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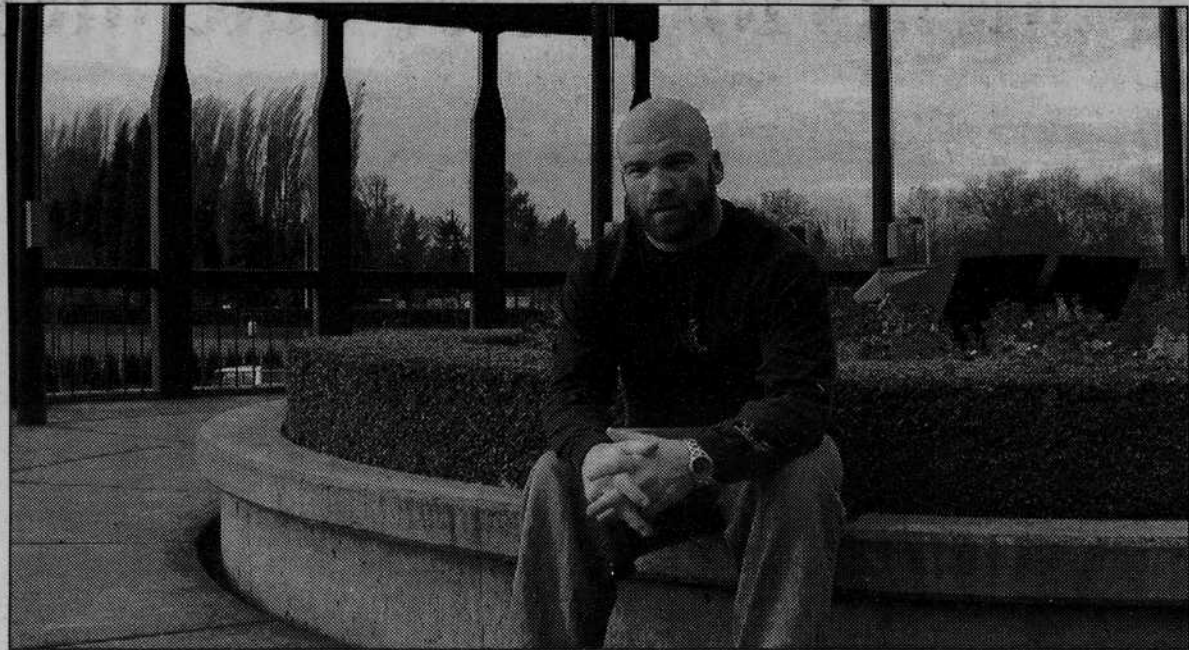
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Oregon linebacker Kevin Mitchell, pictured in front of the Casanova Center, wants to be a K-9 cop when he graduates. Adam Jones Emerald

Just like a game

■ Kevin Mitchell has tackled tougher stuff in his life than Oregon's football opponents

By Eric Martin
Oregon Daily Emerald

In 1997, Oregon linebacker Kevin Mitchell and his friend, Gerrard Faine, arrived at Faine's Santa Ana, Calif., home as a man leapt over a fence carrying a VCR under his arm.

Faine ran inside to call the police, certain his VCR had been stolen, while Mitchell took off in pursuit. Mitchell chased the burglar down an alley, through a strip mall and across an intersection as sports sedans and SUVs rushed by. He tackled the man on the far side of the street and wrestled to hold him down for five minutes until police responded to the scene. It was a little after 7:30 p.m.

"The police were saying to the man, 'You let a high school kid catch you?'" recalls Mitchell's mother, Betsy. "Kevin was 17 years old at the time. It turns out (the burglar) was a third-strike case, and they put him away for a long time."

Many Pacific-10 Conference wide receivers and running backs could share in the burglar's pain. Mitchell has put vicious hits on them as a second-year linebacker for the Ducks.

But his instinct to see justice served comes from a life spent with

family friends who serve in the Los Angeles Police Department and the Orange County Sheriff's Department. His mother works in the training academy of the sheriff's department, and Mitchell would listen to presentations on gangs, cults and drugs while he waited for rides home.

He says those early experiences fueled his desire to work in law enforcement when he finishes school.

"It's an eye-opener," Mitchell said of the tribulations police officers deal with on a daily basis. "I knew these things were out there, but it's an eye-opener."

But Mitchell doesn't look like average cop material. He sports a goatee and has four tattoos, including a multi-colored number on his left arm that reads, "Trust No One." Inside the tattoo are the names of his parents and other family members. He says he got the tattoo because he's seen a harsher side of life. One that is dangerous. Unpredictable.

Those who have known him say his intensity and desire to succeed will take him as far as he's willing to work in whatever career he chooses to pursue.

"There's not a lot of compromising about the young man," says Bruce Rollinson, head football coach at Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, Calif., where Mitchell attended and played. "There's not a lot of acceptance for less than per-

fection. He joked with the best of them, don't get me wrong. But that kind of leadership permeated on this defense. He led them."

Mitchell says Mater Dei — a predominantly Catholic school of 2,200 students — was hard to adjust to, especially since he was not raised Catholic.

"I got sent to the office a lot," Mitchell says. "It would be because I forgot to shave, and my facial hair was too long."

"But it would only be this long," he says, rubbing a hand across the stubble on his cheeks. "Basically, I had to conform."

Motivational speeches from Rollinson didn't hurt, either.

"Yeah," Rollinson says. "I can remember saying, 'Look son, you're not a bad kid. It's just a different set of standards here, and you've got to live up to them. It's just like a game. And the rules of this game are you get your shirt tucked in and get to class on time.'"

Mitchell's experiences have taught him to be himself, because living up to another person's expectations can't make him happy.

"I'm gonna wear my jeans and my steel-toed boots," Mitchell says. "That's just my style."

Eric Martin is a higher education reporter for the Oregon Daily Emerald. He can be reached at ericmartin@dailyemerald.com.

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