Ducks fire Helfrich after 4-8 season

Andrew Greif  The Oregonian/OregonLive

For the first time in 40 years, the Oregon Ducks have fired their head football coach.

Mark Helfrich is out after four seasons and a search for his replacement begins, the school announced Tuesday night, shortly after Helfrich and athletic director Rob Mullens met.

"No one wanted Mark to be more successful at Oregon more than me," Mullens told reporters Tuesday night. "For the past several months I've grown concerned over the direction of the program. We were not competitive in a number of games and we were on a poor trajectory."

Players were given less than a half-hour notice to attend an emergency team meeting Tuesday night at the Hatfield-Dowlin Complex, where they were informed of the decision. At the meeting, players walked to Helfrich's office and formed a line outside as they waited to say their thanks.

"Players were upset, like they had lost a family member," Mullens said.

During the meeting, Mullens told players he was leaving Wednesday but not returning to Eugene until he had the school's next coach, but couldn't offer a timetable with the college football season still ongoing.

The search will be assisted by the firm Parker Executive Search and will go "far and wide," Mullens said.

The unprecedented highs achieved early in Helfrich's four-year tenure were not enough to protect the Oregon native from too many recent losses, by too many points. The setbacks this season undid the Ducks' era of success with shocking speed, not unlike the tempo UO once used to run roughshod over the Pac-12.

Helfrich's final game was a 34-24 defeat at Oregon State on Saturday, a game UO led 24-14 midway through the fourth quarter, roughly three hours after the firing.

Search and will go "far and wide," Mullens said.

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Researchers: Brigande spurred by hearing loss

Lynne Terry The Oregonian/OregonLive

John Brigande found he had a hearing problem when he was 9. In a test at school, he couldn’t hear well on his left side. Teachers noticed that he was slower than others to respond.

He managed by turning his head to compensate.

The problem got worse over time. At Boston College, he couldn’t hear his professors, and he couldn’t distinguish speech in the lab amid the chatter.

“I couldn’t hear my lab partner so I had to put my head in a sound booth where I don’t hear anything because the sound is just coming from my right ear,” he said. “I ended up having to give up the cochlear implant.”

He still wears a hearing aid.

Brigande was fitted with large hearing aids when he was 9. In a test at school, when he was 2, a friend of her parents came over for dinner. He wondered why she didn’t speak so he stood behind her and clapped. When she failed to respond, he told her parents to go to an audiologist.

“He was treated with antibiotics. It could have had a severe infection when she was 1 and severe hearing loss. No one knows why. She was their first child.”

Reiss was fitted with large hearing aids and at age 3 went to a speech therapy school where she learned to talk and listen.

“The specialist said she had severe hearing loss. No one knew why. She had a severe infection when she was 1 and was treated with antibiotics. It could have been from the drugs, she said. No one else in her family is deaf.

When her hearing loss was discovered, her family was in New Jersey, having moved from Berkeley, California, where Reiss was born. Her father, a scientist, worked at Bell Laboratories. Reiss’ mom, a statistician, stayed home, focusing on her daughter.

In middle school, she was the only deaf child. She had difficulty mixing in because she couldn’t jump into conversations. She had to know what the topic of conversation was and be facing the other children. Some of them were mean.

A speech therapist who worked with her through high school taught Reiss to initiate conversations and make friends. She considered a career in journalism but decided at Princeton University to focus on science. She was introduced to auditory research during a summer internship at Johns Hopkins University.

“I was so excited to be learning about hearing and doing something I enjoyed at the same time,” Reiss said.

In 2005, Reiss graduated from Johns Hopkins with a Ph.D. in biomedical engineering. “I wanted to have more of an impact than just finding out how things work,” Reiss said.

Scientists at Oregon Health & Science University’s hearing research center. From left, Peter Steyger, Lina Reiss, John Brigande and Alfred Nuttall. Beth Nakamura / staff

Researchers: Gallun focuses on testing

Lynne Terry The Oregonian/OregonLive

Hearing researcher Frederick Gallun would be a subject in his own experiments.

