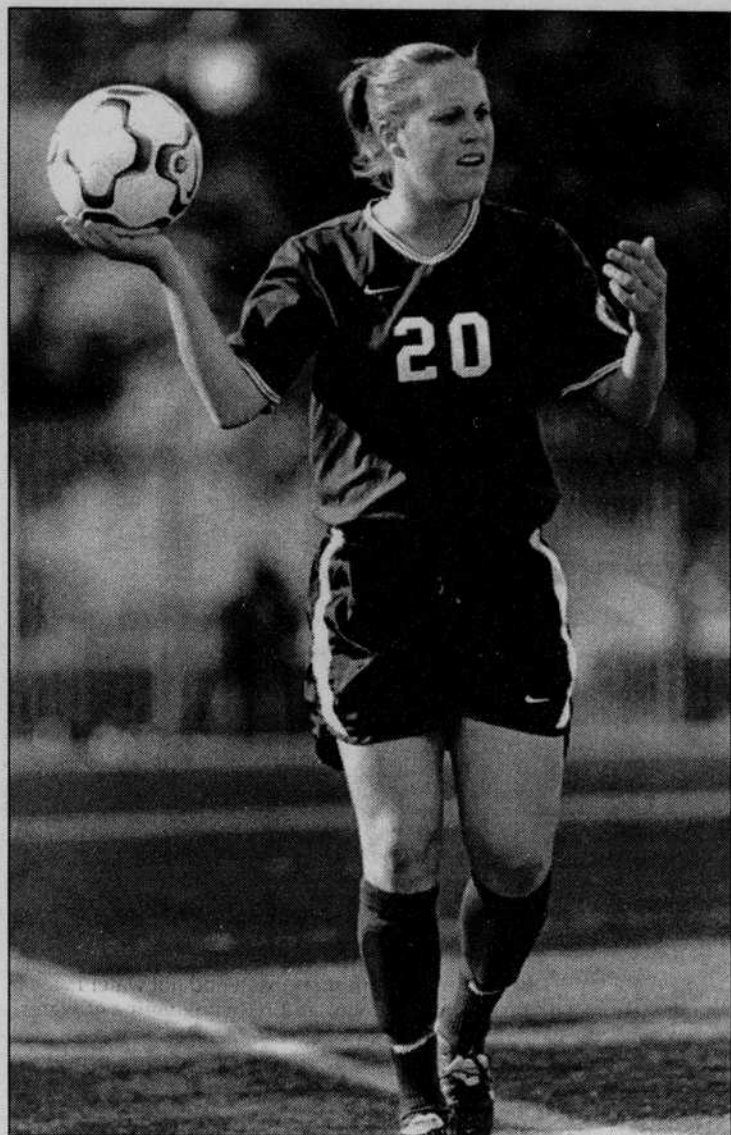


■ Women's soccer

A stable FORCE



GEOFF THURNER | OREGON MEDIA SERVICES

Senior defender Kelly Baird provides Oregon's defense with a collected presence on the field. The Ducks will take on the Beavers tonight at Papé Field in Eugene.

After spending her childhood moving from place to place, senior defender Kelly Baird has found a constant with soccer

BY BRIAN SMITH
SPORTS REPORTER

Dayton, Ohio. Colorado Springs, Colo. Mojave Desert, Calif. Rhode Island. San Pedro, Calif. Alabama. Virginia. San Pedro again.

Culture shocks. East Coast, West Coast.

Ten months here, ten months there.

Welcome to Kelly Baird's childhood.

The Oregon senior defender grew up in the nomadic lifestyle of a military family and found a constant in her life through the game of soccer.

On two separate occasions and several years apart, she found herself living in San Pedro. While she said she would remember the people by face, it was impossible to remember any names.

"It was tough," Baird said. "But at the same time, soccer was the thing that never really changed. The game is the same everywhere."

While soccer was one of the few constants in her life, it was not always a positive experience. Being forced to routinely change teams presented its own unique challenges.

