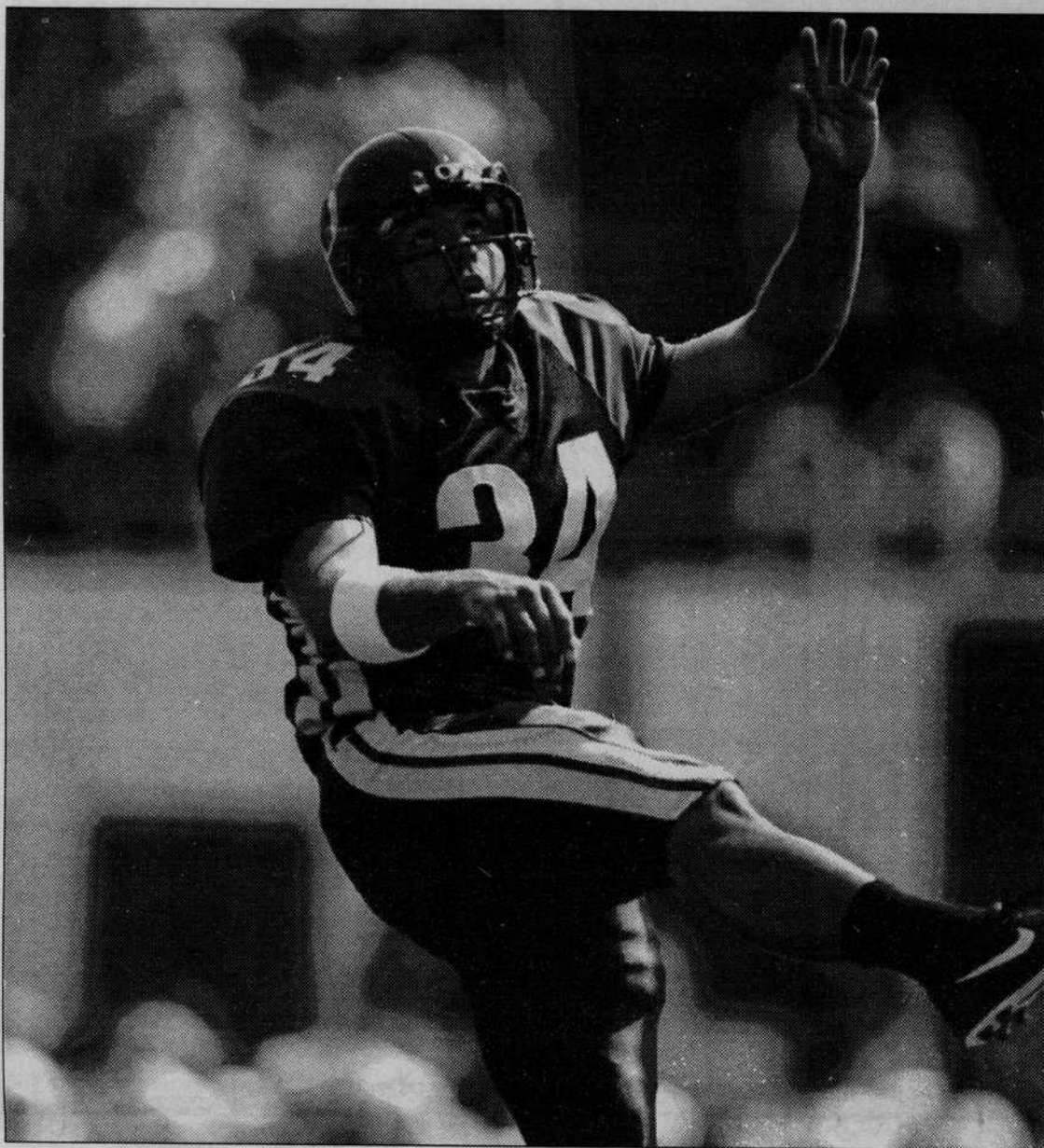


# Small town, **big dreams** for Doerr



Courtesy of Oregon Media Services

Oregon punter Kurtis Doerr's accuracy and strength are reasons why the Ducks' defense is ranked No. 1 in the conference.

■ Kurtis Doerr keeps baseball in his heart but football in his life during his senior season with the Ducks

By Scott Pesznecker  
Oregon Daily Emerald

Don't ask how it happens, just accept it as fact — small towns breed great football players.

Just ask Kurtis Doerr, punter for the Oregon football team.

