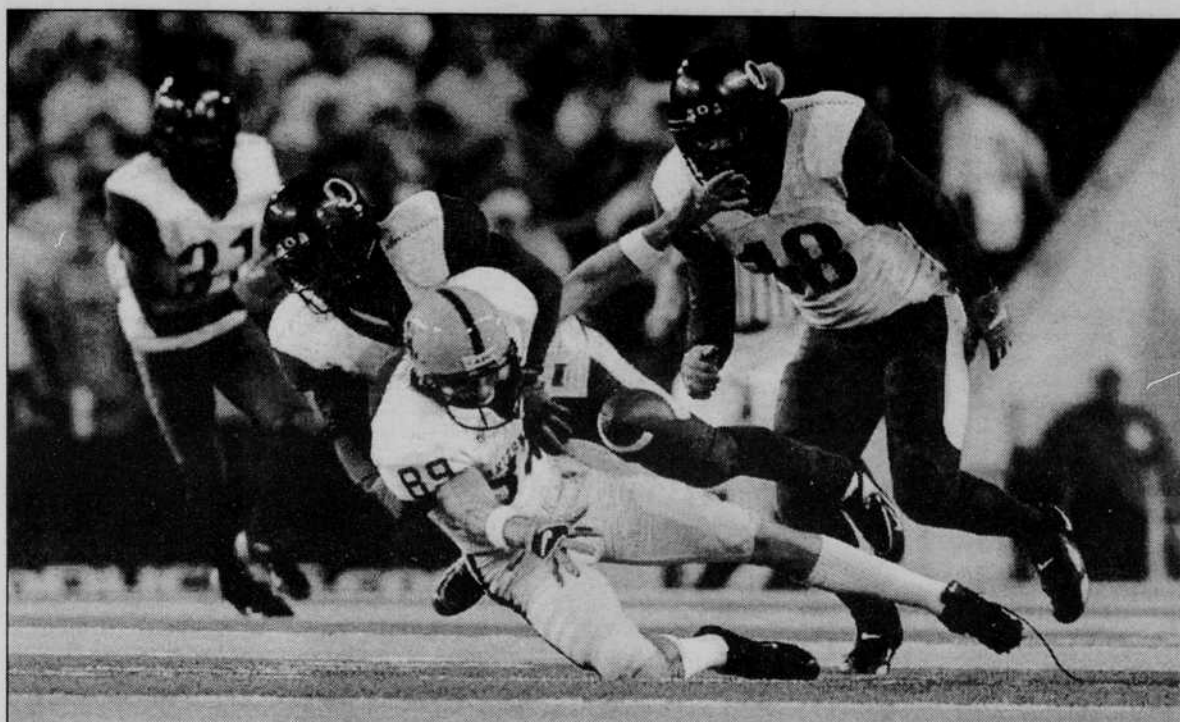




DANIELLE HICKEY | PHOTO EDITOR

Junior Aaron Gipson breaks up a pass against Arizona State. He has returned to start after sitting on the bench much of his sophomore year.

performance **tested**

Aaron Gipson rebounds from criticism of his performance as a freshman

BY CLAYTON JONES
SPORTS EDITOR

Call it a baptism by fire or learning on the fly, but junior Aaron Gipson inherited one of the toughest positions on the football field coming out of high school.

Cornerback.

Though small in stature — 5-foot-9, 179 pounds — he was asked to fill some big shoes with the loss of Rashad Bauman and Steve Smith to the NFL in 2002.

The Fontana, Calif., native started all 11 games his freshman year, but was part of a much maligned secondary that finished the season third-to-last in the nation in pass defense.

"People thought when I first got here I was going to be like Rashad (Bauman)," Gipson said. "I wasn't ready then, but now I feel like I am. I'm ready to fill those shoes so to speak."

Gipson has filled those shoes, recording three interceptions in his last two games and proving to all Duck fans that he was meant to be in Eugene.

"It's the second toughest position coming out of high school to play next to quarterback," Gipson said. "Only being in the system for three weeks and starting presented a lot of challenges."

Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti said Gipson is a better player for having taken his lumps at a young age.

"A lot of the criticism was unfair," Bellotti said. "It was just because of his play, but he was in a tough situation and I'm pleased for Aaron that he has overcome that."

Gipson is now willing to take on the toughest receivers in the conference and do what it takes to make sure they don't catch the ball.

"He's now our best cover corner," Bellotti said. "Same speed, same quickness. He just has a better understanding of the defense."

