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Blair doesn't miss a beat after year off

By Erick Studenicka
Oregon Daily Emerald

Every four years, the winner of the Olympic heptathlon is declared "The World's Greatest Athlete."

If dominance in the heptathlon is indeed the best way to determine a superior athlete, then Oregon track athlete Kelly Blair should be considered "Oregon's Greatest Athlete."

Blair smashed the school record in the heptathlon by nearly 200 points last week at the Arizona State Invitational. Her score of 5,713 beat her nearest competitor, Kim Vanderhoek of Simon Fraser, by 400 points.

What is even more amazing was that Blair set the standard in Tempe under poor weather conditions.

"The first day of the competition was perfect," Blair said. "But the second day was one of the worst ever; it was rainy and windy. I was frustrated, but I figure my point total can only improve in better conditions."

Blair said establishing the school record wasn't her goal.

"I was just trying for the NCAA qualifying mark; I wasn't even thinking about the record," she said. "It just kind of happened."

Blair, now in her junior season of eligibility, easily surpassed the NCAA qualifying standard of 5,500 points, and is the first Duck athlete to qualify for the NCAA Championships this season.



Photo by David Natt
 Junior Kelly Blair returned after a redshirt season to break the school record in the heptathlon and qualify for the NCAA Championships.

The NCAA Championships will be nothing new for Blair, as she took sixth place in the meet two seasons ago. Blair redshirted last season after averaging 4.5 points per game as a guard on the basketball team.

Blair said that although it was tough to give up playing intercollegiate basketball, she feels she

made the right decision.

"Now that I've been away a season, I'm glad I made the decision," she said. "It's made a big difference in my conditioning. When I was playing basketball, I was missing a lot of fall and winter base conditioning."

"I miss the team-oriented closeness of the basketball team; I had

a lot of friends on the squad, but it was always more obvious that track was my real strength."

Track has indeed been Blair's strength since her high school days in Prosser, Wash., when she was named the top prep heptathlete in the nation by *Track and Field News*. Only 22-years-old, she has already represented the United States in the Junior Pan-American Games and international dual meets.

In addition to being an outstanding heptathlete, Blair is also a national-class high jumper and hurdler. Blair recently showed her potential in the hurdles by provisionally qualifying for the NCAA meet the first time she ran the 400-meter hurdle event.

Blair said her aim in the heptathlon is to surpass the 6,000 point barrier, a total which would place her near Arizona State's Gea Johnson's Pacific-10 Conference record of 6,132.

"I know I can score more points if I can put together two strong days," Blair said. "In Tempe, for example, I was a foot behind the take-off board. There's 100 more points if I just hit the board correctly."

Head coach Tom Heinonen also said Blair could reach the 6,000 point mark.

"If Kelly could put together two days similar to her first day at Arizona State, she could score above 6,000 points," Heinonen said.

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