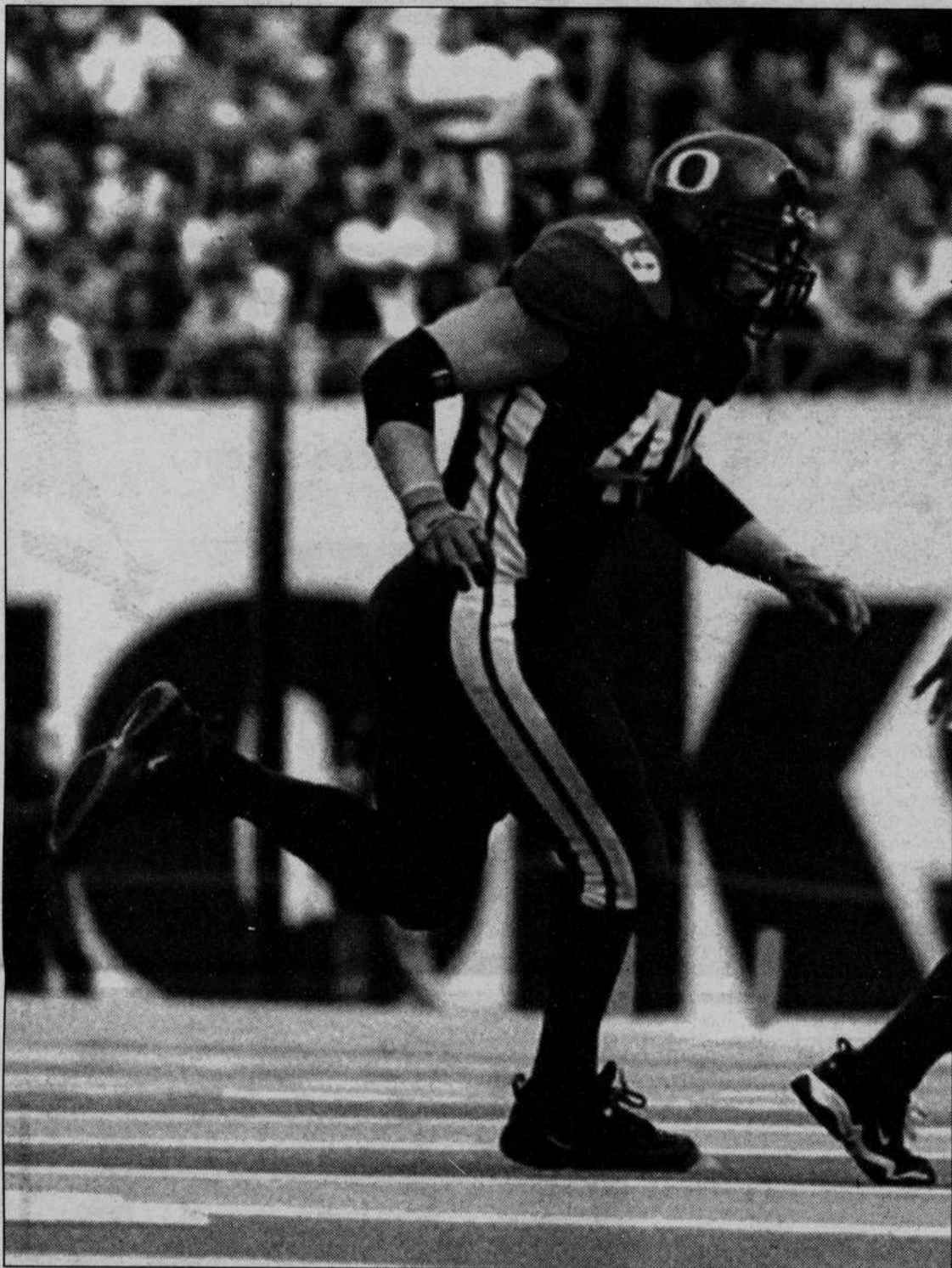


Hard hit down the line



Dan Brunell Emerald

Senior linebacker Matt Smith has proved he is one of the top linebackers in the conference. As it turns out, he is one of the best in the country. The former baseball player is a semi-finalist for the Butkus award, given to the nation's top linebacker.

■ Matt Smith tried his hand at baseball before realizing that he was better suited for the hard-hitting action on the gridiron

By Jeff Smith
Oregon Daily Emerald

It's springtime in Eugene. The sun is out and there's not a cloud in the sky.

It's a perfect day for a ballgame.

On this particular spring day there is an "intense" intramural softball game being played on the large grass area near Hayward Field.

It's the fourth inning — the critical point in all six-inning intramural games.