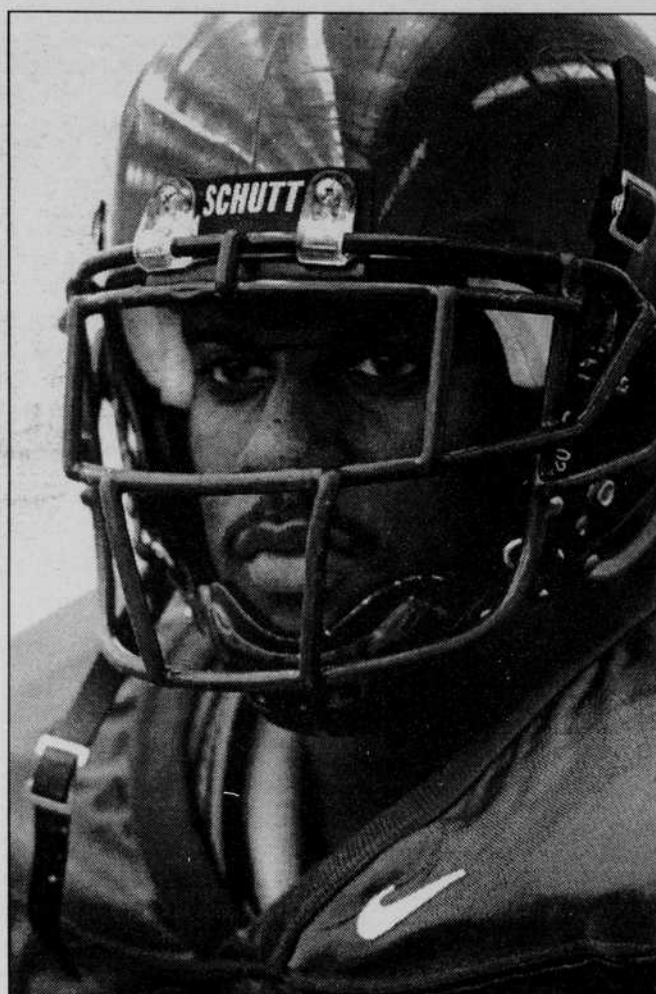
Growing up in Southern California

Gipson was born in Los Angeles, but moved to Fontana when he was seven years old and says the town is never far from his mind.

"I'm so proud of that city," Gipson said. "Every time I go out there on Saturday's it's like I'm wearing them on my sleeves."

That isn't far from the truth as Gipson has the town's name tattooed on his right forearm.

"I got it on my arm so I never forget it," he said. "I get to play for all the people who don't get this



Aaron Gipson credits strength and conditioning coach Jim Radcliffe for helping him move past the baptism by fire his freshman year.

TIM BOBOSKY
PHOTOGRAPHER

opportunity, all my friends and family."

While growing up just east of Los Angeles, he said watching his older brother, Art, doing things the wrong way made him realize he didn't want to follow that path.

"My dad also made sure I didn't follow, so it was easy," Gipson said.

While his brother would go to Fresno State and play football (and be coached by current Oregon offensive coordinator Andy Ludwig), Gipson had a choice to make because he was excelling at both basketball and football.

"I talked to (my high school football coach Dick) Onich, whom I trust and think very highly of, and he told me my best bet would be to stick with football," Gipson said.

But his decision to come to Oregon wasn't immediate.

"When I came up here I didn't like it," Gipson said. "It was raining on my trip and that was just crazy."

After Gipson returned he still thought about staying close to home and going to San Diego State.

"I talked to coach Onich again and he told me this was a good place to go and it's like a family up here," Gipson said. "I've known him most of my life and knew he would point me in the

right direction so here I am."

A bumpy beginning

Coming to college is never easy for anybody. Being an athlete and starting for a football team coming off of a Fiesta Bowl victory and a No. 2 ranking in the polls is daunting. Trying to replace an NFL corner is almost impossible.

This was the task at hand for Gipson.

"The coaches trusted him and thought he could get the job done," junior Justin Phinisee said. "I think he was overwhelmed with everything that was coming his way."

Gipson was part of a defense that gave up a massive amount of yards through the air. The low point of his freshman season came when Arizona State quarterback Andrew Walter threw for a Pac-10 record 536 yards at Autzen Stadium.

After a disappointing season for Gipson, he was relegated to the bench his sophomore year.

"I definitely thought about leaving," Gipson said. "I didn't know where my place was on the team was."

Bellotti saw Gipson's slip in play as being a mental challenge more

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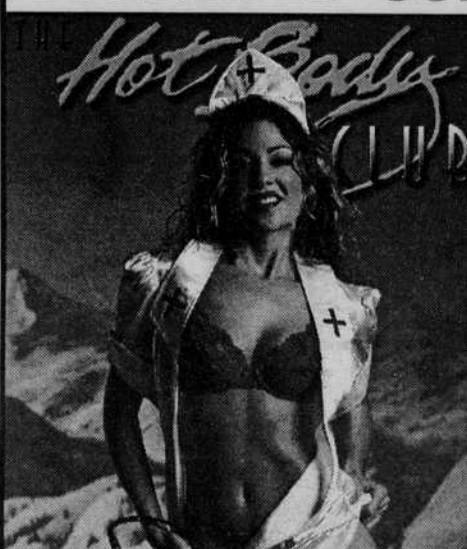
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