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OREGON'S MID-WILLAMETTE VALLEY

Ducks' athletic success brings national attention

With the spotlight on, other aspects of Oregon can shine

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Millions of sports fans will be hearing a lot more about Oregon — the university football team but also the state. The Ducks play Auburn for the NCAA national championship Jan. 10 in Glendale, Ariz.

Oregon State made a valiant effort Saturday to deny Oregon that opportunity, but the Ducks triumphed over their intrastate rival 37-20 in Corvallis.

Many people contend that athletics are over-emphasized in major colleges, with their recruiting scandals, multimillion-dollar compensation for coaches, and other issues. But there is no denying that sports success can bring nationwide exposure to a university. Former Oregon President Dave Frohnmayr is among those who say the Ducks' success in sports translated into increased recognition and support for other areas of the university.

Some schools, such as Southern California, are renowned for their sports prowess but grow into world-class academic institutions along the way. Indeed, USC this season has been in the news for its recruiting and financial violations, which landed it on NCAA probation and kept it out of this year's bowl games. But under former President Steven Sample, USC quietly became one of the world's top urban universities, both in its relationships with neighborhood residents and in its intellectual rigor.

On the other hand, the University of Oregon been highly regarded academically — despite being chronically underfunded by the state — and only now is going for its first national football title. There was a time when the UO would have been thrilled to play in the Pasadena Rose Bowl, but anything less than the championship game would have been a disappointment for this season's undefeated Ducks.

The Ducks, who count Nike founder Phil Knight among their distinguished alumni, have gained fame for their multifaceted Nike-made football uniforms. But the nation's football fans this year got a glimpse of a highly focused, risk-taking team that bought

into coach Chip Kelly's all-business leadership style.

Only last spring, the Ducks seemed a mess, replete with player suspensions and criminal misdeeds, which culminated in starting quarterback Jeremiah Masoli being kicked off the team and finding new life at the University of Mississippi. That makes the Ducks' success this season, led by new quarterback Darron Thomas, even more remarkable. Oregon had the nation's highest-scoring offense, averaging 49 points a game.

The state, including the Beavers, already has benefited from the Ducks' run. On Saturday, ESPN's popular "College GameDay" show was nationally broadcast from Corvallis for the first time. It's worth remembering there was a lengthy era when Oregon State was so bad in football that some people suggested it drop out of the Pacific-10 Conference. Despite this year's losing season, the Beavers have regained respectability and credibility under coach Mike Riley.

The Beavers won't be among the 70 teams in this season's bowl games. But don't be surprised if many Beaver Believers cheer for the Ducks on Jan. 10. They're intense rivals on the sports field. But they're all Oregonians.

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