

Run with football success

The national title game is an opportunity for the University of Oregon to raise its profile and get stronger where it matters most, in the classroom

Oregon will win. Mark it down. No way the Ducks come home losers from playing for the national championship of college football.

Never mind the score. The larger victory will come from the inspiration, the excitement, the infusion of students and support that will result from showcasing the University of Oregon on a national stage before tens of millions of viewers.

When Oregon finally made it to the Rose Bowl in 1995, after four decades of football futility, the Ducks lost to Penn State on the field, but won everywhere else. Recalled former UO President Dave Frohn-mayer, "It was an unparalleled opportunity to raise philanthropic funds, which by the way, go to far more than athletic endeavors. ... I can count tens of millions of dollars that came to the academic enterprise of the university."

By now, everyone with even a passing knowledge of the University of Oregon knows all about the huge disparity between its athletic and academic budgets and facilities. Over the years, Nike's Phil Knight and other major donors have given the university everything from a new basketball arena to the nation's most impressive athletic training facility.

Meanwhile, the Legislature has steadily disinvested in the UO and other Oregon universities, leaving them near the bottom in per-student public funding, faculty pay and other metrics.

Of course all this has something to do with why the Ducks may be first in your heart and second in the college football polls, but still tied for 111th in U.S. News & World Report's ranking of American universities. (Auburn is 85th.)

That contrast has prompted some ridicule and resentment, even from UO professors

who ought to know better than to suggest there's some kind of zero-sum relationship between athletics and academics, that private donations to the former have diverted money away from the latter.

That seems to imply that Oregon somehow would be better off as an academic institution if it hadn't built itself into a football power. Well, it's not as though the UO was a better-funded, stronger academic university back in 1983, when its football team was so bad that it played Oregon State to a 0-0 tie in what was dubbed the "Toilet Bowl."

It is absolutely true that Oregon does not provide adequate funding for its academic universities, including the UO. That is arguably the single greatest public failure in this state. But don't blame Phil Knight, Chip Kelly or the Ducks football team for what's happened to public funding for universities. Blame the voters who passed the Measure 5 property tax limitation and an entire generation of Oregon legislators that has failed to invest in higher education.

Rather than look at the football program with envy and jealousy, those charged with strengthening the UO and other academic institutions ought to take heart, inspiration and lessons from its remarkable rise to national prominence.

The football team has proven you can go from last to first. Yes, it has shown that it takes money — real and sustained investment — to pay for first-rate facilities. But it also demonstrated what is possible with great leadership, persistence and determination.

Over the next month, leading up to the national title game in Glendale, Ariz., you're going to hear all about Oregon's creative offense, its remarkably fast tempo and, yes, its cutting-edge uniforms.

Innovative, strong, cool: There are worse ways to have your university branded on a national scale.

