

Ridnor

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it," Ridnor said. "When he came into my house to talk to us about his program, he just wowed us. He gave us this big recruiting pitch and caught us off guard. He caught my eye."

So in early October, Ridnor decided to check out Oregon as his final stop on the recruiting trail.

Not quite knowing what to expect, Ridnor said he approached the weekend with a "wait-and-see" type attitude. All of that changed when he saw his potential teammates.

He hung out with players such as Bryan Bracey, Freddie Jones, Julius Hicks and David Jackson.

"I chilled with all the guys and they all seemed to like me," Ridnor said. "Right away, they made me feel like a part of the team."

This was precisely what Kent had hoped for. Kent was so confident in his players' ability to show Ridnor around that he often let them be by themselves.

"In our recruiting, we try to have the recruits spend time with all of our players because I think it's important that they get to know all of them and understand different personalities," Kent said. "Because a

recruit is going to click differently with different guys, so when you don't give them an opportunity to meet everyone, you could be missing out on an opportunity that could swing your way."

Once again, it was a philosophy that worked in Kent's favor.

Ridnor was so impressed with his Oregon visit that he immediately put Oregon up there at the top of his list.

He then had to make some tough choices. The lure of nationally prominent Kentucky just wasn't enough for the Blaine, Wash., native as he decided to stay closer to home. Utah was tempting, as was his

hometown school of Washington. But in the end it came down to Gonzaga and Oregon.

One day, the phone rang at Ridnor's house and it was a former Gonzaga point guard who was calling to just "see how things were going."

It turned out, however, that Ridnor had practically made up his mind.

If the Oregon exhibition game that he would attend was anywhere near what he envisioned it to be, then he would be headed to the school that joined in on the Ridnor chase much later than every other school.

His experience at Mac Court exceeded expectations. He was going to become a Duck.

"Of the five schools that I visited," Ridnor said, "Oregon was the only school that I found zero negatives about."

And by the way, that former Gonzaga point guard's name was John Stockton.

The city of Blaine, Wash., lies directly on the border between the state of Washington and the country of Canada. Its population is just under 4,000 people total, and yet 2,000 people packed the Blaine High School gymnasium every home game to see Luke Ridnor. Ridnor played the starring role on his Blaine Borderites basketball team that he led to back-to-back Washington Class 2A state titles.

Last season, he averaged 29 points, seven assists, six steals and five rebounds a game. His stats were fairly consistent with his junior year numbers of 26 points, 8 assists and 5.5 boards a game. That junior year team of his went 27-0 to cap off a remarkable 72-8 three-year record for Ridnor and his team.

Ridnor is a legend in the city that he lived in for 10 years. But he makes sure to point out how excited he is to be in Eugene.

"I came down this summer to get ready for this; wanted to get started early," said Ridnor, whose arrival helped Oregon capture the honor of having the number one ranked recruiting class in the West. "I'm just real excited to see what it's all about. I'm looking forward to the challenges and the competition."

He faced a tough test on March 29 when he traveled to Boston to participate in the prestigious 2000 McDonald's All-American Game. The experience was a rewarding one for the youngster, but it was tough for him to shine with his team-first style of play amidst the many athletic dunkers and ballers.

"It was a great experience being a part of the McDonald's game, but that just wasn't my type of game," Ridnor said of the acclaimed prep all-star game. "It's more of a show-time game and I'm more of a team player."

Kent certainly viewed Ridnor as already being an important part of his team earlier in the spring. The two talked every week while Ridnor completed his senior year of high school and Kent sent his star recruit videotapes of last season's Pac-10 games.

"I've been real impressed with Jason Gardner from Arizona," Ridnor said. "He's a tough competitor and he'll be fun to go up against."

The Ducks will play those Wildcats on Feb. 1, and by then, Ridnor expects to be making much more of an impact than he already has been in his young Duck career.

"Each game I'm going to get a little better," Ridnor said.

Family is an important part of Luke Ridnor's life. So is basketball. Luke's dad, Rob, was his head basketball coach at Blaine High School. Luke's mom, Muriel, was the team's statistician.

Luke's sister, Heather, plays basketball at a community college in

Spokane, Wash.

So it is easy to see why Ridnor would choose a college where family and basketball are so closely intertwined.

But even after Ridnor happily announced that he was going to Oregon there were problems. Rumors floated around that Kent and the Ducks had done something illegal to entice the youngster, such as perhaps luring him with money. Such rumors flabbergasted Kent and Ridnor alike because they both knew that the reason the two hooked up was because of the family feeling that existed.

"It sent out all kinds of rumors as to how Oregon could get someone over Kentucky and Utah and Gonzaga," Kent said. "This is why we're getting him because of this or because of that. But none of those rumors were true."

"He came here because our guys did a better job of recruiting him."

Ridnor says that one of the main ingredients he was looking for was a school with a great family atmosphere. He's not saying that the other schools didn't provide him with it, but he just felt more comfortable in the environment at Oregon.

"I loved the coaches and team a lot," Ridnor said. "They're all good guys and real nice. They really care about each other."

When relayed Ridnor's words, Kent's smile grows wider.

"Our guys were more together and our guys were more like family than any of those other programs," Kent said. "And that's why he came here. He sensed it. He saw it. He felt it. There's a lot of emotion in it."

"He had this basketball family that really just absorbed him and he absorbed them."

Ridnor also is very comfortable with the fact that he made the right decision for the right reasons. The Ducks' run-and-gun offense suits his playing style perfect. He's also playing close enough to home so his parents will have the chance to see him play.

Thus far, Ridnor has started in each of Oregon's first four games and will be out there at the beginning of Saturday's game against Massachusetts in the Papé Jam at the Rose Garden.

"He's got great potential," Oregon junior guard Anthony Norwood said. "He's a great guy and does everything the right way. It's just a matter of him understanding the system and he'll be good to go."

Portland head coach Rob Chavez came away impressed with Ridnor after Oregon's 66-60 victory over the Pilots on Tuesday.

"He's obviously a very talented, savvy point guard," Chavez said. "He doesn't turn the basketball over very much and knows his job. I've seen him play a lot and there will be no surprises for me for what he's able to potentially accomplish in his career here."

Now, Ridnor wants to impress the Duck fans who have been eagerly awaiting his arrival.

"When they see me, I think they'll know that I'm all about winning," Ridnor said. "I am always willing to do whatever it takes to get the win and I enjoy being a part of a winning team."

The fans shouldn't worry about disappointing Ridnor. He got to experience them at their best in a Pac-10 showdown against Stanford last season — an experience that Ridnor still gushes over.

"At that Stanford game, that crowd was amazing," Ridnor said. "I've never seen anything like that in my life. It was unbelievable. It was very, very loud."

And if Kent's plan goes accordingly, that Mac Court crowd is soon to be even louder this season with a certain freshman at the point.

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