A Portland-based expert in auditory perception, Gallun is working on making a series of hearing tests available to audiologists in clinics so they can better diagnose their patients. The tests exist now only in laboratories. One of the experiments tests how easily people can single out speech in a noisy environment.

Gallun fails every time. He has no problem with his hearing in a one-on-one situation. But add a few more voices and he’s lost.

“As soon as people come in and start talking, I have severe problems because I can’t tell who’s saying what,” Gallun said.

He works at the VA Portland Health Care System to research tests on auditory perception. He also has a secondary position as an associate professor at Oregon Health & Science University, where he works with four other specialists with hearing loss at the Oregon Hearing Research Center.

Gallun earned a bachelor’s degree at Reed College and studied music perception, and then went to Boston University for a Ph.D. in auditory perception. He found out he had a hearing problem while conducting experiments for his dissertation. He had different results for his two ears while his subjects did not.

He has a tumor.

Specialists confirmed he had a tumor on his right vestibular and auditory nerve that had grown from the drugs he was taking for his tumors. The VA-Portland Health Care System is trying to remove it.

The 10-hour operation was a success: The tumor has never come back. But his right-ear hearing has not returned.

That’s driven his research ever since.

It’s long been known that having two ears helps people sort out sounds in the environment and tells the one they want to listen to by focusing on its spatial location. That’s something he can’t do, so he wants to rewire the brain.

“I wanted to understand better how much of an advantage that is and whether everyone is equally good at it,” he said. “Is there a natural variability?”

“Turns out there is.”

He’s confirmed that aging usually hampers the ability to single out one person’s voice in a chatty environment. His experiments also have shown that people with traumatic brain injuries have the same problem.

Brigande is used to surmounting obstacles. He’s overcome his hearing loss at work and has learned to navigate his personal life, though it can be exhausting.

“I work at the VA, and I use a lot of research. I try to communicate with my lab members and guide the science and then I go home and way want to talk,” he said.

“But when I get home, the first thing that I want to do is to take out my hearing aids and put my head in a sound booth where I don’t hear anything because the sound is just constant assault.”

An assisted-listening device helps. He uses one with one of his daughters and can book one up at work to an unlimited number of people in meetings. The device sends their voice to his hearing aid and lets only one person talk at a time.
Researchers: Nuttall rebuilt OHSU department

Lynne Terry | The Oregonian/OregonLive

In his early 20s, Alfred Nuttall developed a ringing in his ears. He saw a doctor but nothing could be done. Except for the tinnitus, his hearing was normal. That didn’t last.

By the time he hit his late 40s, he needed hearing aids. Today, at 73, he can manage a conversation without them but still hears them every day.

“Hearing aids are something you should get used to,” he said. “When you’re wearing them, you gradually remap your auditory system to work better and prevent it from deteriorating further.”

Unlike some colleagues at Oregon Health & Science University, Nuttall didn’t choose auditory neuroscience as a specialty because of his hearing disability. He was fascinated by the subject.

After obtaining a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering at what is now the University of Michigan where he studied intensive care units get antibiotics to prevent infections, Steyger’s specialty is the toxicity of certain pharmaceuticals called aminoglycosides, known to damage hearing.

They include Gentamicin and Streptomycin, which Steyger was given for meningitis. He figures the antibiotic was responsible for his hearing loss or contributed to it.

Steyger’s specialty is the toxicity of certain pharmaceuticals to the inner ear. “If we can stop them from crossing the barrier, we can protect the ears from harmful substances. Aminoglycosides are given for meningitis. He figures the antibiotic was responsible for his hearing loss or contributed to it.

He’s found a way to introduce a healthy gene into the cochlea — part of the inner ear. When he got an offer from OHSU in 1997, he set up shop on the hill.

His Ph.D. thesis at Keele University in England, where he was born, focused on aminoglycoside-induced damage to the inner ear, which governs hearing and balance. In post-doctoral work at Keele, he studied the anatomy and function of the cochlea — part of the inner ear. When he got an offer from OHSU in 1997, he set up shop on the hill.

