

Willhite reverses, signs with Ducks

Track program affects prep grid star's decision

By Steve Spatz
and
Steve Turcotte
Of the Emerald

The Oregon football squad pulled off the biggest recruiting coup in its history Wednesday when Kevin Willhite, the most sought-after prep running back in the nation, put his signature on a letter of intent to play with the Ducks.

Willhite, 6-0, 195, from Rancho Cordova, Calif., is the best of a solid recruiting class of 29 attracted to Oregon by coach Rich Brooks and his staff.

Willhite's decision was the biggest surprise of the college recruiting season kicked off by Wednesday's deadline for letters-of-intent. Last week, the prep star, rated as the best runner in the nation by Parade Magazine, had given a verbal commitment to the University of Washington.

"I started wondering what I really wanted to do," said Will-

hite, who gained 1,289 yards in his senior season, and 4,901 in his prep career. "I have to live four years wherever I go."

For Brooks, Willhite's decision was the best possible news he could receive after months of off-the-field scandals and on-the-field disappointments.

"I knew Kevin was still interested in Oregon but when he made his Washington trip and said he would go there, it brought some doubts," Brooks said, obviously fatigued from weeks of wooing potential recruits.

"But a week went by and Kevin let us know that he was still interested. We finally found out this morning (Wednesday)."

As late as Wednesday morning, Willhite had not made a final decision between the two schools. Brooks was in Sacramento at that time trying a last-ditch effort, and assistant coach Jim Skipper was at Willhite's home this morning when he finally cast his lot with

Oregon.

Washington head coach Don James was dismayed with Willhite's decision. "I guess you could say I'm a little disappointed with a couple of players we didn't get," said James at a Seattle press conference Wednesday morning, referring to Willhite and Jim FitzPatrick, a 6-8, 280 lineman from Oregon City who went with Southern California.

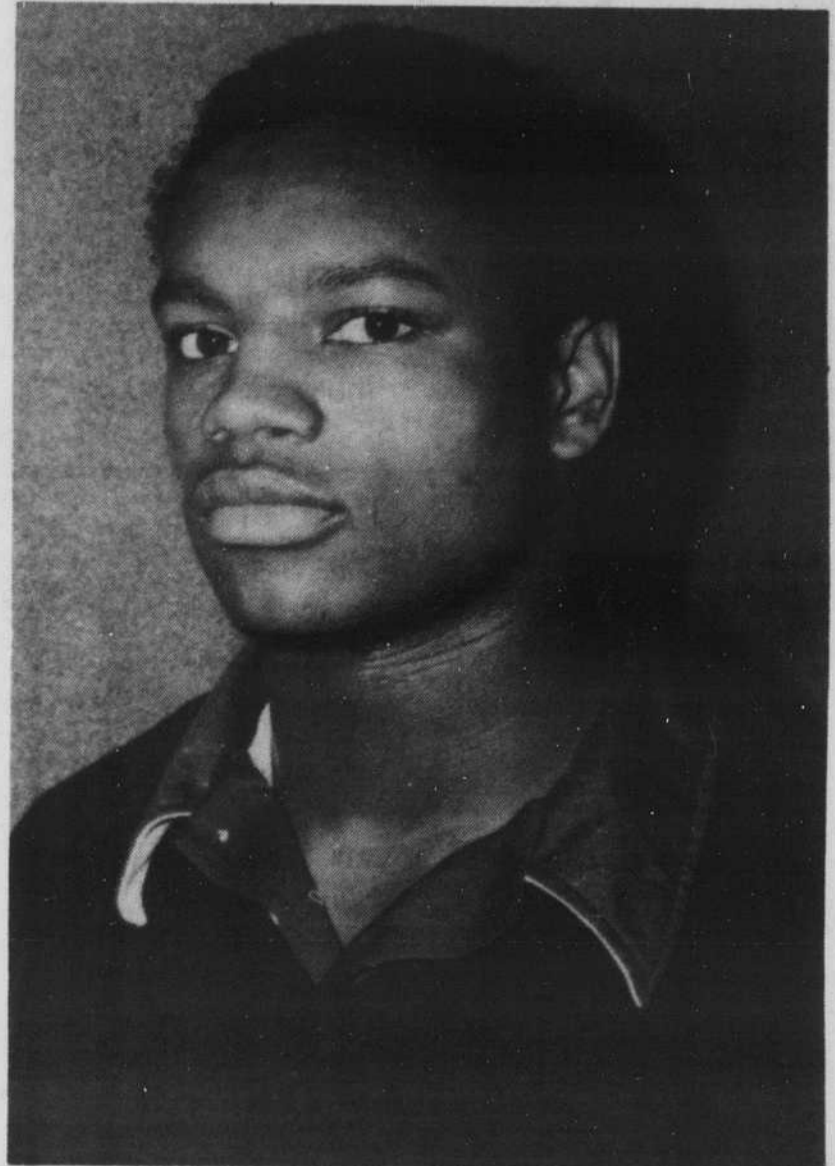
"But I've been around long enough to know that it happens every year that you don't get everyone you want," said James.

To find out how Pacific 10 Conference schools made out Wednesday, turn to Page 9.

Why Willhite, coveted by nearly every major college in the country, opted to go with Oregon is a surprise for a couple of reasons. The Ducks are, at best, a mediocre football school, and are now saddled with the effects of an NCAA probation. What made Willhite choose the Ducks over USC, UCLA, and countless others lies within two key factors:

- UW's backfield is already crowded with quality runners. The Huskies boast sophomore tailback Jacque Robinson, the Huskies' Rose Bowl star, and former prep All-American runner Mike Vindivich, who was injured all of last season. Said Willhite, "I thought about the halfback situation at Washington."

- Willhite is a world-class trackster, with Olympic aspira-



Kevin Willhite, a high school senior from Rancho Cordova, Calif., is perhaps the most highly touted running back to be signed by the Ducks.

tions and times to match — 10.24 in the 100 meters, and 20.6 at 200 meters. Oregon's strong track program headed by Bill Dellinger was probably the deciding factor.

"I was worried about not getting enough publicity in track if I went to Washington," admitted Willhite.

Brooks himself is the first to admit that track, and not football, is what finally sold Willhite

on Oregon.

"Probably the major factor for Kevin coming here is track," said Brooks. "He won't have to play spring ball because he is a world-class sprinter. I want him to go out for the track team."

"It is exciting that he's coming here," said Dennis Whitby, sprint coach for the Oregon track team. "It's nice to have

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Blazers overrun Cavs

RICHFIELD, Ohio (AP) — Calvin Natt scored 20 of his 24 points in the second half as the Portland Trail Blazers overcame an early 20-point deficit to post a 105-91 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers in a National Basketball Association game Wednesday night.

Cleveland led 41-21 with 8:20 remaining in the second quarter, but the Blazers cut the margin to 47-39 at halftime.

Portland caught Cleveland at 63-63 on a Jim Paxson foul shot with 2:29 to play in the third quarter, then took the lead for good when Bobby Gross sank a layup nine seconds later.

The Blazers led 73-66 entering the final quarter, and went on to build several 15-point leads as they coasted to their sixth triumph in the last seven games.

Mychal Thompson added 18 points for Portland and Paxson tossed in 14.

Cleveland, which was able to make only 34 percent of its shots from the field over the final three quarters, was led by Ron Brewer and James Edwards with 22 points each.

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