

Just keep watering, Duck fans

The sky may be wet for Saturday's Oregon-Utah football game at Autzen Stadium but, reminds Greg Bell, it isn't falling.

Like me, the inspirational speaker — and former Duck basketball player — has been amazed at the “woe-is-us” attitude after Oregon's 26-20 loss to Stanford, which may have left national championship hopes sparse but didn't ruin what could still be another banner season.

Like me, he's slightly incredulous that, as of Thursday afternoon, Autzen's 94-game sellout streak is in danger despite the Ducks being ranked sixth in the country and playing a Pac-12 opponent while still having legitimate BCS bowl hopes.

“People get carried away with what it all means,” says Bell, whose Water the Bamboo philosophy was enlisted by former UO Coach Chip Kelly in 2009. “Suddenly you're hearing we should throw out the whole system, we're recruiting the wrong kids, all is lost.”

Did the Stanford loss hurt? Sure. But, judging by blog posts, some fans have become Titanic passengers, post-iceberg.

Bell suggests we remember back four years.

“The first game out of the gate was Boise State — Chip Kelly's first as head coach — and expectations were high,” says the Portland-based Bell. “And look what happened.”

The Ducks' high-powered offense scored eight points, made six first downs and gained 152 yards. The exclamation point on an ugly 19-8 loss was Oregon player LeGarrette Blount's postgame punch of a Boise State player on national TV.

Afterward, fans were grouching with the same end-of-the-world attitudes that last week's loss triggered; Bell remembers a guy who always showed up at the gym in his Duck-garb best suddenly going all gray.

He also remembers what Kelly told him when asking if Bell could offer some inspiration to the team.

“He said, ‘Hey, I need an edge, something to change my guys' mindset.’ ”

What they needed, in essence, was perspective.

Bell, 51, shared with Kelly — and later with the entire team — about his philosophy, how you water bamboo for the first few years and little happens, then it can grow up to 90 feet in two months.

“Whether you are winning or losing,” Bell says, “do not quit watering.”

Keep working hard. Keep being consistent. Keep your head up.

Ultimately, good things will happen. Again.

It's worth noting that since the Boise State loss, Oregon has gone 10-2, 12-1, 12-2, 12-1 and 8-1 — and made four straight BCS bowl games, including a national championship and two Rose Bowls.

In part because coaches and players kept their perspectives, Bell says.

As fans, we need to do the same.

“It’s not about the bamboo, it’s about the water,” says Bell, who earned political science and law degrees from the UO and was a backup basketball guard from 1981 to 1985.

“There’s no reason to panic,” says Bell, twice named UO’s most inspirational basketball player. “If I’m a fan, this is when I should be cheering loudest, this is when the team needs me most. One game does not define a person, a team or a season.”

To be sure, Oregon has become a victim of its own success. When you win 87 percent of your games over a five-year period, fans naturally expect more wins — and get grumpy when you lose.

“A lot of people have drunk the UO football Kool-Aid,” Bell says. “But this idea of throwing out the whole system so we can be more like Stanford or Alabama is the wrong way to look at it.”

This same system, he reminds us, has made Oregon an elite program.

“The game, like life, is fickle,” says Bell, who speaks nationally. “There are a lot of ‘ifs’ out there. If De’Anthony doesn’t fumble, if (Josh) Huff reaches back and catches that first long pass. You can ‘if’ yourself to death. Me? I’m proud of what Oregon has done, and I’m proud of the guys they’ve recruited.”

He liked how Coach Mark Helfrich, when asked after the game if he was going to change the type of player he recruits, said, first, he would keep recruiting young men with character.

And Bell understood Huff’s tears on the sidelines. “Those tears weren’t a sign of weakness but of strength,” Bell says. “Society says keep it all bottled up. That’s ridiculous. These aren’t robots. Underneath all that equipment and armor are people.”

Bell suggests Duck fans simply take a deep breath, then “keep watering the bamboo.”

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