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HAGER

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making the right decision to attend school in Eugene.

After all, he had to turn away Texas, also known as a pretty special program in track and field.

"Oregon had more of what I was looking for," Skipper said. "If you take two different people, this guy over here might want something else. So it was just a personal preference for me."

Oregon has seen its fair share of incredible athletes recently, from Santiago Lorenzo to John Stiegeler.

Each, in his own right, had an ability like no other.

Skipper may be in another category. He is a special talent, which could lead him to Athens, Greece, for the 2004 Summer Olympics.

OK, that's too far away to think of right now. No doubt Skipper will have to jump more than 19 feet to get there. He's never done that and knows it is a goal this season.

For now, his focus is on improving and helping the Duck program move forward into contention for the 2004 NCAA championship.

And hey, if the Padres come calling,

it would be nice. Maybe not nice enough to sign, but something pretty interesting to put in the books.

Besides, who would want to leave Oregon, especially when your last name is Skipper?

"Oregon is just amazing all around," he said. "The academic programs, the people on the teams, the facilities they have, the history. It goes on and on and on. I'm very grateful to be here at Oregon."

Contact the sports editor at hankhager@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

MOMENTUM

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the first. Missouri answered with two runs in the top of the third, but the Ducks tied it up in the bottom of the fifth with two doubles. Suzie Barnes scored from third on a double by pinch hitter Julie Jaime.

The Tigers didn't give up, battling for a run off reliever Anissa Meashintubby in the top of the sixth. Down 3-2, the Ducks manufactured a run in the bottom of the seventh off a walk and two singles to tie the game again.

In the bottom of the ninth, designated player Beth Boskovich walked with one out. After a sacrifice bunt by Dani Baird to advance Boskovich, outfielder Kayleen Hudson drove in the runner with a single to left center field for the winning run.

"I was just trying to relax and play my game," Hudson said. "I was trying not to let the stress get to me. My teammates helped me by getting on base."

The Ducks hosted Kansas for two games, sweeping the Jayhawks in their trip to Eugene. On March 23 Oregon picked up a win, 1-0, at the hands of

Meashintubby in the first game. The senior pitcher threw her ninth career shutout to move up to No. 6 on the all-time career shutout list at Oregon. She had six strikeouts and gave up three hits in the victory.

Wednesday, the Ducks returned to the field and found the offense that was hiding the day before. Three Oregon players — Hudson, Baird and Breanne Sabol — hit home runs en route to a 9-0 five-inning victory against Kansas. For Baird, it was her first home run of the season.

"Yesterday, I was on (Kansas' pitcher) the whole day," Baird said. "So I was just looking for a good pitch to drive."

Oregon ended its week with a Pac-10 victory against Oregon State, 9-8, and a doubleheader split with Utah State Saturday. Ani Nyhus threw a no-hitter in the second game against Utah State.

Oregon is now 5-2 against ranked opponents this season, including the victory against No. 16 Oregon State. As it becomes the Pac-10 season, the Ducks will face tough competition — each team appears somewhere in the top 25 rankings.

Oregon State and Oregon are the only Pac-10 teams to drop out of the top 25 in the past two seasons, and neither remained out of the poll for very long.

In the NFCA/USA Today Poll released March 25, Arizona, UCLA and California, respectively, were the top three schools. Washington was close behind at No. 6, while No. 13 Stanford, No. 16 Oregon State and the No. 17 Ducks rounded out the Pac-10 schools in the top 20. Arizona State, the final Pac-10 school with a softball program, is No. 23.

Following the doubleheader against Portland State, the Ducks play eight consecutive Pac-10 games on the road. They travel to California and Stanford for games Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Oregon then plays Oregon State in Corvallis April 9 and 10 before playing Washington on April 16 and UCLA on April 17 and 18.

The Ducks return to Howe Field on April 23 to host Arizona State and Arizona.

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NEW YORK

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called a "Mecca."

"We're all really excited to play at Madison Square Garden," Oregon forward Jay Anderson said. "It should be really fun for us."

Oregon (18-12 overall) has taken pride in the fact it is getting the chance to play in New York. However, the pride should be focused more on the team's ability to play up to its potential in recent weeks. The realization of that potential has paced Oregon to its current three-game winning streak.

Oregon went 6-1 as the season wound down, which included coming back from an 18-point deficit to Colorado in the first game of the NIT.

Two games later, the Ducks may have had their best defensive game of the season, holding Notre Dame to 61 points overall.

Oregon guard Andre Joseph has been central to the improvement in defense. He was key in holding Notre Dame's Chris Thomas to 18 points on 7 of 25 shooting. Thomas also turned the ball over five times while dishing out a total of four assists.

Joseph did all that while leading the team with 16 points, the second game in a row he paced Oregon in scoring.

"I try to be (a tempo setter)," Joseph said. "I've been good lately so hopefully that continues on."

Oregon head coach Ernie Kent has preached defense all season long. It seems the Ducks are finally getting the hang of it.

"I think it's the fact that we have not given up on these guys," Kent said, listing one of a number of factors why Oregon has improved defensively. "We continue to teach every day and it's starting to be absorbed as we head down the stretch right now."

With Michigan (21-11), a team the Ducks likened to UCLA and California, perimeter defense should be key. The Wolverines' two leading scorers, guard Lester Abram and Bernard Robinson Jr., both stand 6-foot-6 and have the ability to shoot from beyond the three-point line.

Abram drained more than 41 percent of his three-pointers this season. Robinson Jr. shot 25 percent from beyond the arc this season; he knocked down 35 percent during the 2002-03 season, showing he has the capability to shoot from long range.

There's really no one player the Ducks can focus on.

"They've got really good guards," Joseph said. "They've got shot blockers in the middle. They're supposed to be a really good home team, just like us. We're meeting on a neutral court, so it should be a good game."

Contact the sports editor at hankhager@dailyemerald.com.

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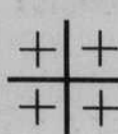
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