

"I dunno. I never smoked any Astroturf."

Tug McGraw when asked whether he preferred grass or Astroturf

O'Neil brings a touch of 'Podunk' to Eugene

Senior libero Katie O'Neil has brought both leadership and unity to a volleyball squad that was looking for good-hearted chemistry

BY STEPHEN MILLER
SPORTS REPORTER

A concrete jungle is frightening to some people who have lived among suburban prairies and rolling hills in the past. The bustling city of Eugene encompasses the University of Oregon, but not to the point that it scares Duck's volleyball player Katie O'Neil.

The senior libero describes herself as "a white girl from Podunk" who was compelled to move from the small town of Corbett to fulfill her desire for self-diversification.

O'Neil has always known where she's needed to be in life, especially in a volleyball sense.

"There were about 150 kids in my high school," she said. "It was pretty apparent at that point that if I was going to be serious about volleyball, I needed to go to a bigger school."

"Me and my parents made the decision that I would go to Gresham, and it ended up really benefiting me," she continued. "I accredit that to me being here, because had I not (transferred), there's no way I would have got the maturity and the experience. It's a 4A school, so I could keep excelling."

Transplanting to Gresham High School after her freshman year allowed O'Neil to constantly improve her skills and technique. She accrued more repetitions throughout the school year and was not limited to the off-season with the Nike Northwest Junior Volleyball Club.

Once O'Neil devoted more of her schedule to volleyball, her agenda for other activities shrunk.

"Volleyball was a year-round thing for me," O'Neil said, "but I also played basketball and softball. At Corbett, it was feasible." She explained that Gresham's athletic programs were more intense and time consuming. O'Neil was unable to sustain such a busy schedule, so she decided to solely focus on volleyball, her favorite sport.

Family matters

O'Neil comes from an athletic background. Her parents were active in high school athletics, and her siblings have all played sports.

The small town atmosphere is still evident in O'Neil's current living situation, particularly because she resides under the same roof as her younger brother, Kevin, who is a part-time

student at Oregon.

"I have found that my family is so incredibly supportive of me and everything I'm trying to do," O'Neil said. "It helps me to have him here because it gives me a slice of home, and I am constantly reminded that I am loved and supported."

Her family makes the two-hour trek from Corbett to watch every home match and provide additional support. They also try to attend every road match in the Northwest.

Within Oregon's volleyball program, a relationship has formed between O'Neil and the three defensive specialists on the team. They have created a family within the family that they call Katie Incorporated, she said.

"We have a special little bond, as do probably the middles and the outsides with each of their groups," O'Neil said. "It's fun. We fire each other up and have a good time in practice. We laugh and make sure we're supporting each other. It's empowering to have a support system like this and people who care about you this much."

Coach Carl Ferreira is aware of this unity and encourages it in every way.

"Katie has made our other three DS's better, and they have made Katie better," he said. "They push each other daily. They have seen Katie perform at a high level and provide our point scoring system with opportunities."

