

Sophomore surge

Jared Siegel has recovered from a sub-par freshman season to emerge as a consistent kicking force for the Ducks.

Peter Hockaday
Sports Editor

It's the scenario little kickers dream about when they're booting imaginary field goals in sandlots on fading summer nights.

National championship game. Down by two points. Seconds on the clock.

With the sun setting over the goal posts — maybe remnants of an old fence — the kicker lifts his hand to block the light. He sizes up the length of the kick, swings his leg in practice. He runs up, kicks it, it's up, it's good! And the crowd goes wild.

Jared Siegel lived this dream. He lived it three years ago as a junior kicker at Jesuit High School in Sacramento, Calif.

In the national-title game that year, Siegel was brought out to kick the winning try with everything on the line. Only this wasn't a football game, it was a rugby match, and Siegel was tired from a game of going both ways and sideways and into people and over people.

But he lived the dream. Split the uprights. Won the national championship.

Haloti Ngata, now a standout freshman defensive lineman for the Ducks, played in that game, on the other side of the ball for his Salt Lake City team.

"Haloti remembers that ball going up and in," Siegel said. "I remind him about it."

Two years later, Siegel was faced with a similar situation, but it wasn't from any kind of storybook. Joey Harrington had just engineered a 61-yard drive in 40 seconds to give Siegel a 32-yard field goal attempt that would elevate or sink the Ducks' young season.

Oregon was down by two points with 12 seconds left in the game. Siegel had already missed a crucial field goal earlier in the game, and Ducks head coach Mike Bellotti had substituted for Siegel minutes earlier on another crucial kick.

Not the ideal situation. No sandlot dream. Just ask his mother.

"I think I felt just sheer panic," Debey Siegel said. "I have all the confidence in the world in Jared. But I do stress out a little more."

But Jared Siegel, once again, made the kick. Although he would go on to a mediocre freshman season — making just three of eight attempts longer than 35 yards — Siegel held on to the memory of jumping into his teammates' arms after winning that crucial Pac-10 contest.

"It gives me confidence as an individual knowing that if it were ever to come down to that, I've done it before, so it's important that I stay consistent and do it again," Siegel said.

The kicker speaks thoughtfully and with a smile, his speech mimicking his play on the field. Siegel has settled into his role as the Ducks' consistent kicker this season by approaching his duties with a light heart and a smile on his face.

"I think he's more relaxed out there," said punter Jose Arroyo, Siegel's roommate and constant companion. "Last year was a learning experience and we were just focused on trying to do our best, and that kind of kept us from doing our best. This year we're having fun."

It's showed. While he was inconsistent from long distances last year, Siegel is 11-for-12 this year, including 4-for-5 longer than 35 yards. He booted a 53-yarder, his career best, against Arizona last week and a 52-yarder against Portland State. His only miss this season wasn't even his fault — it came on a blocked 48-yard kick in the season opener

against Mississippi State.

If you needed any evidence that Siegel is looser this season, just watch him come in to kick from the sidelines. If it looks like he's got three fingers stretched out and he's clawing the air like some sort of tiger, well, that's because he is.

"He has this weird thing with his field goal unit, he calls it 'The Cheetah,'" Arroyo said. "Like we have Zebra, Falcon, different formations for offense, so he calls it The Cheetah."

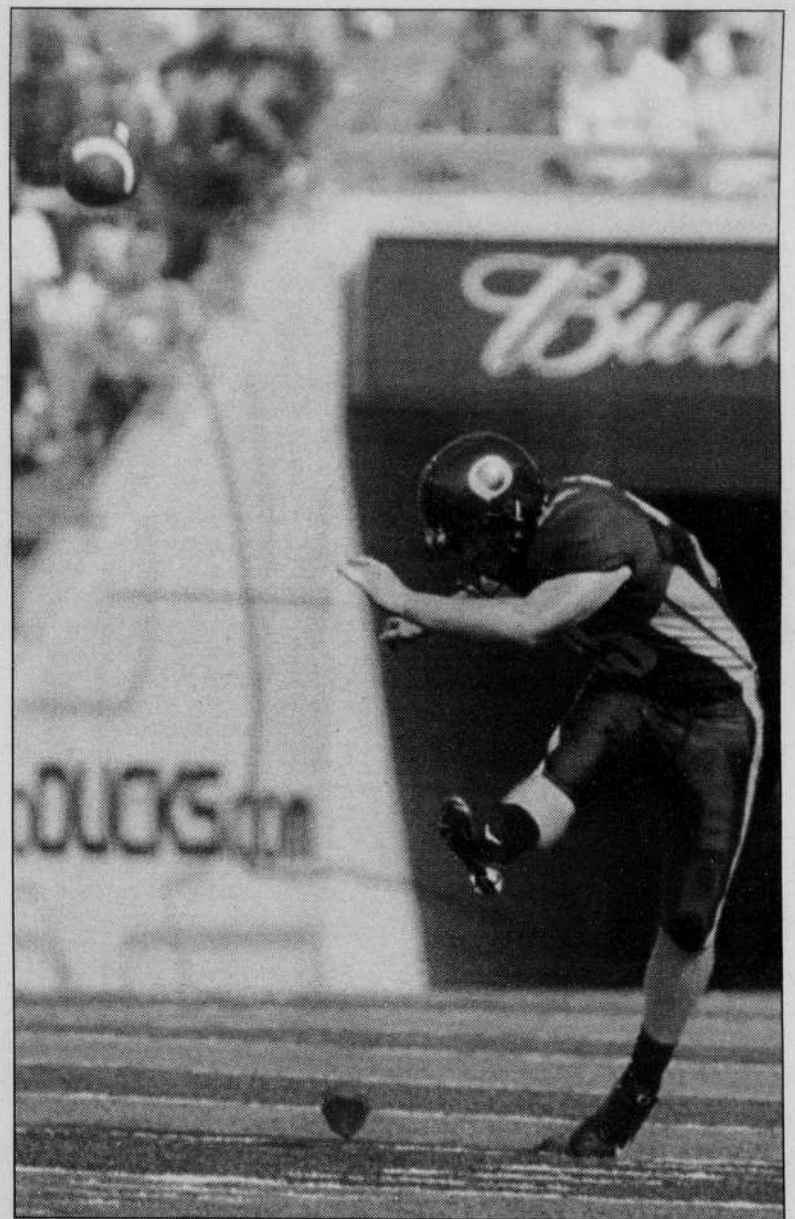
"When I came out to kick my 53-yarder (Saturday), I was calling out to the group, 'cheetah cheetah,' and it was kind of funny because they were in the midst of a very close game so all of (the linemen) were very intense and tired," Siegel said. "So it was kind of funny to see the tired smirks on their faces as this little kicker is calling out the name of the group that he named it."

