

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Oregon grows, lands in Rose

Saturday, December 5, 2009 3:00 AM

BY **TIM MAY**

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

First thought: Ohio State could not have picked a more ideal, high-quality opponent than Oregon for the Rose Bowl. But think again.

At first glance, it seems the Buckeyes might hold a slight edge in a couple of key areas. One, the Ducks like to run the ball a lot more than they throw it, and Ohio State prides itself on stopping the run. And two, the Oregon defense has been vulnerable against a balanced offense all season, and the Buckeyes figure to offer a few more looks in the bowl than they showed in the final three games of the regular season.

Appearances, however, can be deceiving, as another OSU -- Oregon State -- found out the hard way Thursday night. The Beavers led Oregon by nine points in the third quarter in their annual "Civil War" game in which the winner would advance to the Rose Bowl.

Ahead 30-21, Oregon State was mixing it up nicely on offense and its defense seemed to have a bead on Oregon quarterback Jeremiah Masoli and the Ducks' shotgun zone-read option.

Then came the sprouting of the bamboo -- the theory that first-year Oregon coach Chip Kelly has been preaching to his players all season.

"If you water bamboo in the first year, nothing happens," Kelly said in the postgame news conference. "If you water it in the second year, nothing happens. If you water it in the third year, nothing happens. If you water it in the fourth year, it grows 90 feet in six weeks."

"That kind of analogy to our players is that you have to keep driving, keep paying, and it will pay off in the long run. And that's what those guys understand."

The Ducks rallied to win 37-33, and they left the game looking a lot stronger than they did when it began.

While Oregon gained the expected performances from the wheeling-dealing Masoli and speedy redshirt freshman running back LaMichael James (166 yards, three touchdowns), they also welcomed the return of powerful running back LaGarrette Blount.

Blount's entrance in the third quarter marked his first appearance since he was suspended for punching a Boise State player after the Broncos beat the Ducks in the season opener. Blount finished with nine carries for 51 yards and a third-quarter TD.

"LG has been through a lot and I am just proud of him, really proud of him," Kelly said.

Blount's return compounds the homework the OSU defense must put in over the next four weeks as these two schools prepare to meet in the Rose Bowl for the second time. Ohio State won the first meeting 10-7 on Jan. 1, 1958, to cap the Buckeyes' 1957 national championship season.

The 2010 version promises to be much more high-scoring, assuming quarterback Terrelle Pryor and the Buckeyes can hold up their end of the bargain on offense. As for Oregon, it has scored at least 31 points in all but two games this season, in the 19-8 loss at Boise State and in a 24-10 win at UCLA. Even in its only other loss, at Stanford, Oregon went down swinging 51-42.

The Ducks also showed resolve in their two games with the Rose Bowl trip on the line, rallying from 10 points down at Arizona on Nov. 21 to win in double overtime, and then knocking off Oregon State by pass-rushing the steam out of Beavers' balanced offense in the fourth quarter.

"I think we were always capable of something like this, this greatness, but we definitely had some hardships along the way," Masoli said after Thursday's game. "Boise and Stanford definitely had their toll on us.

"Emotionally a team can go down, but our guys -- I give a lot of credit to my teammates for sticking in there, working every day, and believing in the system, putting in the extra hours and having the end result be this."

Kelly, though, made sure to emphasize that the bamboo isn't finished growing as the Ducks head to Pasadena for the first time since the 1994 season.

"We know we have a really good Ohio State team coming in, and this football team is no way done," Kelly said. "We're going to finish thing the right way, and that's what those guys know. We're not just happy to be in a bowl game, we're going to win the bowl game."

tmay@dispatch.com
