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M in the M Middle

Senior linebacker Peter Sirmon is always in the thick of things for the Oregon defense

By Tim Pyle
Oregon Daily Emerald

Maybe it's because he got married in the off-season. Maybe it's because he's gone from a 5-foot-9, 150-pound golfer as a freshman in high school to the Oregon football team's defensive stalwart as a senior in college.

Maybe it's because the Ducks are coming off a big win at Arizona and returning home to play three of their final four games at Autzen Stadium.

Whatever the reasons, life is good for Peter Sirmon.

So good, in fact, that Sirmon even sees a silver lining to the torn pectoralis muscle that limited him to just 2 1/2 games as a junior last season.

"It affected me, looking back, in a positive way," said Sirmon, a Butkus Award nominee at inside linebacker. "Football was too much a part of my life, and I think I was humbled by getting injured enough to look at where I was.

"It's helped me this year to really appreciate football."

And Oregon has no doubt appreciated Sirmon's return.

"Peter Sirmon has been an outstanding leader for us, an outstanding football player, an outstanding person," head coach Mike Bellotti said. "He is a coach on the field. His intelligence about the game of football is outstanding."

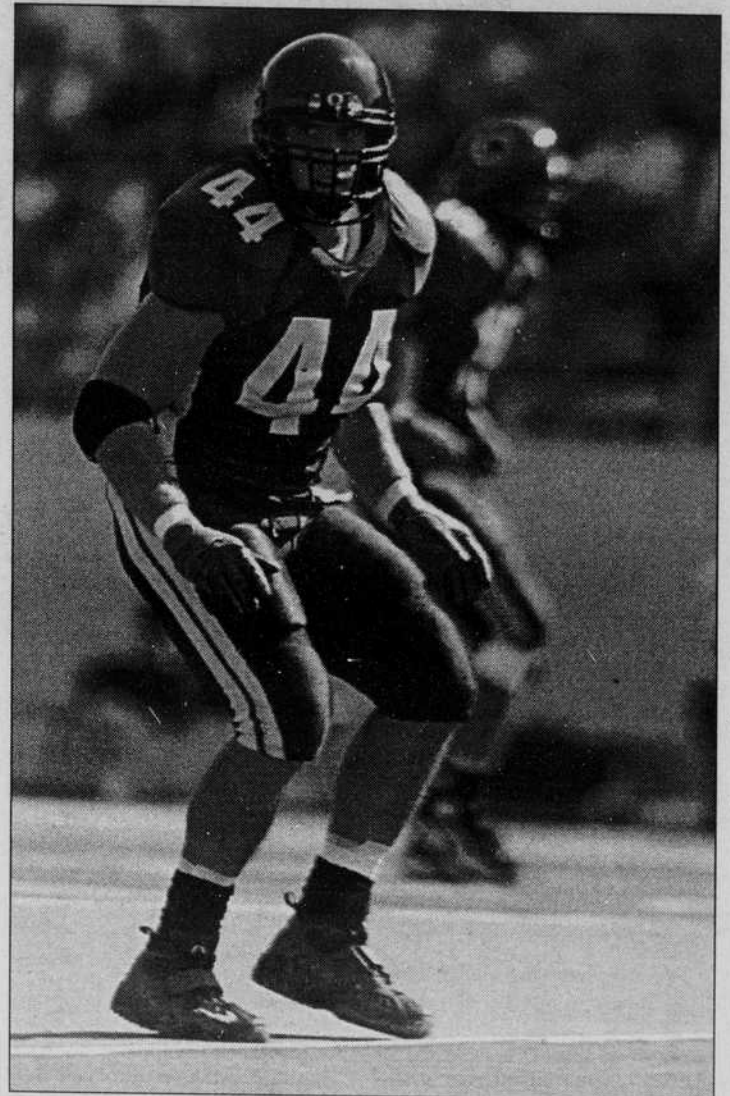
That football IQ — which makes Sirmon "the quarterback of the defense," according to linebackers coach Bob Foster — is what Sirmon singles out as the biggest difference between him now and when he arrived at Oregon out of Walla Walla (Wash.) High School in 1995.

A safety and quarterback as a prep, Sirmon redshirted that Cotton Bowl season as he adjusted to linebacker.

When he did make his debut for the Ducks, Sirmon was ready — and apparently Fresno State wasn't. In the 1996 opener, Sirmon recorded 17 tackles against the Bulldogs, immediately making him the heir apparent to Jeremy Asher, the star linebacker of the "Gang Green" defenses.

Sirmon went on to make 70 tackles while starting five of 11 games that season.

In 1997, Sirmon truly broke out. Starting with an opener against Arizona in which he recorded 15 tackles, two sacks, five overall tackles for loss and a fumble recovery, Sirmon firmly



Mike Crisp Emerald

Peter Sirmon, "the quarterback of the defense," observes the pre-play ongoings.

established himself as one of the Pacific-10 Conference's best linebackers.

Sirmon finished the season as the conference's leading tackler with 115, including 17 for loss.

But then came heartbreak in Sirmon's junior season. After 24 tackles in just 2 1/2 games, Sirmon was forced to the sidelines with the pectoralis injury.

Oregon fans and Sirmon alike were left to wonder what could have been had a healthy Sirmon been anchoring the defense of a team that started 5-0 and was 8-2 before consecutive season-ending losses.

"In a selfish way, it would have been easy to watch the ship just tank," said Sirmon, now 6 foot 2 and 245 pounds. "But they just did a great job. That's what made it so hard."

So could you, Peter, have made the difference in a game such as, say, the Ducks' overtime loss at UCLA when both teams

were still undefeated?

"I don't know if I would've or could've, but it would have been nice to have had that opportunity," Sirmon said.

Although Oregon suffered another close defeat at the Rose Bowl this season, Sirmon did get some measure of revenge for missing the Bruins last season. While recording a career-high 18 tackles, Sirmon was instrumental in the defense's fourth-quarter shutdown of UCLA's offense that nearly allowed the Ducks to come all the way back from a 24-point deficit.

For the season, Sirmon paces Oregon with 62 tackles and eight tackles for loss. He ranks seventh in the Pac-10 with almost nine tackles per game.

"He knows our system probably better than anybody, and he's doing a great job," said Foster, who was the defensive coordinator last season before sliding over

Turn to **Peter Sirmon**, Page 16B

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