

Sept. 30th, 2006: California vs. Oregon State Game Notes

Some thoughts on the Oregon State game, in no particular order:

- As most Cal fans may know, the game between the Bears and the Beavers this Saturday was not televised. While it was unfortunate that the nuances of the Pac-10 TV contracts with Fox, ABC, and TBS, along with the choices made by those networks resulted in no broadcast for the game, I was lucky enough to be in Corvallis, Oregon to take in the action of this league match-up.
- What I saw was another dominating Cal win, not quite as flashy as the first half against Arizona State, but a methodical 41-13 pummeling nonetheless. The Beavers could never stop the Bears when it mattered, and Cal's many stars racked up more gaudy statistics.
- First of all, it was a great experience to tailgate in Corvallis with the crisp, sunny, fall weather, the beautiful countryside, the almost unanimously genial Oregon State fans, and off course, the on-field results did not hurt.
- We were sitting in the south end zone with the other Cal fans, so the angle (and lack of TV replays) may have compromised some accuracy in what you are about the read below, but hopefully it'll paint a good enough picture to hold you over until the battle in store next week.
- It was another 4 touchdown day for Nate Longshore, his third this season (Minnesota, ASU, OSU), and his second 300 yard passing performance (Minnesota, OSU). This time the recipients were Lavelle Hawkins on a deep post-corner pattern, Desean Jackson on a slant and run, Marshawn Lynch on a "throw-back" screen, and a beautiful delayed wheel route to Lynch after a play fake to finish off the scoring. All were long passes with touch, and right on the money. To my layman's eyes, Longshore still needs to improve a bit in not staring down individual receivers and telegraphing his passes sometimes, as many young quarterbacks do. This habit resulted in his only interception and return by All Pac-10 OSU safety Sabby Piscitelli to the Cal 19, leading eventually to the Beavers' only touchdown of the entire game in the fourth quarter. Nevertheless, the blueshirt Sophomore signal-caller has been a revelation this season after a rough start in Knoxville, and it will be interesting to see where he can lead the Bears this year and beyond.
- Oregon State began the game jamming the line of scrimmage with their corners and safeties as they always do under head coach Mike Riley. This tactic can work because it stuffs the running lanes and applies immediate pressure against receivers on short passes. On the other hand, it exposes the defense to long plays over the top. Last season, in the Bears' excruciating 23-20 loss to the Beavers, many things went wrong, but a huge factor was Joe Ayoob's repeated inability to hit Cal wide-outs that were open deep behind the press coverage. As Ayoob mis-fired in 2005, Oregon State saw no need to adjust their pressure, choking off any attempted runs and short passes. (To be fair, Ayoob did lead the Bears to a

rousing come-from-behind victory against Washington State the following week). In any case, it was a completely different story in Corvallis this Saturday, just as it was in Cal's 49-7 romp in 2004. The Bears struck early and often with their play-makers getting behind Beaver safeties, forcing the defense to loosen up. Once the defensive backs were obligated to honor the long pass, Oregon State could not handle Cal's methodical drives down the field with superior personnel.

- Of course, one of the members of this superior personnel as usual was Marshawn Lynch, who also added another 100+ yard day on the ground against the Beavers and another tackle-breaking rushing touchdown to go with his two receptions for scores. As expected, Lynch's effectiveness increased as the first half wore on and Oregon State backed off their pressure D in response to Longshore's barrage. The amazing thing about Lynch is that he can make a 3 touchdown day look like another routine day at the office.
- I may sound like a broken record, but Oregon is a wonderful place – in general, I'm not just saying that based on this trip. I will always be a California man, but the cool sunny weather (yes, I know it's not always like that), the relaxed people, traffic, taxes, and real estate prices (relative to Cali), and the great beer and food stand out. It's like a little slice of the Midwest mixed in with the usual wonders of the west coast. I will definitely be back, also in large part thanks to my lovely friends, a couple who recently moved to Portland and hosted me and a few other buddies up from the bay this past weekend. Thanks!
- Cal's defense also played well, containing and frustrating Oregon State rather than dominating them. The performance does not yet match the (possibly unfair) pre-season hype, but the end results are good. Beaver quarterback Matt Moore did have a high completion percentage (18 of 27 for 187 yards, no TDs or Ints). However, Moore failed to make the big plays that Longshore did with regularity. The Bears also held Oregon State running back Yvenson Bernard in check (17 carries for 74 yards), after having given up 194 yards to him last year along with two long touchdowns. This time, Bernard did get the Beavers' only score on a short fourth quarter touchdown run after Longshore's lone interception.
- Players that stood out on defense to my eyes were linebackers Zach Follett and Desmond Bishop, rover Brandon Hampton, corner Daymeion ('Donte') Hughes, more for his coverage and tackling this time rather than his spectacular interceptions, and as always, and Brandon Mebane (despite limited playing time). Last season, it was Mebane's injury that opened the floodgates for OSU's successful running attack in the second half of that game.
- Blueshirt Junior free safety Thomas Decoud did not make the trip to Corvallis with a sprained knee, but blueshirt Sophomore Bernard Hicks turned in a solid performance in place of the sure-tackling Decoud. The job will be much tougher against the high-flying Oregon offense this Saturday and there is still hope that Decoud will be back.
- On the Bears' first 3 third down situations of the game on offense, the loud PA system at Reser Stadium played the menacing (?) sound of a chainsaw starting up.

