

New team, new attitude

Duck baseball is gone; some players play on

By Paul Danzer
Of the Emerald

With two outs and two men on base, Dean Hummel steps into the batters' box. He drills the first pitch deep to center, scoring what proves to be the winning run, salvaging a double-header split for the home team.

The scene described above might have been played out at Howe Field this spring. But when Oregon last year decided that the national pastime's time had passed, Hummel and his Duck teammates were forced to look for different places to play.

For Hummel and four other ex-Ducks, the new place is Portland State University, where the Vikings are making their first foray into the newfangled Pacific 10 Conference. Hummel's heroics came several weeks ago as PSU split a double-header with Linfield.

Joining Hummel on the trek north were Eric Austed, Dan King, Bill Gwinn and Steve Crumm. Only Austed did not see action against Linfield. King got his arm loosened up in the first game, coming on in relief as the Viks lost 10-5.

In the second game, the transfers displayed the kind of power that makes PSU coach Jack Dunn pleased with his new additions.

Along with his seventh inning smash, Hummel drilled a shot to score a run in the first inning. Gwinn collected a double down the line, one of three hits on his second day back from a broken wrist.

But it was Crumm who really displayed his power, crushing the first pitch of the third inning and driving it over the right-center field wall to give the Viks their first lead.

"One obvious way they have helped us is that they supply us with more power," said Dunn of the contributions the ex-Ducks have made to his program.

Unfortunately for Dunn, the numbers don't back up his claim, which is part of the reason the Viks have struggled in the early going of the Pac-10 season. Other than his two home runs, Crumm had turned downright crummy at the plate through the middle of April, hitting at a .184 clip through 27 games.

The numbers are no better for Hummel, who is the first to admit he is happier throwing baseballs than trying to hit them. In 22 at-bats the pitcher-outfielder had collected just four hits, good enough for a .182 average.

"Crumm is such an outstanding hitter that he was putting pressure on himself to come through for us," Dunn said of Crumm's slow start at the plate.

While Dunn continues to believe that Hummel can help at the plate, he is really happy to have Gwinn back in the fold.

Although he had played in just 12 games through the middle of April after breaking his wrist when hit by a pitch in the first game of the season, Gwinn was hitting .400. Last week against the rival University of Portland Pilots, Gwinn knocked in the winning run in the first game and scored the winning run in the second contest, as the Viks pulled off their first sweep in league play.

The renovation of Portland's Civic Stadium left the Viks without a place to practice this spring, the only major problem which has thrown a kink into the transition to PSU for the ex-Ducks.

"It's hard to compare," Austed said of the change to PSU. "It's hard to do anything without a field. Practicing in a gym makes it hard to do anything."

But even without adequate practice facilities the ex-Ducks are generally happy with their situation at PSU.

"It's nice not to have the ax hanging over our heads," said King, referring to the pressure at Oregon last season when the program was on the chopping block.

Besides being able to relax and play ball, the players all agree that with three coaches as opposed to the one they had at Oregon, the Vik program is more organized and more serious than the Duck program was.

"This team is a lot more organized," Gwinn said. "We have a lot more things to do here than we did playing for Oregon."

"I'm learning a lot more baseball here," Hummel said. "The whole situation is much more relaxed, probably because we have three coaches as opposed to one."

Despite their shaky start, the ex-Ducks expressed confidence in their new team's ability to compete in the Pac-10. "We're strong all around," Hummel said, "Sure we can compete."

"We have a lot of good players, a good team and a good coach. It's a lot of fun," added King.

Gwinn echoed King's comment with a message to the baseball players he left behind. "Say hi to all of the ex-Ducks. I wish they were here, they don't know what they're missing."

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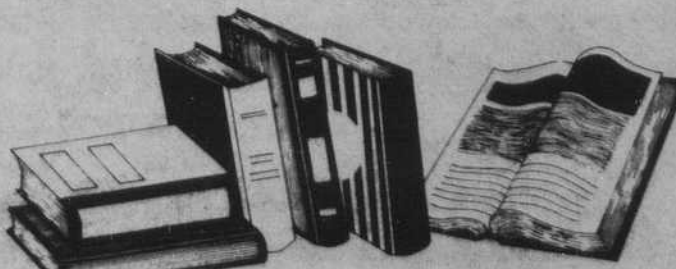
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