

- [Home](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Back to DNews.com](#)

△ △

## [Moscow-Pullman Daily News Blogs](#)

Enter search keyword



Subscribe: [Posts](#) / [Comments](#) / [Email](#)

- [Home](#)
- [Food](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Back to DNews.com](#)



### [Ranking the Pac-12 running backs: Part 4, The Elite](#)

By anemec on Thu, Jun 16, 2011

[Sports](#)

Here's the final installation of the Pac-12 running back rankings. I'll begin wide receiver rankings and previews on Monday, but I do expect to blog about the Cliff Harris situation over the weekend.

**4. Colorado** (85<sup>th</sup> in rushing yards in FBS last season; senior **Rodney Stewart**, 290 carries, 1,318 yards, 10 TDs) — Pac-12 fans meet **Rodney Stewart** — all 5-6, 175-lbs. of him. He's not your typical small back though. He is a pack-mule when it comes to the running game workload, finishing fifth in the FBS in carries...without playing in a bowl game. Look for Stewart to surpass last season's numbers if he can stay healthy — the caveat for all small backs, especially in a tougher-than-you'd-think Pac-12.

Redshirt freshman **Tony Jones** (5-7, 180-lbs.) will act as the primary back-up. He was awarded offensive player of the year on the scout team last fall and won't give Pac-12 defensive fronts a break from playing "Where's Waldo" with the Colorado tailbacks — their size will make them difficult to spot between the tackles.

In a vacuum, I'd rather have Stanford's **Stepfan Taylor**, but Stewart is going to get a lot of chances to surpass Taylor's numbers. Plus, Jones is as intriguing as they come after a strong spring that saw him become a viable running threat. For those reasons, Colorado advanced to part four.

**3. UCLA** (32<sup>nd</sup> in the FBS in rushing yards last season; junior **Johnathan Franklin**, 214 carries, 1,127 yards, 8 TDs; senior **Derrick Coleman** 82 carries, 487 yards, 5 TDs; sophomore **Malcolm Jones** 55 carries, 200 yards, 0 TDs) — Call me crazy, but watch out for the UCLA Bruins' running game this fall (please reserve the "ya, because they sure as heck can't throw it" jokes). **Johnathan Franklin** will be one of the top tailbacks in the Pac-12 this season and has, perhaps, one of the top three back-ups in **Derrick Coleman**. Franklin (5.3 yards per carry) and Coleman (5.9) each ran for over five yards a carry last season with the box stacked as much as it possibly could be. No one respected the Bruin passing game at all — and for good reason — yet these two continued to plug away in **Rick Neuheisel's** — ummm... interesting? — offense. If the passing game develops at all (and it couldn't be worse than last season) and the offensive line gets healthy (looked weak in spring, but mostly due to injuries), this group could produce 1,900 yards on the ground fairly easily.

Redshirt freshman **Jordan James** looked strong in spring and may end up battling Coleman for the primary back-up role, giving the Bruins three solid runners. Sophomore **Malcolm Jones** was also said to have a strong spring, despite a less-than-stellar offensive line showing.

Depth-wise this team could be one spot higher on this list, but the lack of a passing game and some doubts as to whether any of the four tailbacks can emerge as a truly elite option, makes UCLA the number three team on the list.

**2. Washington** (38<sup>th</sup> in the FBS in rushing yards last season; **Chris Polk**, 260 carries, 1,415 yards, 9 TDs, 22 receptions, 180 yards; sophomore **Jesse Callier**, 77 carries, 433 yards, 0 TDs; **Deontae Cooper** and **Bishop Sankey**) — Some running backs are so fluid that they seem like dancers on the field as they juke and spin past would-be tacklers. You watch them and realize that it takes incredible athleticism and vision to do what they do. Then, there are guys like **Chris Polk** (5-11, 214-lbs.). Polk gets you four-to-seven yards per carry seemingly every time he touches the football. In third and three situations, give him the pill because he'll fight and earn the first down. It isn't that his style is sloppy, he just lacks the speed to bust the big one, so instead he has turned himself into a back that can be relied on for a steady gain every time he touches the football. There's something to be said for that. Before I made an effort to watch several of his games, I thought he was overrated: a guy who lacked the skills to put together the highlight reel we are used to seeing with today's small, speedy tailbacks. After watching him, I realized he's a tip-of-the-cap to old-school football, when running backs took on defenders head-on. Teams will play the Huskies this year and think, "we bottled him up pretty well," only to discover he ran for 106 yards on 16 carries with two touchdowns and two critical late first downs. He's worth watching!

