

Sports Editor:  
Hank Hager  
hankhager@dailymerald.com

Best bet  
NIT Final Four  
Oregon v. Michigan  
6 p.m., ESPN2

Tuesday, March 30, 2004



Hank Hager  
Behind the dish

## Skipper's home on the track, not field

There is an age-old belief that every American boy grows up with a glove on his hand, one day hoping to make it to the Major Leagues.

He practices out in the backyard, playing catch with his father under the hot summer sky. He skips school to stay home and listen to the third game of the World Series.

He becomes one of the jocks at the local high school, wowing the crowds during his four years on the diamond. The kid hopes to get picked in one of the 50 rounds of the professional draft.

If he is drafted, he hopes to strike it rich with a big signing bonus, then heads out to a small town with big aspirations. If not, he dreams of getting a college scholarship and playing the game he loves for at least four more years.

All stereotypes, all generalizations born and passed on generation by generation. Since the game was invented way back in the mid-1800s, it has become the central piece of American lore; his father played it, his grandfather played it and so on.

For athletes like Oregon pole vaulter Tommy Skipper, the stereotype doesn't fit. The Sandy native didn't grow up playing the game. He didn't dream of making it to the Bigs or getting the chance to play in front of 40,000-plus fans every night.

Thing is, there are some in the game who believe he may just have the talent.

Skipper was drafted in the 37th round of the 2003 Major League Baseball Amateur Draft by San Diego. He's never picked up a baseball, not when he was six, not when he was 18 (he's 19 now).

Never.  
"Truthfully, I don't see myself being a baseball player or anything like that happening," he said. "But it definitely was humbling."

It takes a truly special athlete to be drafted by a professional organization, especially out of high school.

Especially without having ever swung a bat in a live game or standing out in right field picking grass between pitches.

"I don't try to get too excited about anything," Skipper said. "I'm very humbled that they pursued me; they thought I might have the talent. After that, it's an experience that I feel fortunate to have been a part of."

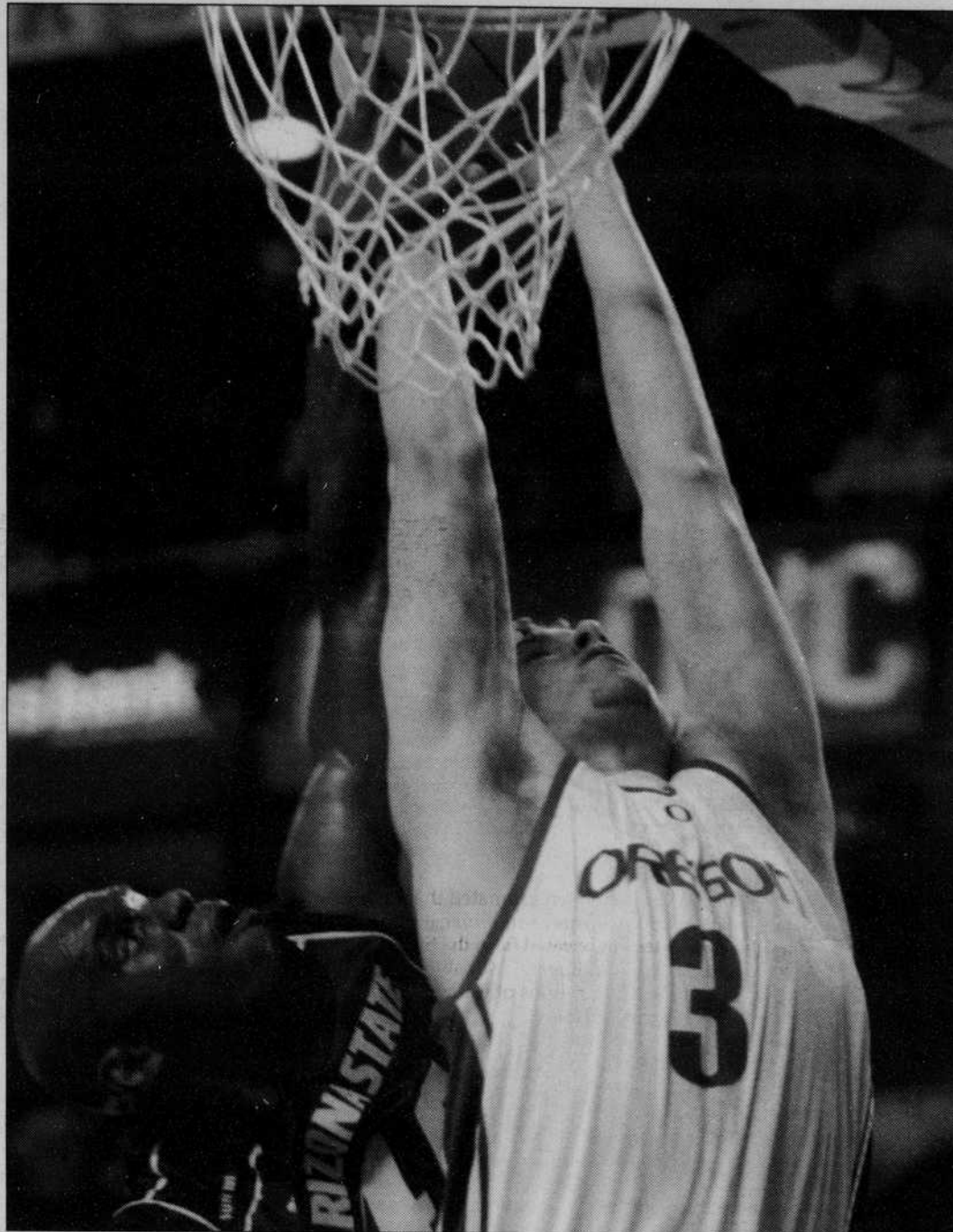
Technically, the experience isn't quite over for Skipper just yet. If the Padres feel inclined to pursue the freshman, they have until June — when the next draft takes place — to sign him.