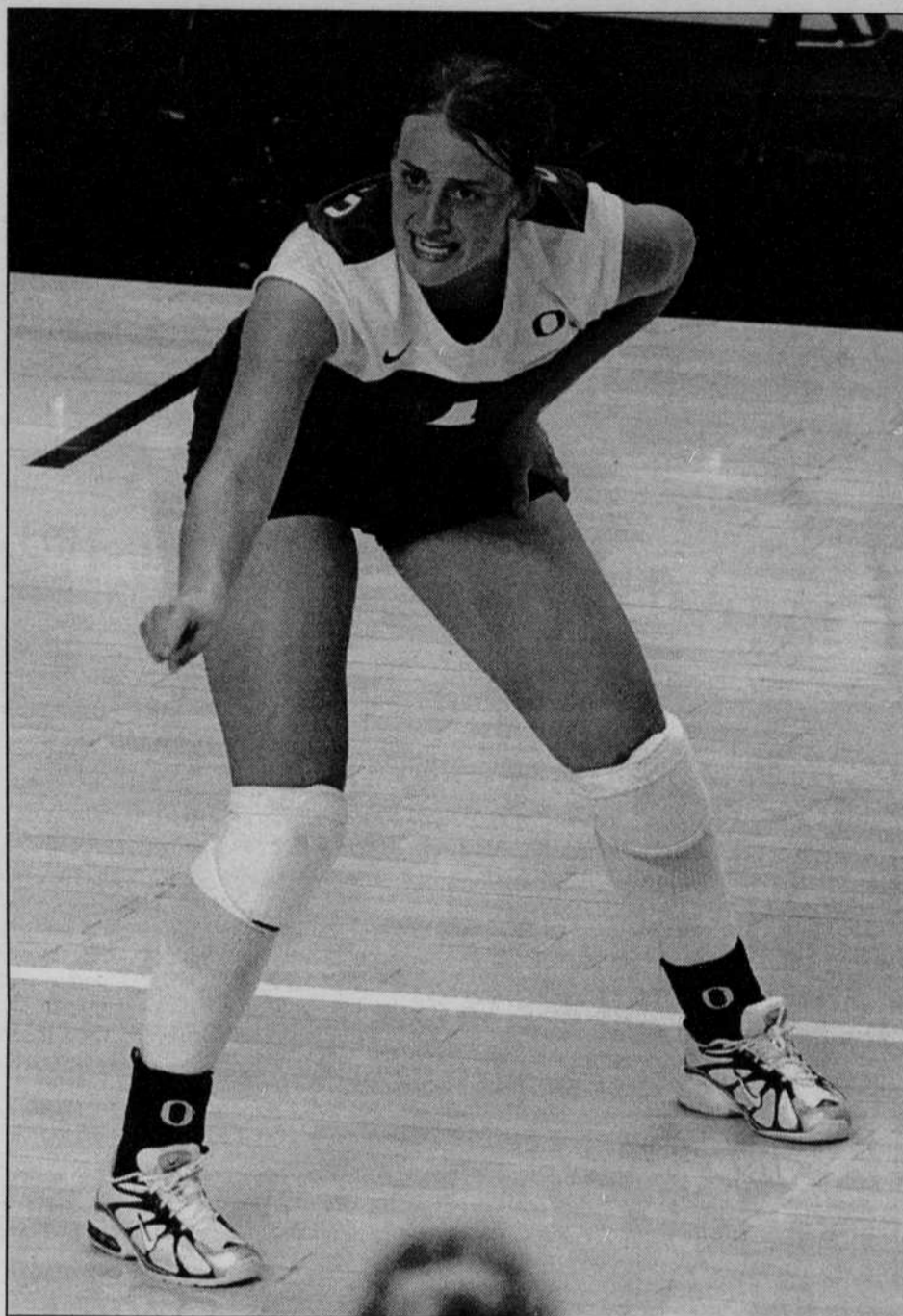
O'Neil helped renovate Oregon's goals and overall approach after her sophomore year. She said there was a lack of team chemistry during her first two years with the program, which made it an unenjoyable experience.

"(We brought) in new people who were still fresh and positive about what was going on," O'Neil said. "We outlined what we wanted to do, we made that commitment and held ourselves accountable."

The result was a family dynamic that changed the atmosphere of the team, she said. Ferreira appreciates O'Neil's contribution as a leader and acknowledges her as the team's unsung hero.

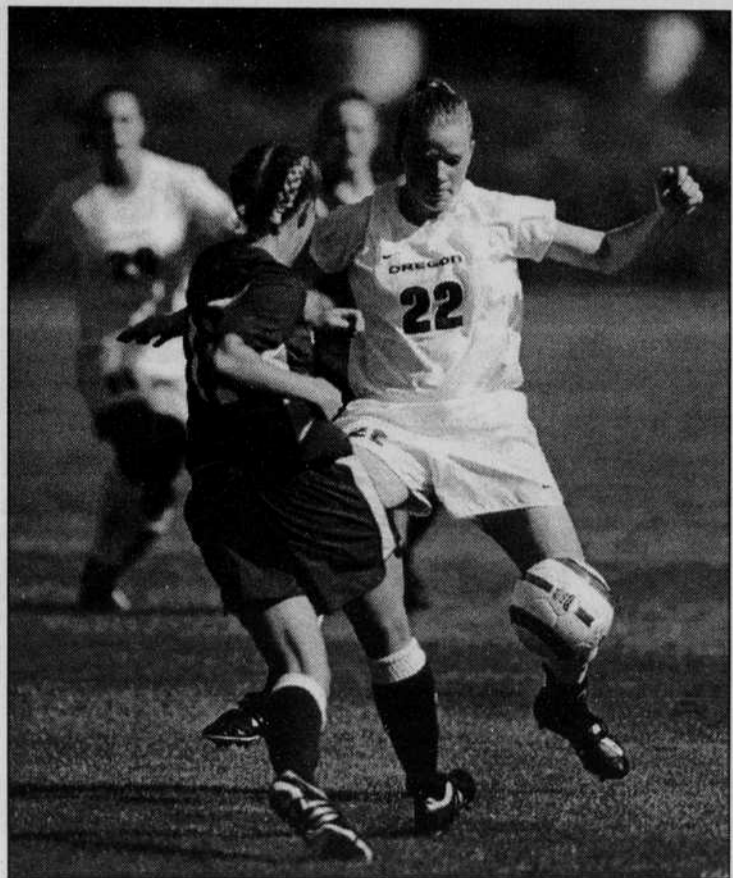
"Katie is one of those behind-the-scenes players," Ferreira said. "She is the backbone of what we do as a program. Katie is very responsible for how our system operates via what she does emotionally for us. She has exceptional instincts for the game, and she is al-

