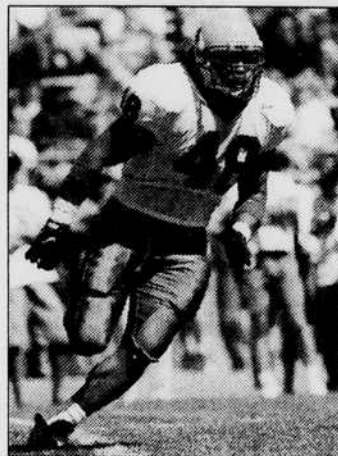


THE RELUCTANT STAR

Defensive end Saul Patu has a new attitude toward his position change



Oregon Media Services
Patu has compensated for a lack of size by utilizing his speed against bigger lineman.

By Rob Moseley
Oregon Daily Emerald

Freshman Saul Patu was not going through a great period of his college experience when he heard the news that would impact his career more than any other.

While lifting weights during his redshirt season of 1996, Patu suffered a hernia and was forced to undergo surgery. He was off solid foods for the next two weeks, a period during which the already undersized defender would lose 15 pounds, and it was then that he heard that bit of strategic minutiae that would forever affect his collegiate career.

The 229-pounder, down from a presurgery weight of 245 pounds, would be moving from linebacker to defensive end for the Oregon football team.

Patu would be moving from a position where he was a four-year starter and team-leading tackler at Seattle's Rainier Beach High School to one that demanded him to stare down 300-pound gorillas on every play.

"I didn't like it when I first moved up to defensive line," the 6-foot-3, now 260-pound Patu says. "It wasn't something that I was familiar with, so obviously I was uncomfortable."

Comfortable or not, Patu was immediately thrust into the limelight last season, when he started 10 games at defensive end as a redshirt freshman. Patu was the youngest member of an already young line that included one member from each of the four classes.

Last season, the Oregon defense was the most suspect in the Pacific-10 Conference, as evidenced by its 10th-place showing in both rushing and total defense. While that unit had something to prove to the conference, Patu was trying to prove he had the size, or the ability to overcome the lack thereof, to play defensive end in the Pac-10.

"I did feel like I had something to prove, being underweight," Patu says. "I tried to use my speed and aggressiveness to play defensive end. The difference between this year and last year is I'm more mentally into the game."

The man Patu credits with opening him up to the mental aspect of football is his position coach, Robin Ross. He said Ross deserves a large portion of the credit for helping Patu raise his tackle total from 20 last season to 19 through seven games in 1998.

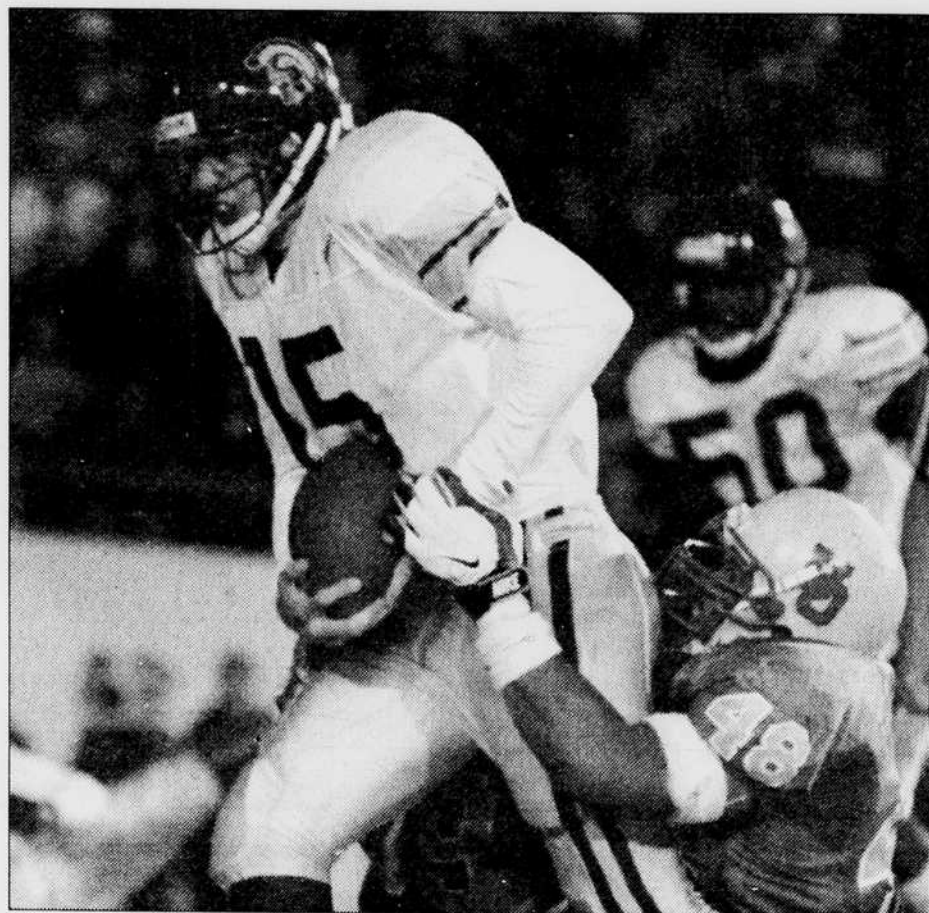
"The more you do anything, the more natural it becomes," Ross says. "Saul plays with such good leverage, and he uses his size and his quickness to his advantage. You look at the trend now in college and it's more speed at the ends. It's almost like you're playing with six linebackers."

