champions League tournament in the past two weeks. Portland is coming off a dominant 5-0 victory against C.D. Marathón of Honduras that moved the Timbers into the quarterfinals of the tournament.

"You already are tested," Savarese said. "You already are in two games that there's something that you need to get out of these two games, and it becomes very competitive, especially in this CCL format which you have to play at home and away and you have to go through. So there's a lot at stake in these games. So I think this is a positive thing for us to have gone through prior to our start of the season."

Portland will take on Vancouver still missing some key players. Forward Jeremy Ebobisse remains out with a hamstring injury, midfielder Se-

## Next up

Portland vs. Vancouver  
When: 7 p.m. Sunday  
TV: Root/ESPN+



bastian Blanco is not ready to return from a torn ACL and midfielder Andy Polo is not yet back with the team because of green card issues.

But the absences haven't slowed the Timbers thus far. Yimmi Chara turned in a hat trick against Marathón on Tuesday, and Portland has put up seven goals across two matches.

The Timbers have a new-look defense that includes left back Claudio Bravo and right back Josecarlos Van Rankin.

Vancouver's key newcomers include midfielder Caio Alexandre and forward Déiber Caicedo, but the biggest threat in the Whitecaps' attack is forward Lucas Cavallini.

Midfielder Diego Valeri said the Champions League matches gave the Timbers experience playing at intensity and allowed them a chance to fix things going into MLS play. But the advantage goes only so far, he said.

"At the end, soccer is how you perform during those 90 minutes," Valeri said, "and now we have the opener and it's going to be a completely different game."