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Shell Joyner, the 1979 state prep champion, is now swinging for Oregon's golf team.

Golf coach feels new stars will put program on par

Oregon men's golf coach Jim Ferguson considers himself a very lucky man these days.

After a highly successful recruiting campaign last year, Ferguson has what he calls the best freshman one-two punch in the country. He's speaking of a pair of men from this state — Eric Johnson and Shell Joyner.

Johnson won the individual high school state championship for Churchill High in 1978 and Joyner dethroned him in 1979. Reunited this year at Oregon, Ferguson hopes they can make the Ducks a national power in the future.

"I don't want to put too much pressure on them in their first year," Ferguson says, "but by (next year), they can be awesome."

"Those two should bring the team back to the level of the 1977 team." The Ducks finished seventh in the nation that year.

Both golfers showed their potential last fall in their first collegiate tournament, the OSU Invitational. The Oregon freshmen tied for second behind 1980 NCAA champion Jay Don Blake.

Both golfers were recruited heavily by Ferguson. The Oregon coach used letters from former Oregon golfers and even a letter from Gov. Vic Atiyeh. In Johnson's case, Ferguson began following him when he was 13 "because he was winning every tournament he played in," Ferguson says.

For Johnson, a first-team high school All-American and 1980 national junior champion, staying home was the natural decision.

"I like Oregon because I like to hunt and I like to fish. Anyway, I didn't hear from the other schools until I won the U.S. junior amateurs. By

then, it was too late because I had already signed my letter of intent."

Joyner received scholarship offers from several colleges, including an attractive offer from Houston University. But he also chose to stay in the state.

Although both Johnson and Joyner performed consistently in the fall season, they agree the spring's competition should show them at their best.

Joyner says, "I developed a swing flaw and got in a slump in the winter but I'm coming out of it now."

Johnson says he's also "coming around."

"Other than the Oregon State tourney, I haven't played well once," Johnson says. "Maybe I'm trying too hard. I'm hitting the ball more consistently now."

With five tournaments remaining this season, Joyner hopes to win his first collegiate tournament.

Johnson has set his sights on a "big" tournament — like the Pac-10 or NCAA championships. Johnson wants to become Oregon's first four-year All-American.

"We've been friends since 12 or 13," Joyner says. "There is no animosity but we're both very competitive. I think the rivalry helps us both."

Johnson remembers the first time they met. "He was 13 and I was 12 when we were in a Roseburg tournament. He beat me in a sudden death (playoff)."

The rivalry continues.

By Bob Leung
 Photo by Steve Dykes

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