Polk showed what he can do late in the season when relied upon heavily: he ran for 284 yards against **Washington State** and 177 yards in a Holiday Bowl victory over **Nebraska**. Look for him to build on that and put together a stellar season.

**Jesse Callier** impressed in the back-up role as a true freshman last season, culminating with a 10-carry, 107-yard performance against **UCLA**. Callier has a bit of a quirky running style — he seems to dump out an entire bag of tricks to get the job done and displays good hands to boot. Callier wasn't highly regarded coming out of high school, despite jaw-dropping numbers, because he lacks the measurements and fails the eye-test of a five-star recruit. Washington would like to thank everyone who was late to the party on him, including **Oregon**.

**Deontae Cooper**, who wasn't full-strength for spring camp due to a torn ACL in his left knee from last season, is expected to be back by fall. He will have a role in the offense, as he is the game-breaker that fits into the Polk-Collier tandem seamlessly. On top of that, Cooper has handled his injury like a professional and is said to have become a team leader. Expect his name to get called a great deal in future years. This season, he'll be a change-of-pace home run threat.

**1. Oregon** (4<sup>th</sup> in the FBS in rushing yards last season; junior **LaMichael James**, 294 carries, 1,731 yards, 21 TDs, 17 receptions, 208 yards, 3 TDs; junior **Kenjon Barner**, 91 carries, 551 yards, 6 TDs) — Simply put, the Oregon Ducks have the best individual running back and the best depth chart in the nation. James returns as a Doak Walker Award winner for the nation's best running back, a Heisman finalist and he led the nation in rushing yards — all while being suspended for the season opener. If the Ducks manage to beat LSU and James has a good game and stays healthy all season, a Heisman Trophy is not out of the question. What many fail to realize about James is that he isn't just the benefactor of Oregon's spread offense and zone-blocking scheme. James is brilliant in the open field, knows when to put his head down and bulls people over despite his 5-9, 185-lb. frame. He is a big-play waiting to happen, but combines that with the ability to grind out tough yards.

In the opener James missed, **Kenjon Barner** was given the starting job and immediately put himself on the map with a 200-yard, 5-TD all-purpose performance. He'd be the starting running back for over half the teams in the Pac-12. Barner hasn't been the same, however, since he sustained a serious concussion against Washington State midway through the season. It appeared he bounced back against Oregon State, especially on the end-around, which Oregon will look to run this season to try to involve him more, but he still looks lost between the tackles at times. It's possible he hasn't gained the confidence that he can sustain a hit between the tackles yet. Barner will play the TZR position in Oregon's offense this season when he's not spelling James. The position amounts to a hybrid RB/WR. Look for him to be a playmaker in the open field.

The Ducks have two exciting youngsters in **Lache Seastrunk** (*Sporting News*' number four overall recruit in the Class of 2010) and **De'Anthony Thomas**. Seastrunk has been as inconsistent as they come during his year-and-a-half at Oregon and it earned him a redshirt last season. He can be brilliant at times, leaping for dramatic catches downfield, only to drop an easy dump-off a rep later. He has had some issues holding onto the football and has danced in the hole too much in scrimmage situations, instead of getting the necessary yards. If he can develop a feel for when to put his head down and when to dance, he could become a star. If **Cliff Harris** is out for an extended period of time Duck fans won't be disappointed if Seastrunk or Thomas emerge as the special teams play-maker that helps to fill the void.

Thomas has been a legend in Los Angeles since he was in junior high, and his high school career didn't disappoint. He became a five-star recruit and was all set to go to USC, but had a change of heart late and switched to Oregon. Thomas was seen as a cornerback by many — a stance that seemed solidified when he dominated the U.S. Army All-American week of practices and led the game in tackles — but Oregon likes him at tailback. He is difficult to project at the college level, especially with a body (5-9, 160-lbs.) that lacks the bulk to stay healthy over a long college football season. It was