Patu's head coach, Mike Bellotti, has also noticed changes in the sophomore's mental approach.

"The improvement I've seen in Saul has been more one of consistency," Bellotti says. "He doesn't take downs off now. He's not confused by things, he's more focused and centered on what he needs to do and understanding how he fits into the defense."

Patu and Ross both mention the lineman's aggressiveness, which Bellotti says is the key to Patu's success.

"He truly likes the physical challenge of going against a 330-pound tackle and taking on a pulling guard, and all of those things



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Patu has nearly matched his tackles total from last year already and has also recorded two sacks, one less than in '97.

that most of us would be scared to death of," Bellotti says.

Taking on a 330-pound lineman would seem to be a daunting task for any defensive lineman, but especially a man who weighs 260 pounds, still light by football standards.

Patu is actually the heavier of Oregon's two defensive ends, the other being 248-pound Terry Miller.

Ross says the nature of the game has changed to the point that those players are no longer viewed as a disadvantage.

"Because the offensive tackles have become so big, you're never going to get a guy who's big enough and still contain the quarterback," Ross says. "I really think it's to our advantage to have those guys outside who can run. All they are is big linebackers."

Which would seem, of course, to help an ex-linebacker like Patu.

In fact, Patu says the transition from linebacker to defensive line has helped simplify the game.

"We go off of movement," Patu says of himself and his fellow linemen. "We only see a couple of moves. If a lineman drops down, we're looking for a pulling guard, and if the lineman pulls, we're looking for a boot."

Patu is facing one of his toughest assignments of the season this Saturday when No. 12 Oregon plays at No. 13 Arizona.

The Wildcats boast two quarterbacks, Keith Smith and Ortege Jenkins, who are each a threat to leave the pocket on any play. Patu says his experience playing against UCLA two weeks ago will help him.

"When you come across quarterbacks who are mobile, especially a guy like Cade McNown, he likes to run out of the pocket, and we had a lot of pressure up the middle

against UCLA," Patu says. "So I pretty much stayed at home and waited for him to come to me."

Sitting back and waiting paid off for Patu in the second quarter against the Bruins. With UCLA up 24-7 and driving toward a 31-7 halftime lead, Patu saw the snap and immediately recognized a play he had seen many times before while playing against the Oregon offense in practice.

"My job was to rush the quarterback on the play, but when the ball was hiked the lineman disappeared, and I saw the quarterback take a 20-step drop," Patu says. "I knew it was a screen. When the lineman disappears, it's a screen to the wide receiver."

Patu stepped between McNown and his intended receiver and returned the ensuing interception 20 yards.

It was the first time he touched the ball since his days as a high school fullback.

"I joke around with the running backs coach, Gary Campbell, and I always ask him to throw me in on goal-line situations or something," Patu says. "Let me run the rock or let me block or something. He always tells me I'm not fast enough for fullback."

That Patu did not return the interception for a touchdown may be evidence of that, but the fact that he even made the play would support the idea that he has improved immeasurably since he came to Oregon.

He has even learned to accept the fate he was dealt two years ago.

"Now, I don't have a problem with D-line," Patu says. "It's getting easier the longer I play and it's a good position for me now."

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invites this season. However, respect is another matter. The loser of this game will likely drop out of the top 20. The loser of the game will undoubtedly lose all credibility with the national media. The best the loser of this game can hope for is a second-rate bowl game in Boise, El Paso or Tucson.

But the winner of Saturday's game has an entirely different future. The winner will get new life in the eyes of the national media.

"Both teams enter their Halloween matchup wearing the same mask — that of a Pac-10 title contender."

The winner will be the front-runner for the Rose Bowl spot assuming UCLA finishes the season with a No. 2 ranking and gets an invite to the national championship game on Jan. 4.

The winner will make it to Sports Illustrated's "Hot List," have its highlights shown on SportsCenter the rest of the

season and bounce to about No. 8 in the country.

No pressure, right?

After Oregon's 17-13 victory over Southern California last Saturday, head coach Mike Bellotti trotted off the field in tears. But by all accounts, the Ducks probably should have lost Saturday's game. They sputtered on offense. They clunked in the kicking game. They drowned on defense.

With Reuben Droughns sidelined the remainder of the season, and Herman Ho-Ching about two weeks from a remarkable comeback, Oregon's offense is not as explosive as it had been through the first six games of the season.

Ironically, it has been the Ducks' passing game that has not picked up the slack. Akili Smith was just 15 for 28 for 231 yards and one touchdown against USC. Those numbers aren't bad but are a long way from the Heisman Trophy numbers he was putting up through the first half of the season.

To beat Arizona the Ducks need to throw the football. They need to throw it deep. They need to throw it over the middle. And they need to throw it short.

UCLA quarterback Cade McNown passed for nearly 400 yards in the Bruins' 52-28 route in Tucson three weeks ago. Although smaller, Oregon's receiving corps is just as dangerous as UCLA's. Look for Smith to put up big, big numbers and jump back into the Heisman race this weekend.

Oregon has never won as many as 10 games. A win against the Wildcats on Saturday would go a long way toward achieving that goal. The Ducks will be favored the rest of the way, but there isn't any sweeter victory than one on the road in conference play. And there hasn't been a game this season that carries more importance than Saturday's.

Both teams enter their Halloween matchup wearing the same mask — that of a Pac-10 title contender. One of the two will have to remove the mask come Sunday morning.