"(Soccer) meant a lot, but it was also a hard thing," Baird said. "Because club teams are getting progressively more (exclusive), where you have this group of 20 girls and they move from one level to the next, trying to break in and get your spot is a lot (to handle) mentally. It makes you question whether

you really want to do it."

But breaking in was always necessary for Baird and she continued to adapt. She learned to just go with the flow.

"I tend to sit back at first and watch," Baird said of feeling out a new team. "But once I'm comfortable, I'm fine and in my own element."

What that element is depends on what she is preparing for. Before a match, Baird assumes the role of the focused, quiet player lost in her own world.

"Before (a game), I like to put my headphones on, listen to a little music and be by myself," Baird said. "(I also) picture things in my head, like hitting a girl hard or a tackle and then I build off of everyone else's energy in the locker room."

Outside soccer, Baird is described as a great friend with, as teammate Christine Mintz describes, a weird sense of humor.

"A freshman told me that 'you're a lot nicer off the field than on the field,'" Baird said. "(Normally) I'm just laughing and having a good time, but once I get on the field, it's a whole different story. So, a lot of things that I'll put up with off the field, I don't on the field."

That mentality has transformed Baird into one of the strongest defenders on the Duck squad. Baird and Mintz routinely draw the assignment of covering some of the best players in the country.

Her career numbers at Oregon — 17 shots, eight shots on goal, two goals and one assist — do little to speak of the contribution she brings to the team.

"Teammates look to her to be calm and composed," Oregon head coach Bill Steffen said. "Kelly is a key leader for us defensively and a calming presence in the back."

Her strength in the back extends to many aspects of her life. Baird has endured a number of injuries in her Duck career. The biggest came when she dislocated an ankle during the first minute of the Ducks' 2004 spring game, an injury that required three screws to be inserted into her ankle.

"Everybody has injuries over the season," Steffen said. "But she has overcome every one. She worked hard on her rehab and that earns her respect from her teammates."

A true teammate in every sense, Baird is quick to return that respect.

"Every game we've won, every game we've lost, they've been there," Baird said. "It sounds almost corny, but at the same time it's who you have at your side day in and day out."

Mintz agrees.

"When you move around a lot, it's always nice to have a team to fall back on," Mintz said. "It's always a stabilizing force."

Soccer has provided not only friends and opportunity for Baird, but has been a showcase for her strength as an individual.

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■ Men's basketball

Ducklings: Oregon's youthful additions add depth

Without a senior on the roster, the Ducks are turning to young players to fill the void left by graduates like Luke Jackson

BY JON ROETMAN
SENIOR SPORTS REPORTER

The Oregon men's basketball program is undergoing a youth movement.

The Ducks' 2004-05 roster features six sophomores, four incoming freshmen, one redshirt freshman and most notably, zero seniors.

Don't be mistaken, however. Oregon's newbies are some of the most talented in the country and should provide for an exciting, up-tempo brand of basketball.

Guards Malik Hairston, Bryce Taylor, Chamberlain Oguchi and forward Maarty Leunen compose one of the top recruiting classes in Oregon basketball history.

Add sophomore point guard Aaron Brooks, junior-college transfer Kenny Love and three seven-footers, and head coach Ernie Kent finds himself with a deep, talented team he said can compete with anyone in the Pacific-10 Conference.

"From a talent basis, we're right there," Kent said. "They're big, they're athletic and their work ethic is already in place."

Plenty of media attention has been paid to the youthful Ducks with the addition of Hairston. The 6-foot-6 Detroit, Mich., phenom was ranked as the top shooting guard prospect in the country by Rivals and No. 7 overall coming out of Renaissance High School. He's considered Oregon's highest-profile signee since Greg Ballard and Ron Lee during the 1970s.

Rivals ranked Taylor as the 50th-best player in the country, while Leunen was ranked 60th

and Oguchi 74th.