The end result of those plays for the Bears? The first was just a long completion to Hawkins for a first down. The next two were long touchdown passes to Hawkins and Jackson respectively. We never heard the chainsaw again.

- Speaking of Desean Jackson, the lightning-fast receiver has now caught a touchdown pass in 7 consecutive games, dating back to Big Game last season. Over this span, Jackson has 10 touchdown receptions, 640 receiving yards, and one spectacular 80 yard punt return for a score to boot. Jackson is the leading scorer in the Pac-10 with 48 points, an honor usually held by a kicker (though Lynch is 3rd with 42 points), and is living up to every inch of his 5-star acclaim as a national blue-chip recruit when he accepted a scholarship with Jeff Tedford.
- The most common refrain from the subdued but still friendly Beaver ‘Believers’ after the game was ‘please beat the Ducks!’. Um, we’ll make sure to pass on the request to Tedford. In the meantime, it felt good when the small Cal contingent (2,000 or so?) eventually became louder than the orange and black-clad Oregon State majority as the game wore on. Tennessee, this was not, despite having the color orange in common.
- Again, it does suck that there was no TV broadcast for the game. As a college football fan, it’s one of the little pleasures of football Saturdays to watch your victorious team’s highlights on SportsCenter mixed in with the rest of the day’s action across the country. But this time, the run-down of games involving ranked teams just omitted the #20-ish Bears and kept going, as if the game was never played. Screw that noise.
- As always, with all the praise heaped on Desean Jackson, the other two Bear receivers are often forgotten. In this game, it was Lavelle Hawkins that dominated, gaining 111 of Cal’s first 118 yards from scrimmage at the start of the game to go along with the first touchdown. Hawkins finished with 128 yards on 6 catches, and an end-around for 10 more yards. A quote from the (obviously excited) Hawkins: “That’s the best quarterback I’ve ever played with in my life,” Hawkins said. “Nate is the guy. Nate is the man.”
- Oregon State’s first points of the game came on the last play of the first half. After a late Schneider field goal to put the Bears up 31-0, the Beavers moved the ball to the Cal 41 with 5 seconds left, primarily on the strength of a pass from Moore to OSU’s strong tight end, Joe Newton. Alexis Serna, the top kicker in the Pac-10, then came on to boot a line drive a few feet above the crossbar for a jaw-dropping 58 yard field goal. Serna, who also hit a 40-yarder in the 3rd quarter, and whose few kickoffs consistently reached the end zone, probably drew the loudest cheers of the day from the Oregon State partisan crowd.
- The hour and a half drive from Portland to Corvallis (mostly south on I-5) allowed us to witness the vast fleet of orange and black decorated cars, with pom-poms and Beaver appendages sticking out all over the place, all heading in the same direction. One white SUV even had a 2-foot flat plastic beaver tail waving in the wind behind its rear bumper. As usual in Oregon, the occupants of almost

all these vehicles smiled and waved. Truly, the friendly, festive beaver, and I'm trying not to insert a joke here, was a common sight on the road to Reser Stadium.

- One encouraging sign from the Cal defense against Oregon State was the relatively low production from Beaver receivers forced by the Bear pass rush (4 sacks) and solid coverage. TE Newton led OSU with 84 receiving yards, with receiver Brandon Powers a distant second (53 yards) and everyone else at 35 yards or less. Bob Gregory's unit will need to do even better against the prolific Oregon attack, spear-headed by the "other" young phenom quarterback in the Pac-10, Dennis Dixon, and huge Sophomore receiver Jaison Williams (115 yards per game, 4 TDs) who is eerily reminiscent of recent Trojan great, Mike Williams. The Ducks are not too shabby on the ground either with freakish talent Jonathan Stewart and capable backup Jeremiah Johnson, running behind a powerful and experienced offensive line.
- Cal's offensive line appeared to have another steady, unspectacular day. Of course, unspectacular is usually good on OL. There were no huge holes for Bear running backs, and no obvious great individual blocks – at least not obvious to me without the benefit of a TV broadcast that I could Tivo. But Longshore had time to throw, and Lynch got his yards when it mattered. Left tackle Andrew Cameron returned from his ankle injury to start the game, though Mike Tepper still filled in for most of the second half. Mike Gibson continues to start and play respectably at right tackle with the injury to Scott Smith. The only noticeable hiccups were a couple false start penalties on right guard Norris Malele in the first half when crowd noise was still a factor, along with one sack which appeared to come on an OSU blitz. Overall a good job for the guys in the trenches, especially on the pass-blocking front.
- All in all – it's hard to complain as a Bear fan. Since the Tennessee game, Cal has taken care of business against opponents who have turned out to be inferior in talent. Let's see how they do against a top notch squad like the one dead ahead.
- Hope to see you all in Memorial for the huge match-up against the Oregon Ducks this coming Saturday. Cal is starting to build a heated rivalry with Mike Belloti's boys from the north, who are undefeated and just finished crushing Arizona State this past weekend. There should be great athletes and spectacular play-makers all over the field, and this game may determine who earns the right to battle USC for the Pac-10 championship and a BCS berth. This is big-time football, kids. Watch, cheer, and enjoy.

Go Bears!!!