

The undersized giant of defensive tackles

Robby Valenzuela poses a large threat to offenses despite 'undersized' frame

BY JON ROETMAN
SENIOR SPORTS REPORTER

Robby Valenzuela is hard to miss. Losing track of the massive Oregon defensive tackle would equate to misplacing a television set between the couch cushions.

Place Valenzuela next to an average college student, and he's a giant.

But place the senior next to a group of elite Division I defensive tackles, and his 6-foot-2, 300-pound frame isn't so massive anymore.

In fact, he's considered undersized.

Despite being one of Oregon's best defensive tackles during the past three seasons, Valenzuela's "diminutive" stature has cost him notoriety. While lining up next to Haloti Ngata (6-5, 345) and former Ducks Igor Olshansky (6-6, 305) and Junior Siavii (6-4, 323), the senior has been overlooked by Oregon fans and opposing offenses.

"I'm not as hyped as the other guys or as publicized as guys in the past," Valenzuela said. "But that works in my favor."

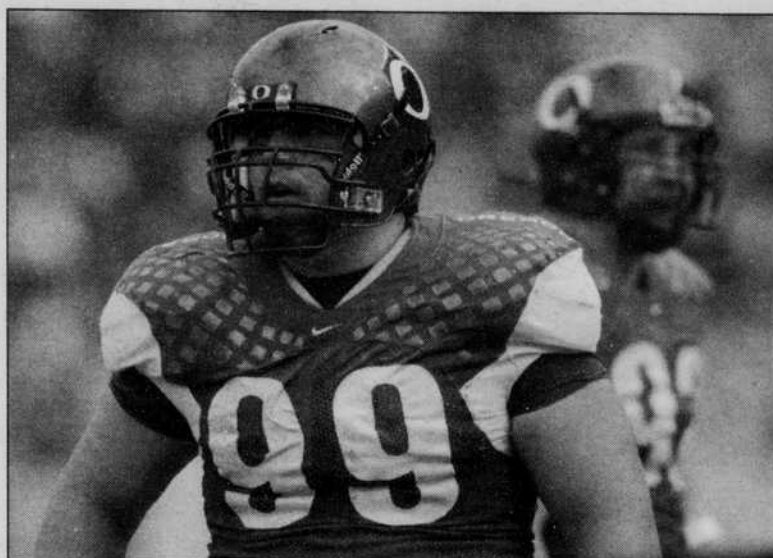
Valenzuela has used the ignorance of opposing offenses to his advantage this season, compiling 24 tackles and 2.5 quarterback sacks.

He tallied a pair of sacks last Saturday against Stanford and knocked quarterback Trent Edwards out of the game in the second quarter with a bruised left shoulder. Valenzuela hit Edwards right after he threw the ball and drove the signal caller into the Stanford Stadium grass.

"He's a different breed of D tackle," Ngata said of Valenzuela. "He's shorter and doesn't really look like Igor or Junior, but he's a guy that gets through the crack if you let him go. He'll put hits on quarterbacks."

While Valenzuela's accomplishments have gone unnoticed by many, his Oregon coaches and teammates have always shown confidence in his abilities.

An All-American honorable mention during his senior year at Grace M. Davis High School, the Modesto, Calif., native saw playing time as a true freshman and helped Oregon limit Colorado to 49 yards rushing during the Ducks' 2002 Fiesta Bowl win.



ERIK R. BISHOFF | PHOTOGRAPHER

Oregon defensive tackle Robby Valenzuela has quietly been one of the Ducks' most consistent players during the past three seasons.

With each down of football played, Valenzuela became more adept at reading blocking schemes and more sound in his technique. The senior is now capable of sniffing out a play before it happens and is a sure tackler once he arrives at the ball carrier.

"Robby has played well for three years," head coach Mike Bellotti said. "He's not the biggest, not the strongest or the fastest, but he's a very good football player."

The senior's teammates are quick to recognize his importance to the Ducks' defensive scheme.

Middle linebacker Jerry Matson is the biggest beneficiary of the solid play of Valenzuela and the rest of the Ducks' defensive line. Matson is often left unblocked as the opposition is forced to bring extra blockers in to deal with the penetration of the Oregon line.

"I've never seen a guy as good as him be so overlooked," Matson said of Valenzuela. "If he was on another team, they'd make the defense around him. He's got kind of a linebacker instinct (and a nose) for the ball."

Valenzuela has also bailed his teammates out of trouble on several occasions.

"He's a step ahead and very instinctive," Matson said. "We call him the screen (pass) sniffer-outer. He's always on the play that fools 90 percent of the defense."

Along with the play of Chris Solomon, Devan Long and Ngata,

Valenzuela's presence on the field has helped make Oregon's defensive line one of the best in the Pacific-10 Conference.

The Ducks rank third in the conference in total defense, allowing 297.3 yards per game. They also rank third in the conference and 24th nationally against the run, surrendering 109.3 yards per contest.

While keeping an opponent's yardage total to a minimum is pleasing, Valenzuela's true passion is sacking the quarterback.

The job of a defensive tackle usually entails disrupting the opponent's blocking scheme, getting penetration into the backfield and putting pressure on the quarterback. A sack is often treated as a bonus for the enormous men who patrol the interior of a defensive line.

So when a defensive tackle finally struggles through a block and gets to unload on the quarterback, Valenzuela said it's one of the most rewarding feelings in football.

"It's kind of like scoring a touchdown," he said. "It's a celebration. It's fun getting to the quarterback. Your main goal is to get sacks and hopefully take the quarterback out and get a chance to win."

When Valenzuela is done hunting field generals on Saturdays, he sets his sights on an elusive four-legged opponent on Sundays. The burly 21-year-

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LAUREN WIMER | SENIOR PHOTOGRAPHER

Robby Valenzuela, seen here wrapping up Arizona State quarterback Andrew Walter, says sacking the quarterback is the ultimate goal of a defensive tackle. The senior from Modesto, Calif., recorded two sacks last week during Oregon's victory against Stanford.

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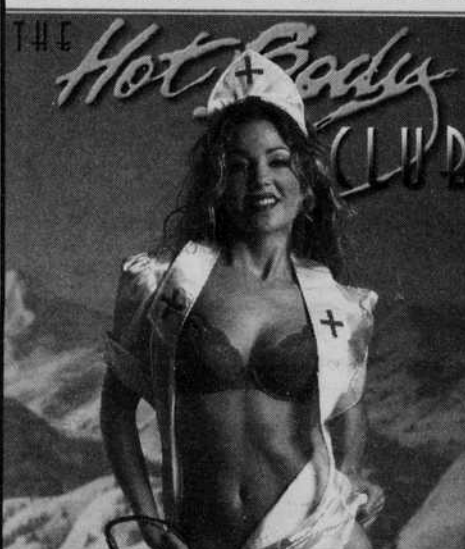
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