Those tired smirks may be saving Siegel's hide this season. The sophomore said he hasn't faced much of a rush from opposing defenses, allowing him to focus more on kicking.

But that's not the only factor in Siegel's improvement. The sophomore is kicking more this season — he already has more made field goals this year than attempts all of last season — and says that helps him.

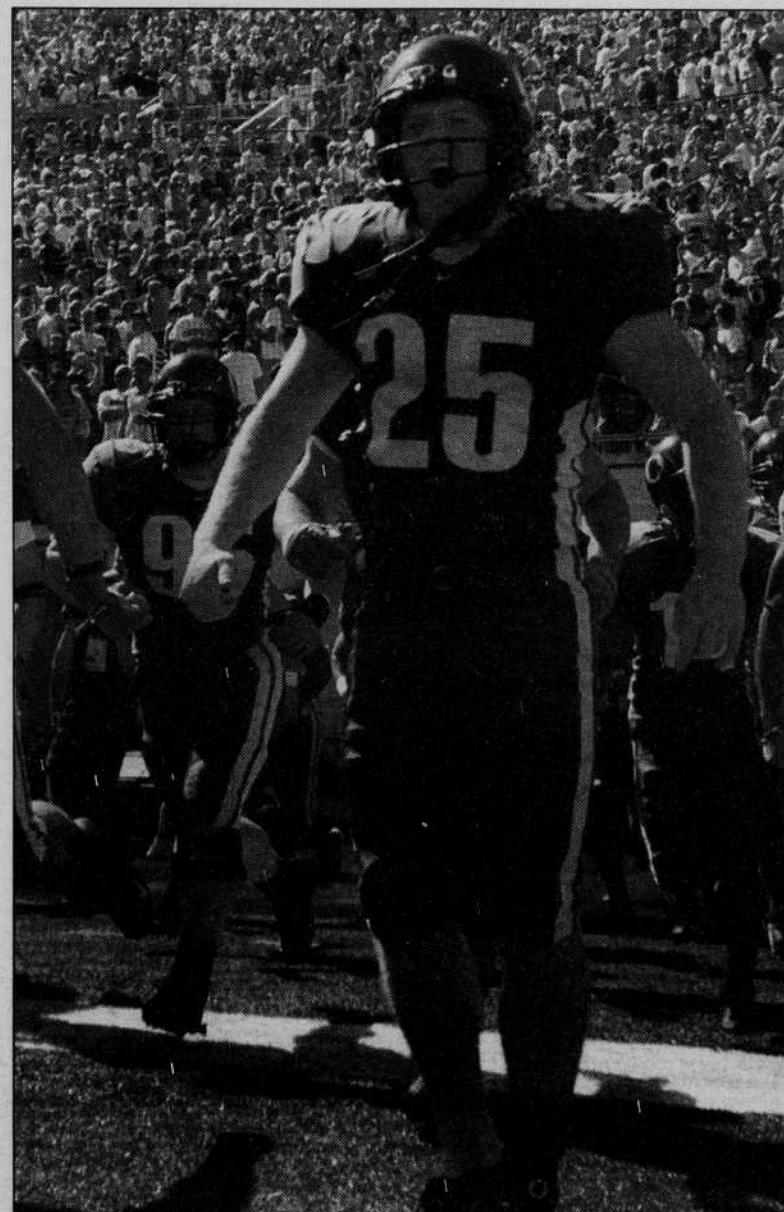
"In high school I got to play other positions, so I never got cold," Siegel said. "In college you could sit on the

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Adam Amato Emerald

Jared Siegel played strong safety in high school and isn't afraid to tackle on kickoffs.



Adam Amato Emerald

Siegel has been successful this season by having fun with his kicking responsibilities.

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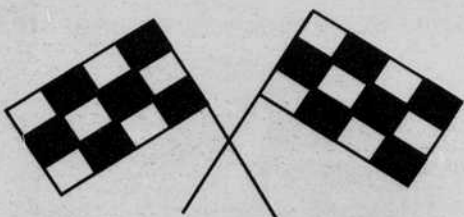
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