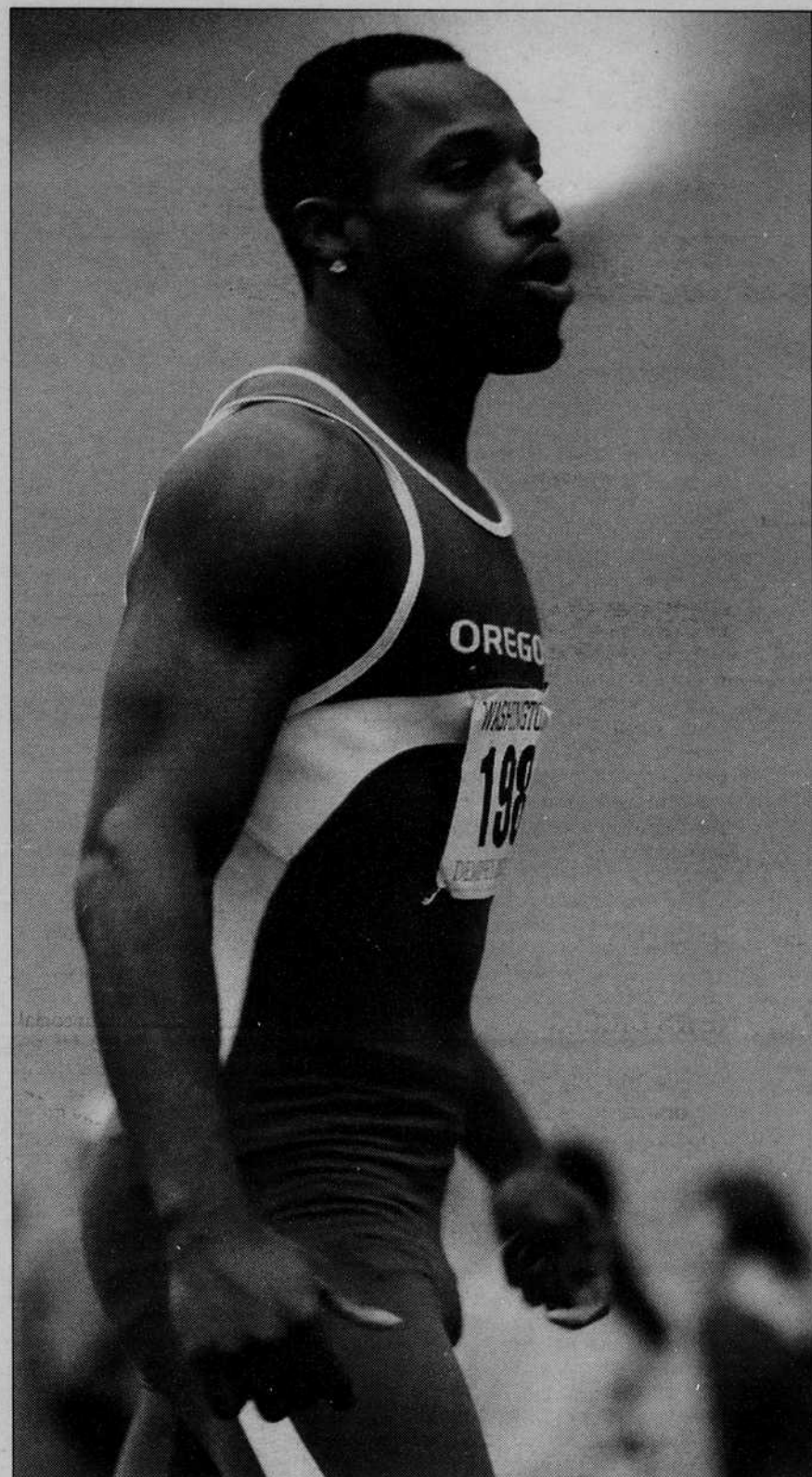


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Geoff Thurner Oregon Media Services

Junior Leonidas Watson has found success during an unexpected college track career.

Unexpected jump

Leonidas Watson's athletic ability has brought him recognition in a different sport than he expected

By Jon Roetman
Sports Reporter

Leonidas Watson can jump.

This fact has been obvious since his childhood, when he was a standout basketball player growing up in St. Louis, Mo.

How he would use his athletic ability later in life, however, turned out to be anything but obvious.

Watson's love was always basketball. He could jump so high that he played forward and center during his youth, despite standing less than 6 feet tall.

During his sophomore year at Parkway West High School, Watson wowed his fellow students by putting on a dunk

show during a pep assembly. While most high school students never experience the sensation of stuffing a basketball, Watson stole the show with a 360° double-pump jam.

His jaw-dropping hops caught the attention of more than just the Parkway West student body. Dale Shepard, the school's track and field coach at the time, took notice of Watson's athletic ability and asked him to join the team during the spring.

While basketball was still Watson's first love, track and field quickly grew on him as he got his start in the high jump. It didn't take long before Watson's athleticism got him involved in several events.

"I was supposed to do the high jump, then I came out and (Shepard) said, 'Let's see how you do in the long jump,'" Watson said. "It was OK, I mean, it was decent. After a couple of meets (Shepard) was like, 'All right, we need points, let's put you in the triple jump.'"

