

Fullback positioned in lead of dream story line

■ Oregon starter Josh Line grabs scholarship after years of dedication, ensuring his future with the Ducks

By Jeff Smith
Oregon Daily Emerald

For most of Oregon football's starting core, this past spring season was a chance to dust off some cobwebs and keep in shape for the upcoming fall season.

For junior starting fullback Josh Line, however, the spring was a make-or-break type situation.

His Oregon football shelf life rested solely on how well he would perform in those precious few weeks in April.

The Springfield native needed a scholarship to stay in Eugene, and to get one he needed to prove to Oregon's coaches that he truly deserved to receive one.

"I understood that the coaches needed to see me perform and I knew that this was my last chance," said the 6-foot-2, 237-pound Line, who was originally a walk-on. "Before the spring, I said to myself and my family that this was it. I was going to give it one last shot, and if I didn't make it, no hard feelings, I'd just go somewhere else."

As luck would have it, there was a shortage of Oregon tailbacks due to injuries and Line was given his golden opportunity to shine.

He worked on blocking. He worked on running. He worked on catching.

And after completing his successful spring season with two rushing touchdowns in Oregon's annual Spring Game, Line worked his way into the starting lineup — and into a full scholarship.

"I had no idea if I was going to stay here or not until I went into coach [Mike] Bellotti's office for our annual individual spring meetings," Line said. "He looked me straight in the eye, and said, 'You earned it.'"

"I was really happy obviously, but more than anything, I was relieved."

Bellotti recognized Line's work ethic and found it impossible not to reward him for it.

"He worked hard to get that scholarship," Bellotti said. "He went out there and automatically earned the respect of his teammates. I'm very pleased with where he's at right now, but I think his potential is even greater."

Line's life happens to make for an almost too-perfect story line.

The hometown boy grows up following the Ducks and dreams of someday donning the yellow and green uniforms — much like the players that he used to get autographs from as a kid.

He ages into a Midwestern League all-conference prep quarterback for Springfield High.

His talents let him start out playing collegiate ball for the College of the Siskiyous in Weed, Calif., before getting a chance to walk-on to his beloved Ducks.

He begins his time here on the Oregon scout team and tries his hand at being a fullback, a position he had never played before.

Sure, he struggles at first, but then begins to pick up on it.

Then that very next year at Oregon there are some injuries and he's able to get into six games.

Still, he's not quite sure if he wants to continue being a Duck. There are possibilities to go somewhere smaller and play more.

But then comes the spring of 2000, with more injuries in the backfield, and the promotion to the starting fullback position.

"It's a dream come true, really," Line said. "I can't complain. What

an amazing 12 months for me."

Funny, though, how sometimes moments in time don't fit so nicely into that perfect little story.

Because in your dream, you always succeed. You always come away satisfied.

So what in the world was that Wisconsin game doing in Line's "dream life" as a starting fullback for the Ducks?

There Line was on Sept. 9, playing in front of 78,000 raucous fans at Camp Randall Stadium in Madison, Wis. — 27,000 more people than the entire population of his hometown.

It was only his second game as a starter and he was psyched to the max. He was blocking holes for Oregon tailback Maurice Morris. He was helping his quarterback, Joey Harrington, preserve as much time as possible before the incoming rush of defenders.

And then in the third quarter, with the Ducks trailing the fifth-ranked Badgers 14-6 and in desperate need of a touchdown, Line found himself racing downfield with his head peering over his shoulder at the incoming pass.

Line had emerged from the backfield as a potential receiver and saw his clear path to the end zone.

He ran... the ball was thrown toward him... it spiraled downward... he strode near the 25-yard line with no defender near him... the ball sailed closer... and closer... and then...

Bounced off his hands and incomplete.

Doh!

Oh well, right? Just one dropped pass. Nobody's going to even notice it, um, gulp, right?

"Ha, yeah, I was hoping it would just go away in those days that followed, but I would see that dropped pass replayed on television over and over and get reminded of it through conversations," Line said. "It was hard, because I put a lot of pressure on myself and expect to make those types of catches. Dropped balls like that one weigh on me."

That drop might have affected his confidence a tad, but it sure didn't change the way his peers and coaches viewed him. He was picked up by his teammates throughout the next week of practice in preparation for the home game against Idaho. His coaches encouraged him that there would be more opportunities like that in the future, but Line found that hard to believe. As a fullback in the Oregon offense, he knows that his main priority is to block and that passes downfield to him may be few and far between.

But soon came the Idaho game, later followed by redemption.

It was a first down on the Idaho 28-yard line at the start of the third quarter. Harrington took the snap and Line broke again from the backfield and streaked down the middle uncovered. Harrington tossed the ball at him, and it must have been impossible not to think about the previous week's mishap.

