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Forecast: Cal vs. Oregon

Photo: Michael Pimentel
GoldenBearSports.comBy [Peter Dudley](#)
Guest Contributor
Posted Nov 2, 2005[More](#)**In college football, anything can happen. Two weeks ago, 6-2 Cal's visit to 7-1 Oregon looked like a possible Duck romp. When Oregon's starting quarterback, Kellen Clemens, broke his ankle in the third quarter of Oregon's win at Arizona, some things changed. And some didn't.**

Sagarin's rating system puts [Oregon](#) at #8 in the country and Cal at #44. Sagarin's computer thinks Oregon is 15 points better than the Bears, but it doesn't know about Clemens' injury. The odds makers do, and they started Cal as a 1-point favorite early this week; since then the teams have flipped, and the Bears are now a 1-point underdog. Sagarin's computer also says that Oregon has played the 15th toughest schedule in football while the Bears have breezed through the 102nd most difficult.

The two teams have only [Arizona](#) and [Washington](#) as common opponents so far; the Ducks have lost only to #1 [USC](#) while beating [Houston](#), Montana, [Fresno State](#), [Stanford](#), [Arizona State](#), Washington, and Arizona.

There is little doubt that Clemens' injury will severely affect the Ducks' offense. [Dennis Dixon](#), Clemens' backup, has just 20 pass attempts and 17 rushes this year and didn't complete even one series against the Wildcats before being knocked out with a concussion. Of those 20 passes, he completed 15 (good) with two interceptions (bad) and one touchdown. He also ran for a touchdown but at this point in his career he's no [Kellen Clemens](#).

Consider what Clemens brought to the Ducks this year (Oregon is not what you would call a "balanced" offense): with 328 yards per game passing and only 137 rushing, they relied on Clemens for most of their offense. In addition, Clemens was their second leading rusher with 25% of the carries (69) and 21% of their net rushing yardage (228). As a team, Oregon has only 1,097 total rushing yards. Tailback [Terrence Whitehead](#) is the leading rusher with 99 carries (35%) and 388 yards (35%). Whitehead gets 3.9 yards per carry.

Everything went through Clemens. Consider these statistics driven by his stellar senior season. Clemens is:

- #1 in the Pac-10 and #5 nationally in total offense
- #2 in the Pac-10 and #9 nationally in passing yards
- #3 in the Pac-10 and #16 nationally in pass efficiency.

Clemens led Oregon to these levels as a team:

- #7 nationally in passing offense
- #12 nationally in total offense
- #20 nationally in pass efficiency

Meanwhile, Oregon does not have one running back among the Pac-10's top 10 in rushing yardage. It is clear that the offense flowed from and through Clemens. It is dubious whether an untested sophomore can step in and accomplish the same level of play.

Not likely, when you look at the history of Pac-10 quarterbacks.

Dixon won't be stepping into an easy situation. The Cal defense is statistically and practically among the best in the conference, and possibly among the best in the country.

The Bears lead the Pac-10 and are #17 nationally in pass defense efficiency; they are one of only two Pac-10 teams (Arizona is the other) with more interceptions than passing touchdowns allowed, and they lead the Pac-10 at just 6.2 yards per pass allowed and a miserly 51% completion rate – and this in spite of the pass yardage given up in the [Washington State](#) game.

Moreover, the Bears are #2 in the Pac in total defense. They are the only Pac-10 team holding opponents under 5 yards per play (4.9), and they've allowed the fewest offensive touchdowns of any Pac-10 team (17; USC has allowed 18, and Oregon is tied at third with 24).

Cal is also #4 in rushing defense at 124 yards per game, with a third-best 3.5 yards per carry. The Bears also hold opponents to a league-low 17.25 first downs per game, and they're #2 in opponent third-down conversion at 34.8%. They do allow the most third down opportunities of any Pac-10 team, however.

Oregon has also gotten into the red zone more times (42) than any other Pac-10 team, but they've only managed touchdowns on half (21) their trips. (Coach Tedford has noted that the absence of a strong running game, a consequence of the spread formation, may contribute to the poor performance in the red zone that has plagued some spread-offense teams.)

The Bears are #2 in red zone defense, holding opponents to league-lows in red zone appearances (24) and red zone touchdowns (9). The Ducks have attempted far more field goals (28) than any other Pac-10 team (other Pac-10 teams average 10 attempts). They've only converted on 19 of those tries. (Speaking of field goals, it is odd that Oregon and OSU account for more than 36% of all the field goal attempts in the Pac-10.)

All this is to say that the Oregon offense is going to be severely challenged with the loss of their heart and soul while facing arguably the league's best overall defense.

The interesting thing about Clemens' injury, though, is that it takes away the marquee player that Cal would normally focus on. In the past three games, Cal has successfully corralled a marquee player: [Marcedes Lewis](#) (UCLA), [Mike Hass](#) (Oregon State), and [Jerome Harrison](#) (Washington State). Unfortunately for the Bears, in shutting down the superstar, they allowed someone else to step up: Maurice Jones-Drew (UCLA), [Yvenson Bernard](#) (OSU), and [Jason Hill](#) (WSU). Each of them had monster games, and Cal nearly went oh-for-three against them.

This week there is no marquee player to focus on, so in that sense this game is more like Washington or Arizona was for the Bears. They will have to be more versatile and ready for anything on defense. If they focus on anyone, it will be senior WR [Demetrius Williams](#), 5th in the Pac-10 in receptions per game (5.75) and 3rd in receiving yards per game (111.9).

The thing that hasn't changed about this matchup is Oregon's defense. The top three defenses in the league are Cal, USC, and Oregon. Consider these Oregon statistics:

- #3 in the Pac-10 in scoring defense (24.5 points per game)
- Allowed 25 touchdowns; only USC (21) and Cal (19) are better
- Run defense allows a mediocre 3.9 yards per carry and gives up only 124 yards per game - and only eight rushing touchdowns total
- Although Oregon allows a high completion percentage of 58% and 17 passing touchdowns, they lead the league in interceptions with 13 and hold opponents to a league-best 6.2 yards per pass (tied with Cal). They have three interceptions inside the red zone.
- Oregon's defense consists of four seniors, six juniors, and one freshman. Their DL is big and has dominated with 15 sacks in their last four games.

On the positive side for Cal, the Bears are the only Pac-10 team averaging more rush yards than pass yards per game. The Bears will line up 340-pound senior guard [Aaron Merz](#) next to 360-pound senior tackle [Ryan O'Callaghan](#) with 305-pound senior center [Marvin Philip](#) at the center. One might wonder if the Bears might stick a tight end out there, too, and try running that way once or twice, just to loosen up the receivers' routes a bit.

On special teams, the Ducks have good return teams but are bad at covering kickoffs. This is a good matchup for them because the Bears are at the bottom of the Pac-10 in kickoff returns.

All in all, this has the makings of a very interesting game. We don't know how Oregon's offense will respond to losing their keystone; they could crumble, or they could see other players take up the slack. Either way, I think the Cal defense will give them a serious challenge.

The larger question is whether Cal's offense has matured enough and healed enough to score 30 or more points against possibly the toughest, most experienced, most complete defense they'll see all season.

This game will probably come down to a turnover or a big special teams play, and either side could take it. If one team's defense scores, or if a special teams unit scores, that may win the game.

Setting aside surprises like that, I think the Bears are a shade better than the Ducks without Clemens. I look for the Bears to step up big and take their place at the head of the class - with a win this weekend, 32 to 30.

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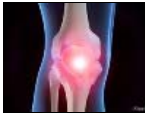
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