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WOODS

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favor from Bellotti and defensive coordinator Nick Aliotti. "It's not often at all that you get a Division I coach like that to stick up for you, write a letter in your favor. I thank and continue to thank coach Bellotti for the opportunity he gave me."

"He stuck his neck out for me a lot."

It has been three months since Woods first stepped onto campus as a student-athlete. He's played in nine games for the Ducks, gradually seeing more playing time each week.

He started his first game on Oct. 3 against Utah, and has been a key piece of the secondary puzzle.

"Any time it's a junior college player, you hope you can get him close enough to play at the level of a junior as soon as possible, and it's very hard to predict that," secondary coach John Neal said. "I think we've got more out of Rodney than the normal junior college player because he played so much more earlier on than we expected."

"It's just unfortunate, because we would have loved to have him since he was a freshman. All of us feel that way."

Woods' story is a complicated one. Had he not been charged with a felony, he would have been on his way to Fresno State in August 2000, where head coach Pat Hill had a scholarship waiting for him.

But, like at Oregon, Woods wouldn't be able to play for the Bulldogs with a felony on his record.

Hill "was behind me just like coach Bellotti," Woods said. "From the get-go, (Hill) told me, 'OK, you get all this stuff cleared up, you still have your scholarship here.' I was fine with it until I went to my sentencing. I was upset, but I really wasn't too upset because there was nothing I could do about it. It was something that he had to do."

So, Woods went to Fresno City, where he played for two seasons under head coach Tony Caviglia. According to a story in The Fresno Bee in December 2001, Caviglia didn't know of Woods' situation until the teenager called in April 2001 and expressed interest in playing for the program.

However, that didn't matter. The junior college had no student code of conduct, so Woods was free to attend classes and play football.

"Kids make mistakes," Caviglia said in a phone interview earlier this week. "He's an example of someone who deserves a second chance."

Then and now

Woods said he tries to forget that fateful night, but knows he will never be able to flush it out of his mind. He tries to push it to the back of his head so he can concentrate on things like classes and football, and getting used to the way of life in Eugene, where he will spend at least one more year.

Caviglia described him as a player who plays as hard as he can on the field and is responsible off of it.

Oregon cornerback Justin Phinisee said Woods has been just another teammate and that the incident that clouded Woods' life has not been dwelled upon.

"You would think a wild kid coming out to the city like this, everybody would see the trouble he gets in," Phinisee said, describing what the preconception of Woods was like. "But he's low-key. He hangs out and comes to our house on the weekends. He likes to have fun. He knows his limit. He's learned from his past, and I think he's a good guy."

Woods is majoring in sociology. Like seemingly every collegiate football player, he wants to play in the NFL, but knows only a lucky few get that chance.

If he doesn't graduate to the NFL, Woods said he would like to become a social worker and be someone who can offer counseling to teenagers and

help lead them away from the dangers of life.

"It's a good life lesson because I learned a lot from the stuff I've been through and the people I've talked to," he said. "I would love to teach that to other people."

Although he's always been religious, Woods said the events of that May night have made him focus more on the Bible and his belief in God.

"My main lesson I've learned is to trust in God with all your heart and he'll do everything for you," Woods said. "He's up there, and he knows what's going on at all times. If you give everything to him, he'll make sure to straighten your path out."

Neal, for one, is happy to have him as a member of the secondary. Neal has liked what he has seen from the junior and is looking forward to having him for at least one more season.

He echoes Caviglia's belief that Woods is deserving of that second chance.

"His situation is still ambiguous, at best, in terms of what happened," Neal said. "I think they have to separate the fact of who did what and understand that he did not do the main crime that happened."

"So anyhow, what do I know about right and wrong, any more than anyone else? We all feel like human beings. We all want to give someone a second chance. Sometimes maybe we give people third and fourth chances. I think Rodney has learned a great lesson, and I think he'll be a college graduate and we'll all be proud of him."

Contact the sports editor at hankhager@dailyemerald.com.



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