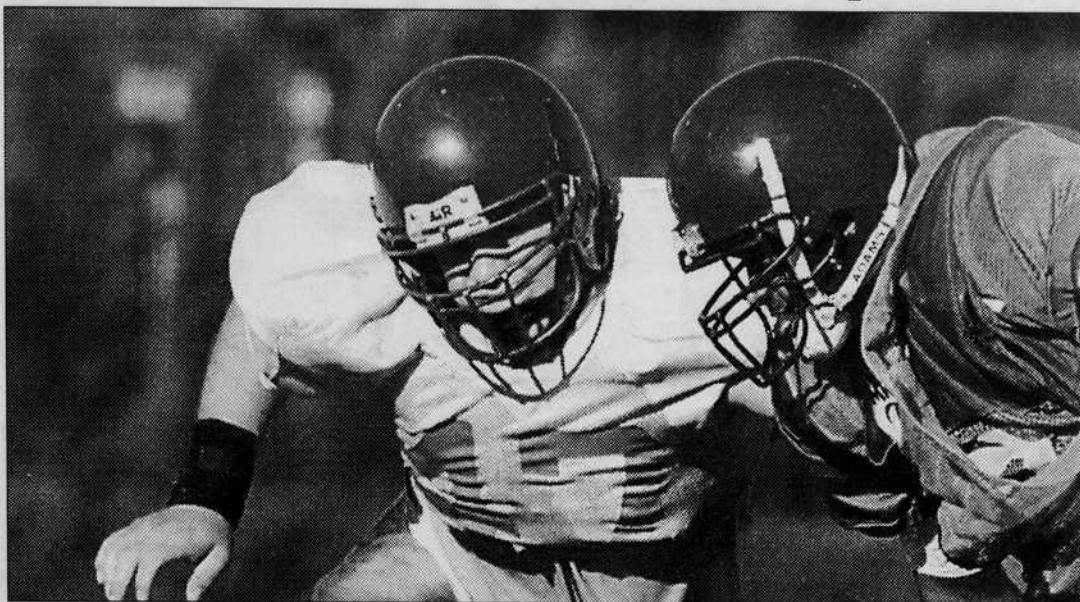
"I was just thinking, 'catch the ball, catch the ball,'" Line said.

And catch the ball he did, engulfing the football in his arms at the 10-yard line and marching in for the 28-yard score to insert the nail in the coffin for Oregon's 42-13 blowout win.

Line jumped immediately on top of center Ryan Schmid, who was the first person to greet him in the end zone.


"Ryan was there for me right away, and he just kept telling me, 'I knew you could do it. I knew you could do it.'"

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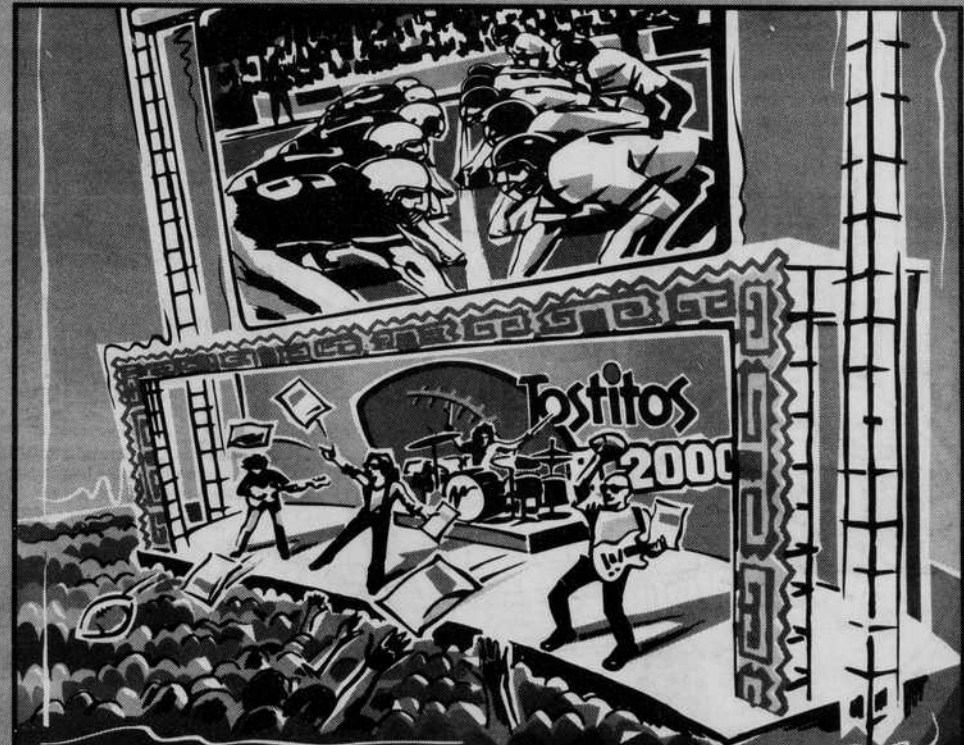
Erin Swanson-Davis Emerald

Josh Line (left) considers it a dream come true to be the starting fullback for Oregon after growing up as a 'big-time' fan and stand-out Springfield High School athlete, receiving honors in basketball as well as football.



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