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FOOTBALL SPORTS



 Ducks quarterback Justin Herbert (10) squeezes through the CAL defense to score a touchdown.

It's truly "next man up" for the Ducks now

Kylee O'Connor — October 1, 2017 at 2:03 am

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Oregon's 45-24 win on Saturday over Cal may look great on paper, but the victory came with some losses. Six injuries and one ejection to key players plagued the Ducks throughout the game and may have cost them more than if they had lost the game itself.

The injuries included quarterback Justin Herbert, running back Royce Freeman and wide receiver Dillon Mitchell.

When head coach Willie Taggart sat down and addressed the media post-game, the first thing he said was, "I could ask this question."

The ensuing question, about the status of Herbert, was answered with, "There's no updates right now."

"I asked [Herbert] if he was OK," said Taggart. "He said, 'Yeah,' but that's what Justin always says."

Herbert suffered what reports say to be a broken collarbone during his first quarter touchdown run. No matter what the circumstances, it's always "next man up mentality."

"You can't really miss a beat, especially in such a close game," center Jake Hanson said. " ... It seemed like everybody was going down, at least at some point."

Taylor Alie entered the game after Herbert went down, but after going 9-for-13 for 41 yards and an interception, he too left the field injured. Coach Taggart then decided to put in freshman Braxton Burmeister and burn his potential redshirt year. But if Burmeister ends up being the guy going forward, running back Kani Benoit thinks that he's ready and that the offense has enough weapons to help him succeed.

"Braxton has been with us for a while now," Benoit said. "He knows how our offense runs. Out there he just needs to go and make the plays. Our receivers and running backs will carry him in that way and I think he's pretty confident in himself and in his talent."

Benoit replaced standout running back Royce Freeman after he injured what seemed to be his shoulder during the first quarter. When Taggart asked Freeman how he was doing after the game, Freeman responded, "I'll be alright coach, I did this before. I'll be fine." Freeman was burdened with ongoing injuries throughout the 2016-17 season.

"If anyone drops, we're going to pick up the slack," Benoit said. "That's what happened tonight and [Freeman] has full trust in us."

These injuries hurt the already lacking depth of the Oregon offense; however, Taggart said, "If there was any position that has depth, it would be running backs." After running for negative one yards in one attempt against Arizona State, Benoit ran for 141 yards and two touchdowns following Freeman's departure to the locker room.

"Guys go down and we're not going to put their heads down or anything. The next guy steps up," Taggart said. "We always talk about that with our guys. You've gotta be ready, you never know when the opportunity is going to come."

Going into the game, the Ducks were already missing receiver Charles Nelson and tight end Jacob Breeland. Now, with these additional injuries, the next man up will have a chance to "do something" against Washington State next week.

"What a great opportunity. When everybody's out, you've got a chance to go out there and do something, and our guys did it," Taggart said.

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