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Camara Jones (left) and LaReina Woods help teammate Lisa Bedwell rest after a race. All three run for Oregon's two relay squads.

Keeping up with Camara Jones

By Jake Berg
Emerald Sports Editor

An Office of Public Safety officer arrived at the Hayward Field parking lot much to the chagrin of the many Oregon athletes practicing there Tuesday.

As the officer pulled out his pen and book of parking tickets, a couple of athletes took the cue like a starter's gun and ran to save their illegally parked cars from being ticketed.

Duck sprints coach George Walcott smiled and looked across to the southwest corner of the field, where Camara Jones was walking together with the other three members of Oregon's women's 4x100-meter relay team.

"You want to see someone run fast?" Walcott asked himself. "CJ! Ticket Man!"

Jones bolted into a light sprint — by her standards — arriving in time to save her car from the evil citations of Ticket Man.

This got another chuckle out of Walcott, but Jones' competitors have been far from laughing at the Oregon sophomore's efforts so far this season. It's been more like envy.

In only her second 400 of the season, Jones exceeded all expectations at the Pepsi Team Invitational. Simply put, she beat favored Shanelle Porter of Nebraska, was the first Duck ever to dip below the 53-second barrier for an NCAA automatic qualifying time, and was key to the Ducks' two-point win over the Cornhuskers.

Oh, she broke the 11-year-old school record, too.

"What it comes down to is talent," Walcott said. "When the chips are down and she needs to make something happen, she usually does."

"She handled Porter," said Washington coach Orin Richburg, whose team was at the Pepsi meet. "I'm not saying it was easy, but she didn't struggle."

Understanding that she won that race in the time she did is more of a challenge for Jones than maybe the race was.

"Sometimes I find it hard to believe that I ran that race," Jones said.

After this weekend, she may find it harder to realize where she's at. When Arizona State sprinter Maicel Malone pulled out of the Pacific-10 Conference Track and Field Championships earlier this week, Jones was suddenly boosted into the much touted role of "favorite."

"That's baggage," said Jones, who was second to Malone at last year's Pac-10 meet. "I'm not so sure I want that."

But oh Lord, it's hard to be humble when you've run as fast as Jones has this season. Her school record 52.73 in the 400 is almost a full second faster than anyone else entered in the conference meet this weekend at Hayward Field.

The possibility of winning a Pac-10 title is something Jones said she thought was at least farther on down the road than her sophomore year. Jones said that as a student at Mountain View High School in Vancouver, Wash., such early success in track and field's finest collegiate conference was something she didn't give much thought to.

Jones attributes her quick rise to the top of the school record lists — she's third in the 100 and sixth in the 200 now — to maturity and a year of experience.

"She's running with much more confidence," Richburg said. "Now she has established herself as one of the better runners in the country at this event."

Oregon head coach Tom Heinonen said the difference in Jones this year has also been her physical condition.

"Physically, she's better in every way," he said. "She's stronger."

But even after last season — when Jones barely made the provisional cut to get into the NCAA meet — probably few people would have guessed the 5-foot-6, 135-pound senior could break the school record in the 400 this year.

Her season ended on a down note when typical Eugene weather — rain — at the NCAA meet and stress from a car wreck kept Jones from advancing

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