Here's a guy who never set foot on a football field to compete before his freshman year of high school in the little town of Waterford, Wis., and even then, he didn't actually play football. And now, here he is, named Pacific-10 Conference Player of the Week for Oct. 2, following one of his best performances ever against Washington.

"It's my job," Doerr said, opting not to pat himself on the back. "It's what I'm supposed to do."

A program called "Punt, Pass and Kick," which measured skill in those areas in terms of distance and accuracy, was Doerr's first experience playing football as a high school freshman. With help from his father, some practice and a little luck, Doerr punted, passed and kicked his way to the Wisconsin state tournament. Then, he won it.

Needless to say, he turned some heads.

Doerr continued to command attention in his next three years at Waterford Union High School, taking after his father, Kurt, by shouldering quarterback, punter and kicker duties for his prep football team. After graduating, he enrolled at Glendale Community College in Glendale, Ariz., where he intended to start a collegiate athletic career.

But not in football.

Not in football, even if sportsuniversity.com called Doerr a punter "who specializes in distance, accuracy and hang-time"?

The multi-sport athlete has always been a baseball player at heart. He never considered his future as a punter when he was young: "If a team's going to punt, it's always a good time to run for the fridge and grab a beer or soda," Doerr said.

Someday, he even hopes to be back in the diamond, making a return to competitive baseball.

However, Doerr put his baseball plans on hold in his first fall season. One of the football coaches happened to see him kicking and approached Doerr about joining the team. He did, and again, it didn't take long for a couple of other coaches to notice his powerful punts.

Doerr made a verbal commitment to go to Arizona during his sophomore season. That was before he talked with Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti, who persuaded the punter to take a trip out to Eugene. Doerr was blown away by Oregon's facilities and Bellotti's professional-yet-relatable demeanor.

"The next thing I know, I got home and called Arizona and told them I wasn't going there anymore," Doerr said.

Fittingly, the Ducks hit the road to play Michigan State last year on Sept. 2. Making his Division I-A debut in front of family and friends, Doerr proceeded to break the school single-game record with a 51.2-yard punt average against the Spartans, including one 75-yard blast.

"I just wanted to make sure that I

caught the ball and kicked it," Doerr recalls. "I was nervous, I'd never seen that many people in the same place at the same time."

After ascending the ranks from high school to junior college to Oregon, more people began to notice the punter from small-town Waterford. His stats — 59 punts, 2,460 total yards and an average of 41.7 yards per kick — ranked him 38th nationally and earned him a spot on the Pac-10 coaches' second conference team.

Then, the 2000 season arrived.

Picked in the preseason to finish third in the Pac-10 race, the Ducks packed their bags for Madison, Wis., to face the No. 3 Badgers. For Doerr, it would be his second homecoming in as many years, and he was eager to repeat his best-ever performance.

Unfortunately, the second-time around was not as sweet.

Doerr had probably his worst game ever, having one punt blocked in the end zone for a touchdown and averaging 28.3 yards in his seven attempts.

"I tried doing too much and I can't do that," Doerr said. "It's like baseball. If you try to smash it out of the park every time, you're going to strike out."

"You've got to write it off. You can't ponder on it too much or you'll get what kickers call 'the mind screw.'"

The senior lived true to his words, regaining form and posting solid numbers against Idaho, UCLA and Washington. If anyone got "mind-screw" from Doerr's kicking, it was Husky coach Rick Neuheisel, who blamed his team's loss partly on poor field position throughout the game.

"He's the best kicker we've seen this season," a befuddled Neuheisel said after the game.

Doerr gets plenty of support from fellow Duck kickers, as well as the Oregon defense, ranked No. 1 in the Pacific-10 Conference. Defensive end Jason Nikolao said that Doerr has something to do with the defense's strong showings.

"It's a lot easier when we have to defend 90 yards, rather than 60 or 70," Nikolao said. "Kurtis is doing a great job, I think we've got the best punter in the nation."

"I tell that guy he's our best ally, our best friend. As long as he keeps them as far back pinned in their territory as possible, that helps us a lot."

Doerr also talks fondly about Bellotti, who he says is "not too big for anybody," and about his strong-minded girlfriend, Duck softball player Missy Coe, who keeps him focused, he said.

And no longer does Doerr have to travel halfway across the country to see his family. His mother, Betsy, and 8-year old sister, Anna, moved to Eugene at the start of this season. His father flies to every game from Waterford.

"I look up in the stands [at my dad] and I can tell what he's telling me to do," Doerr said.

Ironic that a baseball player from Waterford turned down a collegiate career in sunny Arizona to kick the football in rainy Eugene.

Must be a small-town thing.

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