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Giving back

Golf co-captain Mike Sica excels off the course as well as on

By Brian Smith
Freelance Reporter

Some would say that an athlete's dream of making it to the big-time is primarily about the bling.

Oregon men's golfer Mike Sica doesn't embody such a mentality; instead working hard on and off the course to better himself, his teammates and the community around him.

The senior and co-captain will be remembered for a number of accomplishments during his time with Oregon, and while his on-course achievements have made an impact, his off-course compassion will continue to make an impact for years to come.

Mike Sica, the golfer

Sica came to Oregon in the 1999-2000 season, a winner of 16 prep tournaments and a three-time West Catholic Athletic League selection for San Francisco's St. Ignatius High School. His resume also includes wins at the 1999 Robert O' Brien Junior and the California Golf Tour Amateur.

"I came up here and I just really liked the atmosphere and the college town," Sica said. "I had some good friends from high school who went here. And when I signed here, (the men's golf team) was ranked No. 10 in the country, and the Pac-10 was the best conference in my opinion, so that was a pretty key factor."

Oregon's coach Steve Nosler also was a key in Sica's decision to come to Oregon.

"I really liked him," Sica said. "He was pretty honest with me, said that I would have to probably redshirt my freshman year, which I did, because we had four or five seniors on the team that year. (He told me) work hard and you'll play, and that's what happened."

What Nosler saw in Sica was a player who had good Division I potential.

"Mike's a good kid, a smart kid," Nosler said. "I knew I would never have trouble with him on the academic side. He had a lot of enthusiasm, he cares a lot and he wanted to play."

On the course, Sica is described jokingly by his teammates as the most deliberate and slowest player on the team, a honor that is not fully understood by Sica.

"Honestly, that's the complete opposite. I think I am one of the fastest players on the team," Sica said. "Matt Ma has to be the slowest player by far. I guess he just does things the Hawaiian way, you know, half as slow as everyone else."



Jeremy Cook Courtesy Oregon Media Services

Mike Sica has finished in the top 30 in his past two events and looks to continue his strong spring play this week. Sica has steadily improved since coming to the Ducks' program

Joking or not, what the players do see in him is a leader by example to a team comprised of almost entirely freshmen and sophomores — the only other upperclassman being co-captain and fellow senior Jimmy White. Sica does not dispense much swing advice or tips on how to play the game. Instead, his experience becomes most valuable because Sica is someone who is always available to provide some tips about a particular course or how to cope with the amount of travel players may have to face.

"He tries to help out the younger guys a lot," Ma said. "It's obvious during the practice rounds, I think. Obviously, he's been there and seen it all before."

Nosler said Sica tries to instill knowledge to the team in his own way.

"How individuals take a leadership situation, that's kind of an individual thing," Nosler said. "I can't fault Mike. Mike is a

team player, Mike really cares about the team, and I think that he has tried to share what experiences he's had with the team, and that's really all I can ask."

Sica sees his leadership role in much the same way as Nosler.

"I just try to answer any of the questions guys have," Sica said. "When we go to a tournament, they'll usually listen to me and ask for advice because I've probably played the course three or four times. And as far as practice goes, (I) just encourage them to get out there and practice, stuff like that. Our schedule is pretty hectic, so there is some adjustment period, and I just try to help them out."

The softer side of Sica

The impact of Sica's leadership is felt far beyond the 18th green.

Most only see the student/athlete side of Turn to **GIVING**, page 9

Defensive bumps plague Oregon

The Ducks have been on a roller coaster of defensive success and disappointment during the past month of the team's play

By Mindi Rice
Senior Sports Reporter

It is perhaps the ultimate Jekyll and Hyde situation for a collegiate softball program, or at least Oregon's version — impeccable defense one game followed by a deluge of errors in a losing effort the next game.

It can happen in a day, a weekend or a week apart, and this season it has happened for the No. 15 Oregon softball team.

Most recently, the Ducks won Friday's

game against Oregon State, 2-0, and didn't commit an error while helping starter Ani Nyhus earn a third one-hitter.

Saturday, Oregon (30-10 overall, 4-2 Pacific-10 Conference) lost its final game of the season to the Beavers, 7-4, behind four errors. Both teams had eight hits and just three of the seven runs given up by Duck pitchers were earned.

"For me, personally, when you make an error you kind of think about it for the rest of the game and you're kind of pressing," shortstop Breanne Sabol said. "I think that's what kind of happens when you notice other people making errors on the dirt or you see bad hops and you start thinking about it."