In the invisible dugout, Joey Harrington and Justin Peelle stand and cheer on their teammates. Standing on second base is Garrett Sabol, who is itching to come around the bases.

And slowly walking to the plate is a certain Matt Smith, who has been in this situation before. Smith, the starting middle linebacker for the Ducks' football team, knows a thing or two about baseball, considering he played it for four years in the Kansas City Royals' minor league organization.

Smith digs in and eyes the slow-moving softball as it floats through the air and comes toward home plate. He swings and ... the whiff. Strike one.

"Oh come on Matt!," a teammate jokes. "It hasn't been that long for ya has it?"

Smith smiles sheepishly and squares his eyes on the pitcher. In the intramural rules, two strikes mean a strikeout.

The pitch floats high and comes down to him again. And again the result is a big miss, ending the inning.

"Now you see why I don't play this anymore," said Smith in between a few laughs. "I can't hit."

Oh, Smith can hit all right; it just turned out that he pursued the wrong sport out of high school.

Put him in front of a curve ball and all he'll hit is the air.

Put him in front of a quarterback, however, and he'll leave the quarterback gasping for air.

"I've always enjoyed the intensity of defense and love to make those big hits," Smith said.

Those hits, as well as those fumble recoveries and those interceptions and those leadership skills and on and on, have brought Smith success at Oregon.

"He's Mr. Turnover," head coach Mike Bellotti said. "He's one of the guys that have helped make this thing go. Matt finds a way to get it done."

Smith looks like a football player. He stands 6-foot-4 and weighs in at 247. His body is lean. When he's serious about something people know it because his eyebrows move closer together and his lips tighten.

"He would sure scare me if I was a running back and I saw him coming right at me," wide receiver Marshaun Tucker said.

When Smith is off the field, he is a gracious 24-year old man who makes sure to say his pleases and thank yous.

When he's on it, though, he's a tough, gritty linebacker who leads the team with 50 tackles and who has been selected as a semi-finalist for the Butkus award — given to the nation's top linebacker in honor of legendary Chicago Bears linebacker Dick Butkus.

"The Butkus award, what more can you say?" Tucker said. "That's a great accomplishment and I hope that he gets it because he's one of the great linebackers in the country."

Not bad for someone who spent five seasons in the minor leagues

trying to make it first as a consistent hitter, then as a pitcher.

Smith graduated from Grants Pass High School in 1994, where he was a two-sport star in both baseball and football. Even though he was in close proximity to the Ducks, he signed a letter of intent to play both sports at Stanford. At the time, Oregon was coming off a 5-6 1993 season and Smith had no idea that the Ducks would reach the Rose Bowl that next season.

So it was on to Stanford.

Or so he thought. Then, money talked.

Smith was selected as the 16th pick in the first round of the 1994 Major League Baseball amateur draft by Kansas City. The Royals proceeded to give Smith a one million-dollar signing bonus, which was too much for the then-18-year-old to turn down.

"At that point, I had to give baseball a try because it was always my dream," Smith said. "It was an extremely tough decision, but obviously, it was too good of an opportunity to pass up."

In five seasons in the minors, Smith finished with an average of .243 and knocked out 17 home runs. In his final season in baseball, Smith tried his hand at pitching, where he finished with an 0-3 record and a 3.81 ERA. A sore elbow in his pitching arm told him that it was time to call it quits.

So he decided to come back to school and earn his business degree at Oregon, still undecided about football because he had been away for so long.

But the date of Nov. 8, 1997 would change all of that. Smith attended the Oregon-Washington football game up in Seattle and crazy thoughts began creeping into his mind.

"I just really missed football, and that got me going again," Smith said.

So when quarterback Akili Smith connected with receiver Pat Johnson on a long receiving touchdown to beat the Huskies, Smith was sold. He walked on to the football team and made it. Since he had already signed a professional contract, he had to pay his way through college.

He didn't mind. He was just pumped to strap on the pads again.

The rest is history. He has regained his football mindset and the attitude that helped him earn the Oregon class 4A defensive player of the year award after his senior year in '93.

And now he is one of the main reasons the Ducks are ranked seventh in the country and on the verge of perhaps making one of the few Rose Bowl appearances in school history.

"This program is on the rise and it's fun to be a part of it," Smith said. "This is what you dream of."

Smith admits, though, that his dreams growing up were equal for his two sports.

"If it was football season, I wanted to play in the Super Bowl, and if it was baseball season, I wanted to play in the World Series," he said.

Smith still finds time in his busy schedule to follow baseball, especially the World Series.

"I'd say the Yankees will take it," Smith said earlier in the week. "They have so much experience and they're just too tough. I don't see many flaws in them."

One could also say the same thing about Smith, even if he still can't connect on the curve.

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