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ERIK R. BISHOFF | PHOTOGRAPHER

Senior libero Katie O'Neil is Oregon's "unsung hero" in coach Carl Ferreira's opinion. In 2004, she has 4.23 digs per game, nearly doubling her 2.25 career average.



ERIK R. BISHOFF | PHOTOGRAPHER

Freshman Dylann Tharp (22) has started in nine of the Ducks' matches this season and looks for a win in Oregon's conference opener today against Southern Cal.

USC win tops Oregon's wish list

Ducks will take on USC and UCLA in Los Angeles this weekend to commence Pac-10 conference play

BY BRIAN SMITH
SPORTS REPORTER

The second part of the season for the Oregon women's soccer team gets under way today as the Ducks take on the Trojans at McAlister Field in Los Angeles.

The 3 p.m. match is the Pacific-10 Conference opener for both teams.

The Ducks are coming off back-to-back victories for the first time this season, with wins over Wyoming (3-1) and Gonzaga (1-0, OT) last weekend at Papé Field. The last time the Ducks won three in a row was when they went 5-0 to open the 2003 season.

The two home victories gave the Ducks a much-needed lift after coming off a month-long road trip where they went 0-5 and managed only two goals.

"We knew we needed to get some wins," senior defender Katie Abrahamson said. "It was a confidence builder going into the Pac-10s. So it was good for us."

Critical to the Ducks' Pac-10 success will be the continued maturation and consistency of the offense.

"I think our patience is getting a little better," Oregon head coach Bill Steffen said. "But again, it's been clearer and clearer that when we're playing with a lot of energy and enthusiasm, we are a very different club."

Oregon (3-6-1 overall, 0-0 Pac-10) vs. USC (6-3-1 overall, 0-0 Pac-10)

The Ducks are in search of their first victory ever against USC, and their first road victory of the year. Oregon is 0-8 in the all-time series against the Trojans, including last year's 3-1 defeat at Papé Field.

Oregon will look to slow down the reigning Pac-10 Freshman of the Year, USC's Rosa Anna Tantillo. The sophomore from San Diego leads the team in goals (8) and points (19). She has already eclipsed her freshman totals in both categories (7 goals, 16 points).

"They are a good team," Steffen said. "They have some very exciting players, and we just have to be up to the task. If we show up ready to play, we'll be fine."

But if we don't have a very high energy level, it's going to be a long afternoon."

Oregon's defense will be busy with Tantillo, but the return of senior defender Christine Mintz will greatly bolster the Duck back four.

"I think we just need to come and play with the focus and energy that we know we can (play with), rather than play for a half and then go to sleep," Mintz said.

Tantillo will most likely hold Mintz's attention the entire match, so the onus will be on some of the other Ducks — senior Kelly Baird, freshman Dylann Tharp and junior Katie Abrahamson, for example — to keep a productive USC front line at bay.

Tharp, whose aggressive and athletic play has translated into nine starts and 614 minutes, is ranked third among the Oregon freshmen in minutes played.

Oregon (3-6-1, 0-0) vs. UCLA (7-3, 0-0)

Eighth-ranked UCLA brings in a solid 4-1 record against teams ranked in the NSCAA/adidas Top-25. The Bruins' only loss came against No. 9 Virginia. Since that loss, UCLA has

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