

MR. Tracktown



Azle Malinao-Alvarez Emerald

■ Even Nat Johnson didn't expect that he'd become the valuable go-to guy that he has been for the Ducks

By Scott Pesznecker
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Amazing that chance and luck can work so well together.

Funny that a long-haired high school kid who dreamed of being the next Mr. Baseball wound up being Mr. Tracktown at Oregon instead.

Weird because at the age of 21, Nathan Garrett Johnson's senior outdoor season is already nearing its end, as he makes his final collegiate appearance at Hayward Field at the Pacific-10 Conference Championships this Saturday and Sunday.

Hard to believe he'll even make it that far, considering the massive size of the two ice packs he applies to his knee and groin immediately after practice on Tuesday afternoon.

Quite a bit of mileage — for a young'un.

And he's hungry for more. "This is the meet where everything shows," Johnson said. "This is the meet I've been working for. We've trained through certain meets and practiced hard all week just to be ready for the big Pac-10 meet here. So far it's been a good season, and I think it's going to be a great one."

Johnson moves into the Pac-10 Championships planning to compete in four events: the long jump, 4x100-meter relay, triple jump and 4x400, in that order.

When one considers that he has to run the 4x100 twice — once in Saturday's preliminaries and again in Sunday's finals, barring a major upset from another team — Johnson's weekend workload leaves little room for rest.

No problem. "He's been a workhorse," Oregon field coach Bill Lawson said. "He likes wearing that badge, and he likes carrying lots of weight. He's like a kid in a candy store."

Five years ago Johnson would have scoffed at the thought of being a track and field favorite, especially for the revered Ducks.

Because he was a baseball player. A sure-fire short stop who never committed an error, Johnson knew that his future belonged in the diamond.

Or so he thought. This is where chance and luck stepped in.

After playing on his high school baseball team for two years, Johnson faced a major dilemma when he went to join the squad his junior year.

"They made a new rule on the baseball team that you had to have really short hair," Johnson said. "I had totally long hair. I didn't want to cut my hair, but I wanted to play baseball."

So, after much thought, Johnson cut his hair. Everything was settled — or so he thought.

"We had our first meeting for the baseball team, and [the coach] made everybody take their hats off and show him their hair," Johnson said. "As I walked through the door, he said 'Go home and get a haircut.'"

"I went home and thought about it, and I didn't want to play for a coach where hair mattered more than ability. So I was like, maybe I need to go out for track and field."

"And as luck would have it, that's my sport."

A month into his first track and field season, Johnson became a long jump standout. Most athletes spend years in their sports before finding success.

Not Nat. As more luck would have it, then-Oregon-assistant coach John Gillespie watched Johnson PR in the long jump and triple jump at the state championships at Hayward Field his senior year.

"He said, 'Why don't you come on and give it a try, and we'll see what happens,' and that was such a big deal," Johnson said. "I didn't get recruited but I did get to meet him, and that was the biggest thing that happened to me."

"I came here just hoping to get a shot, and [to] maybe be on the team."

Johnson expected to specialize in the triple jump when he came to Oregon.

But again, he couldn't have been more wrong.

His role as a Duck was that of a utility player, just like it was when he played baseball in high school.

Since the beginning of his collegiate career, Johnson has specialized in the long jump, 200 meters, the 400 and both 4x100 and 4x400 relays. Only now, near the end of his final season as a Duck, has Johnson thrown the triple jump into his bag of tricks.

He's an experienced Pac-10 scorer, having contributed Oregon points in each of his three outdoor seasons in both relay and jumping events.

The one thing Johnson hasn't had is a trip to the NCAA Championships. One might say he has little chance of doing so this season because his seasonal best is 1 foot, 1 inch short of the 25-1 1/4 NCAA provisional mark.

But that's hard to gauge because he's only taken nine jumps at Hayward Field this season, some of which he fouled.

"It's in me — it has always been in me — and I need to get it out and keep going farther because I should jump a lot further than 25 feet every meet," Johnson said. "I'm still growing as a long jumper and as an athlete, but jumping 25 feet is my main goal right now, and I know I can go a lot further than that."

"He's been getting in more runway work," Lawson said. "I anticipate him having the best jumps of the year in the long jump and triple jump."

Johnson's entire collegiate career won't end if he doesn't capture an NCAA mark this weekend. He still has one indoor season of eligibility remaining, and he intends to compete unattached at Hayward Field next spring.

He said he'll treasure all the memories he's had as a Duck.

"It's been chance that I became a sprinter here, when I came here to be a triple jumper," Johnson said. "Things have just kind of happened. Following that pattern, there's a lot left to be discovered in what I can do."

"I'd like to think there's an unlimited amount of potential. That's just my optimistic way of looking at things."



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