While it's unlikely he'll sign on the dotted line — so he said — it's not the time to say never. San Diego hasn't really pursued him to this point, and probably won't, figuring his career in track and field could go a lot further than it would in baseball.

So, Skipper is perfectly content competing for head coach Martin Smith and Oregon this season. He enrolled in the winter because he wanted to ensure that he was

Turn to **HAGER**, page 8

## Oregon faces Michigan in New York



Adam Amato Senior Photographer

Senior Jay Anderson and the Ducks face Michigan in the NIT's Final Four today at Madison Square Garden.

The Ducks and Wolverines square off tonight in New York at Madison Square Garden

By Hank Hager  
Sports Editor

For Oregon, it's win or go home. For Michigan, it's win or go home.

In other words, the approximate 6 p.m. tip off between the teams at Madison Square Garden in New York begins the second semifinal game of the National Invitation Tournament.

### MEN'S BASKETBALL

For both the Ducks and Wolverines, the NIT has been a welcome addition to their season after missing out on the NCAA Tournament. Both teams escaped three games to make it to the East Coast. Oregon took care of Colorado, George Mason and Notre Dame. Michigan defeated Missouri, Oklahoma and Hawaii en route to the final four of the postseason tournament.

"You want to make it to the NCAA so bad because that's the Big Dance," Oregon forward Luke Jackson said. "Everyone has that bracket and everyone is watching that. It's kind of the whole goal. But every team wants to be in the position we are in. I think we're able to win this thing."

Unlike years past in the NIT, this season's tournament is truly one-and-done. There is no consolation game Thursday as there has been every season since 1983 — and every year from 1939 to 1981 previous to that.

The Ducks have been to the final stages of the NIT two previous times. In both of the semifinal games the Ducks have participated in, they've lost.

In 1975, it was a one-point loss to Princeton. In 1999, it was a 16-point loss to Pacific-10 Conference rival California.

This year, the semifinal contests take on importance of their own.

A loss means no more chance to play on the famous floor of Madison Square Garden, a building that many Oregon players

Turn to **NEW YORK**, page 8

## Five-win week gives Ducks momentum

Oregon found success at Howe Field during the break and is ready to dive into Pac-10 play

By Mindi Rice  
Senior Sports Reporter

The Oregon softball team put together a 5-2 run at home during spring break to give the Ducks some momentum for the heart of the Pacific-10 Conference season.

Before the No. 17 Ducks (25-9 overall, 1-0 Pac-10) hit the road to travel to California for their second conference game, they face a feisty Portland State team Wednesday in a doubleheader at Portland.

"We've got to get a little bit better for Portland State because they're a better ballclub than what Utah State is," Oregon head coach Kathy Arendsen said after the Ducks split a doubleheader with Utah State Saturday to close their week at Howe Field.

The Ducks kicked off their week with a doubleheader against Missouri on March 21. Tiger pitcher Erin Kalka threw a two-hit shutout in the first game against Oregon. The game was called after six innings by the eight-run rule, with Missouri earning the 8-0 victory.

"Our defense really struggled," Arendsen said after the doubleheader. "That's really unlike us. We've been a great defensive team all year. It kind of seemed like we were pressing all day, and the more we were getting ground balls, the more we were booting them."

The Ducks committed four errors in the first game. They picked up a win in the second game of the day despite another four errors.

In the second game against Missouri, Oregon took an early lead on a solo home run by Ashley Richards in the bottom of

Turn to **MOMENTUM**, page 8



Erik R. Bishoff Photographer

Outfielder Kayleen Hudson helped Oregon to five wins in seven games last week. The No. 17 Ducks are 25-9 this season and earned their first Pac-10 win Friday against Oregon State, 9-8. The women will be in Portland today to take on Portland State in a doubleheader.