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Tuesday, December 21, 2004

Birdine: Leinart isn't Heisman quality

Associated Press

NORMAN, Okla. -- If [Oklahoma](#) defensive end Larry Birdine got a Heisman vote, it wouldn't have gone to [Southern California](#) quarterback Matt Leinart.

Birdine made that known Tuesday in a series of statements that showed he wasn't all that impressed with the offense the No. 1 Trojans will bring into the Orange Bowl against the Sooners on Jan. 4.

"I feel like they're, I'd say, a one-and-a-half man team," Birdine said. "I want to respect them just because I have to play them, but then I watch them on tape and everything, and I realize that they're an average team."

Birdine repeatedly praised Reggie Bush, the Trojans' All-American all-purpose player who returns punts and lines up as a tailback and wide receiver for Southern Cal, but he had little positive to say about Bush's teammates on offense.

"Besides Reggie Bush, he's a great athlete, he's a fast back, he makes plays or whatever, but nobody else stands out to me," Birdine said. "Matt Leinart, he's the Heisman Trophy winner, but he hasn't been driving them -- or he hasn't been winning games. Up 'til the last four or five games, Reggie Bush has been their difference-maker.

"We feel like if we take Reggie out of the game, we're gonna win."

Birdine said he didn't think Leinart should have won the Heisman Trophy, and he wasn't just cheerleading for teammates Adrian Peterson and Jason White, who finished second and third in the voting.

"If anybody should have won it from USC, it should have been Reggie Bush," Birdine said. "I don't think that he was the best quarterback. [Utah quarterback] Alex Smith, he was better than Matt Leinart. I don't think Matt Leinart should have won."

Birdine later added: "He's definitely overrated. Like I said, he's a good quarterback, but he's not a Heisman-winning quarterback."

Birdine said he realized he could be providing USC with bulletin-board material and said his opinions didn't necessarily reflect the mind-set of the team.

"I don't know if that's the mood in the locker room," Birdine said. "I ask some guys and they say, 'they're good.' I haven't seen them on defense, but if our offense don't turn the ball over and their offense can't

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score, then I believe we're going to win the game."

"From a defensive perspective, I haven't seen anything that just stood out besides Reggie Bush."

Earlier, Oklahoma coach Bob Stoops had far different comments about the Sooners' opponent. He called tailback LenDale White a "great, great player" and said the Trojans receivers were "very good; I'm going to say that about every position on their team that we go to."

Asked about Leinart's positives and negatives, Stoops said the Trojans quarterback was "very wise and smart the way he plays and the way he's coached. He makes very few poor decisions. He's a great decision maker. He has a great arm, he's very accurate. He's got the poise you look for in the pocket.

"The criticism: he's not a great option guy. He's got everything you look for and he's a guy we recruited hard."

Birdine also judged that Oklahoma played more difficult competition in the Big 12 Conference than Southern California had faced in the Pacific 10, but most of his comments were directed toward the Trojans' offense.

"We're not going to just say we've got to stop Reggie and let everybody else run free, but definitely if you take Reggie Bush out of the game, you're chances for winning are that much greater just because if you think about it they give him the ball running, they give him the ball on reverses, they give him the ball on passes," Birdine said.

"Besides him, the only guy they throw the ball to is (Dwayne) Jarrett. If you take you take him out of the game, their options are obsolete."

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