"In my 13 years as a head coach, I've never been around a team that has received so much hype over the course of a summer and fall heading into a basketball season," Kent said. "Obviously that's a good place to be because that means we've done something right."

Hairston said the hype surrounding his arrival at Oregon hasn't derailed his focus of being successful.

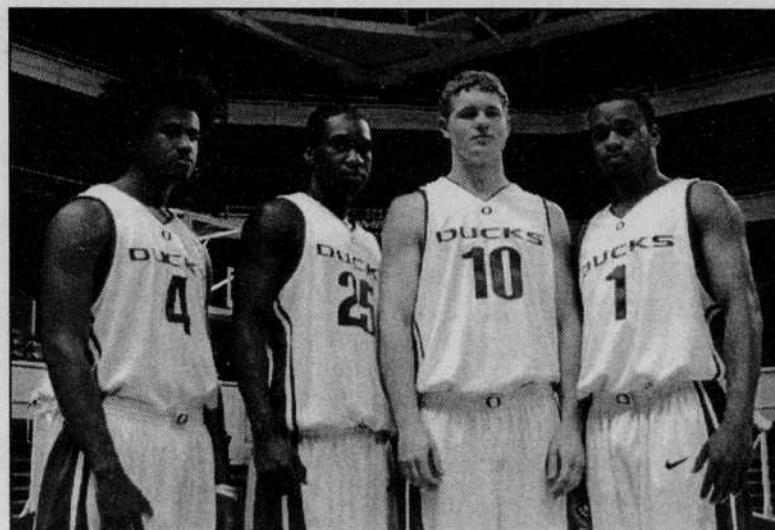
"There's no pressure," Hairston said. "I know a lot of people are raving about it, but honestly, I'm just focused on what I want to get done. I want to become a winning program. This is a good basketball team. We have a lot to learn but we'll be there every step of the way."

Along with a talented group of young wing players, the Ducks will have a more-experienced Brooks running the show. After being selected to the Pac-10 All-Freshman team last season, Brooks spent the summer improving his perimeter shooting to become a more complete offensive weapon.

The Seattle native will also take on a leadership role with the loss of seniors Luke Jackson, James Davis, Andre Joseph and Jay Anderson.

"My role on this team is to be the floor general," Brooks said. "You know (the freshmen) are going to fall sometimes. That's human nature. But we'll be there to pick them up when it happens."

Kenny Love will provide depth at the position after playing his freshman season at Casper College in Wyoming. Kent said the Ducks "won't



Freshmen Bryce Taylor (4), Chamberlain Oguchi (25), Maarty Leunen (10) and Malik Hairston (1) will be looked upon to be major contributors to the 2004-05 Oregon men's basketball team.
NICOLE BARKER
PHOTOGRAPHER

miss a beat" when Love takes over for Brooks.

Oregon will be strong inside as well with four players standing 6-foot-10 or taller. Junior Ian Crosswhite returned from a five-week trip to Australia in the best shape of his career and is ready to improve on his honorable mention all-conference honors from last season. Sophomore Mitch Platt received valuable playing time last year and showed he can hold his own in the paint. Junior Matt Short and redshirt freshman Ray Schafer are also expected to contribute.

Kent said the Ducks' talent and depth will allow them to run teams into the ground with an attacking style of offense.

"We're going to run," Kent said. "We're going to try and make the game as fast and chaotic as we possibly can with this group. We

have a lot of depth, a lot of size, a lot of weapons and a lot of speed and we want people to play to our strength and that's going to their bench."

With so many young players, maintaining a high level of confidence will be critical to Oregon's success. Self-assurance shouldn't be a problem for the time-being, as the youthful Ducks receive plenty of preseason attention.

"It's their time," Crosswhite said. "They need that kind of hype to give them confidence coming into the season. When it comes down to it, it will take at least 10 of us to win these games. They're going to need that confidence when their shots aren't dropping."

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