

How a freshman kicker exorcised Oregon's demons against Mike Leach and Washington State



By Tyson Alger (/author/tyson-alger/) Oct 27, 2019

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EUGENE, Ore. — Halloween films thrive on the predictability of the horror.

For Oregon the past four seasons, Mike Leach has been the guy with the axe.

Don't go in that closet; he's in there!

Oregon opens the closet.

Don't go in that shed; he's in there!

Oregon goes in the shed.

Make sure to check the back seat of your car!

Oregon speeds off with nary a look in the rearview.

Saturday, the Ducks set themselves up for the most predictable ending yet. Wearing their “Nightmare Green” uniforms under the lights in a game that pushed well into the night, Camden Lewis took the field with the game on the line.

Don't have the true freshman kicker attempt a game-winning kick at the buzzer with your playoff hopes hanging in the balance!

Trailing 35-34, Oregon attempted the kick.

It was a chip shot, Lewis would say after nailing the game-winner, a 25-yard wooden stake through the heart of a four-year losing streak to the man known as the “Pirate.”

You wouldn't believe Lewis' confidence. Well, maybe you would if you saw the way he sports a mustache that his face hasn't quite grown into, but this was the guy who missed his first career field goal attempt against Auburn. And then his second three weeks later against Stanford. And a guy who was only 1-of-2 the next week at Cal. And, hell, he was the guy who earlier against Wazzu had drilled a 39-yarder, only to miss the extra-point attempt after Oregon's first touchdown.

Lewis hasn't had to make a game-winner in years, he said. But when the Ducks took over, down a point with 52 seconds left on the clock, he knew his time was coming. Pretty simple how that works, he said.

“Just going through my normal routine. I didn't want to change anything up. It's just another field goal, to be honest,” said Lewis, a three-star recruit from the Charlotte, N.C., suburbs who originally committed to Minnesota. “Obviously the situation was a lot different.”

No kidding.

Oregon lost this game, then won it and — break in the action here for another replay review — lost it again by the time Lewis had lined up. The Ducks tore through the Cougars on the ground, with sophomore CJ Verdell rushing for a career-high 257 yards and three touchdowns. But the Cougars carved up the Ducks in the air, with Anthony Gordon throwing for 406 yards and three touchdowns.



CJ Verdell rushed for 257 yards and three TDs; it tied for the fourth-best single-game performance in school history. (Troy Wayrynen / USA Today)

There was a phantom false start call and a 15-yard unsportsmanlike penalty on Mario Cristobal for arguing a pass interference call on a play that was reviewed and reversed, meaning that, technically, Cristobal was arguing something that never actually happened.

We digress.

No. 8 Notre Dame had lost earlier in the day. So, too, had No. 5 Oklahoma. There was plenty at stake for an Oregon team that all but wrapped up the Pac-12's North Division a week ago in Seattle. Win Saturday night and Oregon would continue its rise up the playoff's eligible bachelor list.

But after Gordon hit Brandon Arcanado for the go-ahead score, the Ducks had to move from one end of the field to the other with under a minute left. Thanks to a 36-yard kickoff return by freshman Mykael Wright, Oregon started at its 39 with 52 seconds left.

Herbert to Verdell: 6 yards

Herbert to Spencer Webb: 7 yards

Herbert to Juwan Johnson: 15 yards

Herbert to Juwan Johnson: 24 yards

That last one is key. Johnson has been fighting his own demons. He's the heralded transfer from Penn State, the guy who arrived in the spring and was running with the starters within a couple of weeks. But he's also the guy who tweaked his calf before Auburn, was listed as "day-to-day" for a month and had just two catches to his name going into Saturday's game.

His first impact came when he pancaked two defenders to help clear the way for an 89-yard touchdown run for Verdell in the first half. Then came that final drive.

"The toughest part was sitting back and watching people and your teammates play football when you can't," Johnson said. "That's the reason why I came here ... and then you can't do that. I came all the way over here from Jersey. Coming here is very hard and it was very difficult to do.

"... It was rewarding. Knowing that Herbert trusted me. I was just trying to be that guy that hooked him up. I've been there before; we just had to do it right."

For a moment, it seemed like the Ducks might try to go for the TD. Johnson's 24-yard gain put them on the Cougars' 9, and the Ducks had two timeouts. Cristobal called one with 14 seconds left after a Verdell run to the left took the ball to WSU's 6.

Then Herbert got the snap, centered himself and took a knee, and Oregon used its final timeout.

The rest, Lewis said, was kind of a blur. He didn't thread the kick. It generously used much of the space right-of-center. Then he was mobbed. Fans rushed. Teammates swarmed. He was on shoulders and didn't know what to do with his hands.

First, he held them out right. Then he flexed before finally ending with an "O" for the crowd. He eventually was back on the ground. He eventually made it to the locker room. And he eventually was brought out to talk with the media for the first time this season.

"That was easy," Lewis said, ending this four-year horror story with a smile.

(Top photo: Abbie Parr / Getty Images)

Tyson Alger ([/author/tyson-alger/](#)) covers the Oregon Ducks for The Athletic. From Palmer, Alaska and a graduate of the University of Montana, he began his career in Hawaii before starting to cover the Ducks in 2014 for The Oregonian. Follow Tyson on Twitter [@tysonalger](#) (<https://twitter.com/tysonalger>).



55 COMMENTS

Add a comment...

Ed H. Oct 27, 1:00pm

The story is about the kicker?

Wow. This should have been about the near loss to a really bad WSU team that nearly beat the Ducks. I guess we have to wait for Fentress for the more objective and insightful report. You whiffed on this one.



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Neil H. Oct 27, 1:55pm