

## Balderston: A leader for the Ducks on and off court

Student-athletes are often caught in the middle when it comes to devoting time to both athletic and academic pursuits. They are afforded to one cuts deeply into the other. When granted a full-ride scholarship, student-athletes are given the opportunity to attend school in trade for their athletic talent; tuition, room and board and textbook costs are bartered for their participation in a varsity sport. And in some cases, school suffers as the game takes the highest priority.

Oregon basketball player Keith Balderston is achieving a pleasant medium, not only balancing basketball and school, but enjoying success at both.

Balderston, the 6-foot-7 sophomore from Portland's Wilson High School, was recently named to the Pac-10 basketball all-Academic team and second team all-Academic as named by the Sports Information Directors of America. He has a unique attitude when it comes to describing what a student athlete really is.

### Reporters notebook

By Joe Arndt

"I really don't think about it too much," says Balderston. "I try to separate the two worlds. Right now I'm a student, and right now I'm an athlete. I don't know if that is good or bad. . . . When I'm on the court, I'm just a basketball player, I don't even think about school. With school I try just to think about it, but that doesn't always work.

"For the most part, I have to separate the two. In a way, when the pressures of one get too great, you escape to the other," Balderston says.

Balderston has the reputation of a scrappy player who works hard for every rebound and every two points. He admits his skills on the court are surpassed by others, but a competitive spirit has helped transform him into a bonafide Pac-10 player.

"I think my style of play as one of a hard-nosed kid who goes out to get things done and goes after loose balls," Balderston says. "I have to be scrappy."

Balderston says he has had to develop this format because he doesn't have the pure talent or quickness "a lot of kids have. . . . I can't play a laid-back game and do well. I have to go after things and be aggressive."

Aggressive is not the personality Balderston reflects off the court however. He is a pleasant guy who prefers to spend his precious free time with others, rather than by himself.

"My general personality is that I like people a lot. . . . I'm kind of a free type of guy," Balderston laughs. "I love people, love talking to them."

Balderston's outgoing nature is complemented with his inner-religious beliefs. When he was young, his father, after retiring from the military, became a Christian and eventually joined the ministry. Balderston says his strong religious background and

feelings has helped him deal with the pressures of school and basketball. These pressures fluctuate from day to day.

"Sometimes there is a lot (of pressure)," Balderston says. "Sometimes you are swamped. I don't think of it as totally being under the gun—I don't think you could stay sane if it was."

Pressure on a student-athlete can be compounded if the team isn't doing as well as expected. This season the Ducks have struggled and it has taken its toll on the players.

"One of the hardest things is when we've played well and lost, like a lot the way it's gone this year. You are so emotionally drained. And then I remember I have a midterm tomorrow or a paper due or I have to go to a lab."

Fortunately for Balderston, he has clear career goals in mind. He realizes his future after college is not likely going to be basketball. Along with his other classes, Balderston the pre-med student, is taking organic chemistry and core biology. Right now, he is interested in pediatrics, and a relative newcomer to the medical field — shock trauma treatment. He hopes to take the competitive spirit of athletics which he enjoys so much and apply it to the medical field.

These are high expectations for a young man who, in only his sophomore year, has become a consistent starter for Oregon coach Don Monson. If you go back a few basketball seasons, Balderston's rise to a Pac-10 basketball player is remarkable. Three years ago as a junior in high school Balderston helped Portland Christian win the Class A state title. After transferring to Wilson for his senior year because of its fine science curriculum, he led the Trojans to fifth in the state tournament and was named to the all-tournament team. His 18.5 points per game average along with 13 rebounds per contest earned him first team all-Metro Conference and second team all-state honors. As you might expect, basketball wasn't all that Balderston was recognized for.

He graduated with a 4.0 GPA and was valedictorian of his graduating class.

But major college basketball coaches weren't exactly beating down his front door.

In fact, no major schools recruited him except for some Big Sky schools. Balderston was accepted to Stan-



Keith Balderston

ford and could have walked on with their basketball program and possibly worked himself into a scholarship for his sophomore year.

He eventually decided on attending a small NAIA school in California until the Ducks came calling.

Oregon had successfully recruited Anthony Taylor of Beaverton and Rick Osborn of Parkrose, and when another recruit opted to go elsewhere, the Ducks had a scholarship to spare.

Balderston, though unsure how he would match up with other forwards in the Pac-10, has shown that he belongs here. This season, he's shot nearly 55 percent from the floor and averaged five rebounds per game. Earlier this season at Stanford, he scored a career-high 18 points and pulled down eight boards. But it has been a tough year for Oregon.

Balderston says at times it has been frustrating.

"You get frustrated at things, especially when you lose," Balderston says. "The coaches get frustrated with us and us with them, and us with each other."

But it is from this frustration that Balderston believes the Ducks and coach Monson will benefit from. There's always next season.

"It's frustrating for him (Monson) because he's had so many wins in the past," Balderston says. "He is used to winning the close games, and now he isn't getting those wins."

It has been a season for the Ducks that, when they've won, they have done it convincingly. But too many close games have been dropped, both this season and last. Winning the close games is a must if the Ducks are to ascend from the Pac-10 cellar.

"It's (winning the close games) something we have to do. . . . good teams can have bad games and still win. We can't," Balderston says. "It has hampered us."

"Hopefully, we're getting this out of our system and us young kids — there's lots of us left — we believe this can be a great ball club. Maybe this year, is what it takes to teach us the lessons before we can do it."

Balderston is humble in describing his success in the classroom and the comparisons some might make to his teammates.

"Everyone's given different talents and abilities," Balderston says. "For me, school is a lot easier than for some other of the guys on the team. I put different expectations on myself than others. If I'm meeting my expectations, then I'm being a successful role model."

"If the other guys are meeting their expectations, the ones they set for themselves and what the coaches have, their grade point might not be as high, but as long as they're trying — that's what is important."

Keith Balderston has proven that success in athletics and in school is possible when a competitive spirit and hard work are combined. It's an example we can all follow. It's a trait Balderston is certain to maintain for two more basketball seasons and the possible medical career that lies ahead.

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