

baseball

Hitting isn't any problem for Tabler

By NICK DAWSON
Of the Emerald

It wasn't until Oregon's game against University of Pacific that Oregon coach Mel Krause found out what kind of player Kevin Tabler was. It was in that game that Tabler, a senior catcher-outfielder from Independence, showed his true colors.

Tabler bashed out four hits in as many trips to the plate, and he hasn't stopped hitting since then. Tabler now enjoys a .432 average (going into yesterday's games against OIT and PSU).

Hitting the ball, insists Tabler, is nothing new.

"I've always hit well," he said. "I left high school with a .412 average. I've never had any trouble hitting the ball." And so opposing

pitchers are finding out.

"I've never had any trouble hitting because I don't worry about it. A lot of guys do worry," Tabler said, although he did admit to being nervous when batting. "The key is hitting the ball hard, because if you hit the ball hard you're forcing them to make the play."

Tabler knows his success might be only temporary, pointing out that he doesn't have nearly as many at-bats or games played as some of his teammates. "There's still a long season yet to go," he said.

Tabler is in his first, and last, varsity year at Oregon. His journey to Duckville was, to say the least, not direct.

Following his senior year of play at Central High of Monmouth-Independence, Tabler decided to

stay in Monmouth and play for Oregon College of Education. He was the team's starting catcher his freshman year and hit an impressive .364.

It was at OCE that Tabler got to play some of the major colleges in the area, including Oregon, Portland State and Oregon State. "I got to thinking a lot of the guys (on the major college teams) weren't any better than some of the players on our team," Tabler said.

And to Tabler, that meant himself. He talked to Oregon coach Mel Krause and asked for a shot at making the Duck team. However, that would have meant sitting out a year, as NCAA state an athlete transferring from one four-year school to another has to stay out of competition a year to become eligible.

To Tabler's thinking; that was out of the question, he decided to go to Chemeketa, a two-year school, so he could play his sophomore year and still play for Oregon his junior year, which he would have had to do if he transferred directly from OCE to Oregon.

Last season, Tabler spent most of his time on the junior varsity, hitting above .300 for the season for the umpteenth time in his life. He even made an appearance on the varsity last year, playing in three games and stroking four hits, including two doubles and three runs batted in, in 11 trips to the plate.

However, according to Krause, Tabler wasn't a sure bet to come back for his final year as a Duck. "This year he had some reservations about coming back," said Krause. Most of them centered on playing time, and that was a guarantee the coach couldn't give

Tabler, especially since three lettermen catchers were returning from last year's squad.

Because of that, and several nagging injuries, Tabler has played in only 14 of Oregon's 27 games this year, while Mike Carr, Pete Wilkinson and Gig Nelson have split the rest of the catching duties. Tabler knows the going is rough. "I'm still battling for a spot," he said. "There's some good talent out there."

Tabler's defensive game is improving, though, as the baseball press guide states, he needs more work on his defensive game to warrant more playing time.

"I have trouble with my (throwing) accuracy. It's foot work," said Tabler. "I've always been able to block the ball well."

A back injury has also kept Tabler on the bench for a number of games. It was in the second game of a three game series against Washington that Tabler, in reaching for an outside pitch, wrenched his back. Since that time, he has

made only a couple appearances as a pinch hitter. "He's just touch and go," said Krause of his leading hitter's condition.

It is now, more than ever, that the Ducks need Tabler's bat. Oregon leads the Northern Division of the Pac-8 after finishing in the cellar last year. Hitting, part of that Tabler's, could help Oregon finish a cinderella story that no one would have predicted at the start of the year.

"As long as we hit the ball we'll be all right," said Tabler. "The best thing about this team this year is if somebody has a bad day, someone else can pick it up. I think the attitude on the team is much better this year than last," he said.

For now, Tabler is content to finish his collegiate baseball career helping the Ducks in any way he can, even though he doesn't start all the time.

"It'd be nice (starting), but for now I'm just happy to be on the team and help out any way I can."



Photo by Neil Gruenfelder

Kevin Tabler has been just one of the keys in Oregon's surprising success this season. The Ducks are 16-10 on the year, while they won only 14 games all of last year.



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