

Welcome To Week 7: Oregon



Photo by Ben Lonergan/The Register-Guard

OPPONENT: Oregon (5-0, 2-0 in Big Ten)

After five rather convincing wins to open the season, the main event is finally here for No. 2 Ohio State, who will travel cross-country to Eugene, Ore., to take on No. 3 Oregon in what is one of the more highly anticipated games of the 2024 college football season.

This top-three heavyweight matchup, which will kick off at 7:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (4 p.m. Pacific) on NBC, with ESPN's "College Gameday" on Oregon's campus beforehand, carries several countless storylines, perhaps none more than it being the first game between the two powerhouses as Big Ten opponents.

In addition to that, the game is also a reunion for Ohio State offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach Chip Kelly, who returns to Autzen Stadium after helping transform the Ducks into a national powerhouse and offensive machine as Oregon head coach from 2009-12, as well as running backs coach Carlos Locklyn, who the Buckeyes plucked from Oregon in the offseason after Tony Alford left for Michigan.

On the Oregon side, sixth-year starting quarterback Dillon Gabriel will be playing against an Ohio State team that had productive conversations with him during the offseason while he was in the transfer portal, before the Buckeyes ultimately decided to wait for Devin Brown to play in the Cotton Bowl, leading Gabriel to commit to Oregon.

In all, it's a titanic clash of college football powerhouses that many around the country are looking forward to, including those who will be lining up at Autzen Stadium on Saturday.

"I'm super excited," Jack Sawyer said after the Iowa game. "I can't wait to go compete against a team like Oregon. Going behind enemy lines, we love that, so we're ready for a heavyweight bout. I think we're ready. I think everybody's ready in the whole program. We're really excited for it. I can't wait, and we can't wait to get back to work this week."

"I think it's going to be fun," Gabriel said during the offseason. "I know (Ohio State and Oregon) played before in the nonconference, but so many people look forward to those cool matchups. You'd have to wait 10 years to make it happen, but now you get it more consistently...Those are the types of matchups you look forward to when that week rolls around."

Hype and intriguing storylines, Saturday's game will ultimately be a battle between two supremely talented teams on the field.

Oregon, despite struggling out of the gates with two close home wins against Idaho and Boise State, has zoomed to a 5-0 record in large part due to its strong defense, which has given up just 12.3 points and 79.0 rushing yards per game over its last three wins over Oregon State (49-14), UCLA (34-13) and Michigan State (31-10).

The defense has been led all season by Washington transfer Jabbar Muhammad, who is tied for the lead in the Big Ten with six pass breakups while also adding 15 tackles (one for loss).

On offense, Oregon has one of the more explosive units in the country, led by Gabriel, who is one of the more accomplished and seasoned quarterbacks in the history of the sport. Entering the Ohio State game, Gabriel ranked fourth in NCAA history in passing yards (16,314), third in passing touchdowns (136), second in total yards (17,445) and second in total touchdowns, while his 53 starts sit just seven behind Bo Nix for the all-time record.

The Oklahoma transfer has made a seamless transition to his new team, completing an FBS-leading 77.8 percent of his passes for 1,449 passing yards and 11 touchdowns to three interceptions — two of those coming against Michigan State in the red zone. But that would not have come without some major weapons at his disposal, starting with speedy wideout Tez Johnson (43 catches, 395 yards, five touchdowns) and reliable tight end Terrance Ferguson (16, 29).

But while the Ducks passing game has been elite all season, their running game is also starting to come together thanks to some improved offensive line play. With Iapani Laloulu, also known as "Poncho," on Oregon's campus, starting at center in place of junior Charlie Pickard, Oregon has averaged 205.0 rushing yards in their past three games. Junior back Jordan James has led that effort, as he has averaged 6.3 yards per carry this season and is coming off a season-best 166 rushing yards and two scores on 24 totes.

In all, Ohio State will have its hands full in Eugene, Ore., on Saturday night, but Ryan Day and co. have already indicated that they are not backing down to the challenge.

"It didn't take too long for us to set our focus on Oregon," Day said after the Iowa game. "Our focus is, when we leave the locker room today, that we're already starting on Oregon."

Players To Watch

- **QB Dillon Gabriel** — Gabriel leads all FBS quarterbacks with a 77.8 completion percentage, hitting on 130 of his first 167 passes for 1,449 passing yards (17th nationally) and 11 touchdowns (T-27th). He is coming off his worst game of the season, though, completing 20 of his 32 passes for 257 yards, two touchdowns and two interceptions.
- **WR Tez Johnson** — Johnson is one of the more explosive slot receivers in the country. He set the Ducks single-season record for most receptions last year with 86 but is in line to eclipse that already with 43 catches — 24 higher than the next closest Ducks receiver — for 395 yards and five touchdowns. Also a weapon on special teams, returning a punt against Boise State 85 yards for a touchdown.
- **TE Terrance Ferguson** — Ferguson has served as a Cade Stover-like safety blanket for Oregon

throughout his career, totaling a career 107 receptions and 13 touchdowns, which sits 17 and two shy of the program's all-time record by tight ends. He has yet to record a touchdown this season but has already established a great rapport with Gabriel. They are next-door neighbors and Gabriel called him his "best friend."

- **CB Jabbar Muhammad** — A former All-Pac 12 selection from Washington, Muhammad has totaled a tied-for-Big Ten-leading six pass breakups along with 15 tackles (½ for loss). Dan Lanning has lauded him for his high football IQ and great ball-hawking instincts.
- **LB Bryce Boettcher** — A defensive back-turned-linebacker and standout baseball player for the Ducks, Boettcher has set the tone for the Ducks' defense this season with 32 tackles — 13 more than the next highest tackler — along with an interception and three pass breakups.

(Also of note: Indiana sixth-year transfer right guard Matthew Bedford (6-6, 315) has missed all-but two snaps for the Ducks this season while dealing with a lingering knee issue. There is no timetable for his return, but if he is to come back against the Buckeyes it would be a significant addition to the line. He started 31 games for Indiana at right guard/right tackle for the Hoosiers from 2019-23.)