Sabol, second baseman Erin Goodell and catcher Jenn Poore are the returning infielders from last season's squad. Sabol started all but one of Oregon's 56 games at shortstop last season and has started all 40 games in the same place this season.

Both Sabol and Goodell say the snowball

effect of errors is more a mental hurdle than anything else.

"Especially individually, when you make an error yourself, you kind of lose a bit of confidence and that can affect the way you play the rest of the game," Goodell said. "Once you get down on yourself and one thing happens, you start thinking about that too much and it's going to just keep going like a domino effect."

The split personalities have been restricted to the infield this season. The regular outfielders have drastically fewer errors than the infielders, as is common in softball and baseball.

"(The outfielders) have a good understanding of one another and where people are going to be," outfielder Dani Baird said. "We have a lot of trust knowing that if I'm going to go and lay out for this ball, someone's going to back me up and cover

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LiaBraaten's shift to defense suits Oregon

Nate LiaBraaten switched to defense for Oregon's first scrimmage and impressed on both sides of the ball despite the challenge

By Hank Hager
Sports Editor

Nate LiaBraaten saw the best part of Oregon's 2003 season.

He caught two passes in the team's first four games, all of which ended in victories.

Along the way, he established himself as a valuable tight end during a time when the Ducks were thin at the position. Tim Day, who eventually staked his claim to the starting position and made the most of it later in the season — finishing with 23 receptions — hadn't made his mark yet.

But in Oregon's defeat of Michigan on Sept. 20, 2003, LiaBraaten injured his ankle, prematurely ending his season.

DUCK FOOTBALL

LiaBraaten's back this spring, healthy and ready to challenge for the backup tight-end spot. But he's been making his mark elsewhere early on.

That is, he's the newest member of the Oregon defense.

"It's definitely different, but it's a lot of fun," LiaBraaten said. "Ask me again in a month, at the end of spring, and we'll see what happens."

In the team's first scrimmage Saturday, LiaBraaten played on an injury-depleted defensive line and was credited with a sack for 11 yards. He also caught three passes for 11 yards.

LiaBraaten effectively neutralized himself.

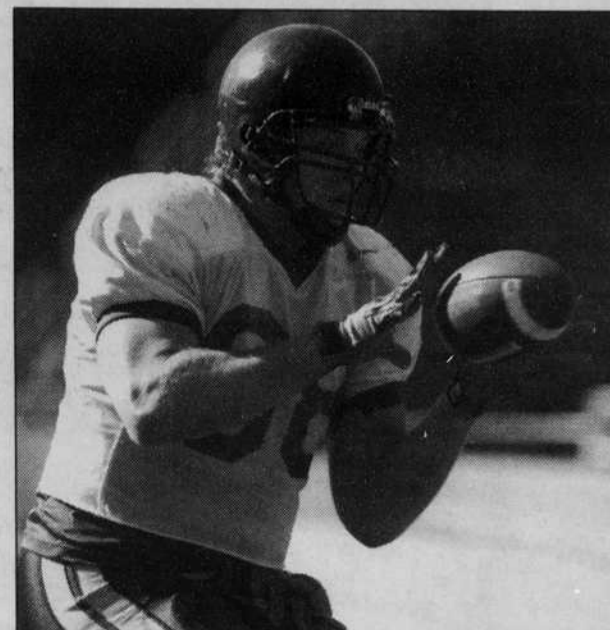
"Probably primarily for the second half of spring, he'll be a defensive player," Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said. "It'll be two-to-one or three-to-one in terms of the reps he'll take on defense versus offense. I think he is filling an immediate need for us, but Nate has looked good at (the defensive) position. Either way, whether it was at tight end or defensive end, he would probably be at the two-deep."

LiaBraaten's presence on defense will be necessary in the spring because of injuries and recovery that have claimed both Devan Long and Haloti Ngata on the defensive line. Senior Robby Valenzuela has also been banged up, which, coupled with the departures of Igor Olshansky and Junior Siavii after the 2003 season, has left a lack of depth on the defensive line, especially among the team's tackles.

"We've got two of our big-time guns — Haloti and Devan — out. We could use some help," linebacker Jerry Matson said. "Why not try him out a little bit?"

"We have so few guys, in regards to talent, that you get so fatigued that you really can't (play) your talent anymore. First of all, it's really nice of him to do it because (he has his) own family, (his) own side of the ball. It's good to see him come over to our side and try hard for us. It's a team effort when you

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Adam Amato Senior Photographer

Nate LiaBraaten normally plays tight end, but spent some time on the defensive line in Oregon's first scrimmage on Saturday.