Track and field continued to play second fiddle to basketball when it came time for Watson to make a decision about where to attend college. He decided to join the basketball team at St. Louis (Mo.) Community College, where he would play his natural position of point guard.

After his freshman year (2000-01), the SLCC basketball program made a coaching change and Watson didn't figure into the team's plans. At this point, he had a decision to make: Sit on the bench or give track and field a shot.

Watson chose the latter.

"I was hurt for awhile because I was real cocky about basketball," Watson said. "(It wasn't) until my first (track and field) season when I really stopped worrying about basketball."

Watson committed himself to track at SLCC and started noticing improvements in his jumping as he matched technique with his raw athletic ability. After a

year of competition at the junior-college level, Watson realized that the sport which always took a back seat to basketball might be his ticket to a big-time school.

"There were a couple of meets, and after awhile I started improving more and more," Watson said. "Then I started to hit those marks where I was like, 'Man, I can actually do this at the Division I level.'"

During the 2003 season, Watson's hard work paid off when he won junior college national championships in the outdoor (53 feet) and indoor (52-5) triple jump. He also took second nationally in the outdoor (25-1) and indoor (24-9) long jump.

Watson started getting attention from the likes of Nebraska, Texas Tech, Tennessee, Arkansas and Louisiana State. But it was a meeting with a certain Pacific-10 Conference school that helped make his decision an easy one.

"Oregon was the last school to recruit me, but they were the first to come to my house," Watson said. "That really impressed me. (Jumps coach Bill Lawson) came in my house, talked to my mom and didn't tell me one thing and do another. (He) just straight up told me, 'This is what we're going to do for you.' So far, he's been right."

Lawson said that meeting face-to-face with an athlete is the best way to start building a trustworthy relationship.

"If you're going to ask a young man to come halfway across the country, it's important to visit him at his home and get a feel for his environment before he comes to your home and enters your environment," Lawson said. "It's kind of like a two-way street."

Watson has plenty of respect for Lawson and is a large supporter of his coaching style. Watson said he enjoys Lawson's method of coaching because rather than simply barking instructions, the coach asks for feedback and shows trust in athletes.

"(The relationship) isn't all coach, disciplinary, do it this way," Watson said. "(Lawson) asks for your feedback, then he tells you what you should do. When you're with a program you have to believe in your coach and believe in what he does."

Once Watson arrived in Eugene, the transition from city life in St. Louis to small-town life began. While life in Oregon's third-largest city has its moments, Watson was hit by a case of culture shock.

"I'm so used to being in a city environment," Watson said. "Where I'm at now is more country and open. Not being able to go to (a decent) mall or go to the movies or go get my hair cut ... I think there's only one place in town I can get my hair cut. You actually

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Duck women confident heading into Pepsi Invite

The Ducks host the event after winning the same meet last year

By Alex Tam
Sports Reporter

The Oregon women's track and field team hopes to translate its efforts from last season's

Pepsi Team Invitational to this year's 15th edition Saturday.

Last year, the Ducks defeated three squads after accumulating 204 points against Minnesota, Colorado and Washington. Each of those teams returns to

Hayward Field for the annual meet, which starts at noon.

With recruiting scaled back the past couple of years, several Ducks will compete in multiple events, including senior sprinter Michelle Donovan, who will compete in the 400-meters, 200-meters and other relay events.

Donovan said that being successful at the

meet is important for her team under first-year program director and head coach Martin Smith.

"This is a big meet for us all," Donovan said. "We're all being thrown into a bunch of events because we want to go out there and win. We don't want goose eggs out there in an individual event."

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Ducks set for first scrimmage

The first game-style practice this spring will afford younger players a chance to stand out and impress their peers

By Hank Hager
Sports Editor

At this time last year, Johnny DuRocher was in a whole different world.

He was out on the football field, practicing during the Ducks' spring workouts as a freshman quarterback. The catch: He was supposed to be in high school at the time.

The Graham, Wash. native was an early entry in Oregon's workouts, foregoing the spring semester of his senior year at Bethel High School.

"I just remember I was kind of swimming," DuRocher said Thursday. "I had a lot of stuff going on, I wasn't sure what was going on, just in terms of school and football."

Now a year older and wiser, DuRocher, a redshirt freshman entering the 2004 season, is set to be the team's backup — at least he's got the inside track — as the Ducks play their first scrimmage of spring workouts today.

"I'm looking forward to the scrimmage a lot more," he said. "Get out there, have some fun, play some football. Practice is one thing; practice is fun. But it's

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Oregon looks to bolster its NCAA chances today

Dustin Pewarchuk and Therese Wenslow lead their respective teams into action this weekend

By Brian Smith
Freelance Reporter

The Oregon men's and women's golf teams head into action this weekend with a similar goal: To control their own fate heading into the upcoming Pacific-10 Championships that loom a few weeks away. Each team has its own agenda, and

each needs a solid showing to secure their respective bids.

For the men, the task is a little more arduous, starting with this week's PING/ASU Thunderbird Invitational, held at the par-72, 7,037-yard Karsten Golf Course in Tempe, Ariz. The field includes eight of the top 25 teams in this week's Golfweek rankings

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DUCK FOOTBALL

MEN'S GOLF