His lab is trying to understand how aminoglycosides cross the blood-labyrinth barrier, which has a similar function to the blood-brain barrier but instead of protecting the brain, it protects the inner ear.

An inflammation that results in an analysis of sound,” Nuttall said. “It’s a complicated and interesting system.”

He was hired in 1996 from the University of Michigan. All but two faculty members had retired. That gave him a chance to reshape the department, which now has only one faculty member who was hired before he took the helm.

Nuttall has brought on scientists who cover all aspects of the auditory system. His faculty members study everything from the genetics of hearing loss to cochlear implants to the physiology and neuroscience of the auditory system. Nuttall, who’s interested in studying blood flow and cochlear mechanics, has made major contributions of his own, said Jonathan Ashmore, auditory neuroscientist at University College London.

He’s developed laser techniques to measure very small movements in the inner ear while people develop an instrument to measure blood flow in the inner ear and working on Pharmaceuticals to reduce hearing loss caused by loud sound.

The former could help experts find the source of hearing loss and the latter could help a wide range of people, including those in the military.

“If you had a really successful and relatively benign drug, you would have people taking it before they go to concerts or get out lawnmowers,” Nuttall said.

OHSU scientists Peter Steyger, left, and Linda Reiss facilitate a conversation during a class. “It’s very stimulating to be around a group with many deaf people,” Reiss said. Beth Nakamura / staff

Another researcher at the center, John Brigande, is focused on studying how stem cells can be made to regenerate the auditory system.

Like Steyger, Brigande has profound hearing loss. He gradually lost hearing in his left ear from some unknown cause. By the time he was in college, he had to wear hearing aids. He ended up doing post-doctoral training with a hearing scientist at Purdue University in Indiana in an environment that accommodated his disability.

His choice to focus on hearing was strategic, he said.

“I expected that they would be more welcoming of a hearing-impaired person,” said Brigande. “The annual meetings would have captioning. They would have listening technologies. I thought that this would be an obvious, clear path to give me the best chance to communicate effectively.”

As director of the Oregon Hearing Research Center, Brigande wants to see his work benefit people. “I’m passionately committed to finding a cure that happen,” Brigande said. “I would love to be able to spare a child from growing up with hearing loss.”

Besides breaking new ground in the lab, Brigande has raised awareness about the need to accommodate students with hearing impairments on the campus. Together with Steyger, he’s persuaded OHSU management to equip conference halls with assisted-listening devices.

The center’s director, Alfred Nuttall, 73, whose hearing loss started in his 40s, said their personal situations didn’t influence the decision to hire Steyger, Brigande and Linda Reiss, who’s 41 and another member of the department with severe hearing loss. Frederick Gallun, 45, originally hired by the VA Portland Health Care System, also conducts auditory research at the center and can hear out of only one ear.

“Every scientist we have hired is based on the science that they’re working on — not their hearing loss,” Nuttall said.

But having them all has turned out to be an advantage for the scientists. It creates camaraderie and boosts their confidence in their work.

“It’s very stimulating to be around a group with many deaf people,” Reiss said.

Her lab is trying to understand what some people with hybrid cochlear implants — which combine an implant with a hearing aid in the same ear — do well while others don’t. Steyger, who has a traditional cochlear implant, takes a keen interest in her work, feeding her hypotheses to test.

During his first six years at the center, Steyger was the only one with profound hearing loss. Now that he’s not alone, he enjoys a sense of community.

When he first arrived, he said he often wondered whether he was there as the token faculty member with hearing loss.

Then OHSU hired Brigande, followed by Reiss. Today they all need hearing aids to do their ground-breaking work.

“Our field’s been redirected by these individuals,” Stone said. “They’ve highlighted new questions. They’ve taken the flow and cochlear mechanics, has made major contributions of his own, said Jonathan Ashmore, auditory neuroscientist at University College London.

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