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Senior Jerry Matson worked his way from special teams standout to starting middle linebacker by his junior season at Oregon.

From Kodiak to Kamiak to Quack Attack

Senior middle linebacker Jerry Matson's road to success at Oregon was a long and winding one

BY JON ROETMAN
SENIOR SPORTS REPORTER

It's a chilly Tuesday evening at Autzen Stadium and Jerry Matson is hard at work.

With one calf wrapped in tape and his chin strap tightly snapped, Oregon's senior middle linebacker labors through defensive drills, preparing himself for Saturday's showdown against UCLA. Later, with practice nearing an end, Matson joins a group of special teamers to practice kickoff coverage.

While sprinting down the field to cover a mock kickoff isn't where one would expect to see a starting Division I linebacker, Matson wouldn't have it any other way.

In fact, hard work and taking on unwanted jobs are the reasons No. 52 is at Oregon today. The senior didn't even start playing football until the eighth grade, and at that point, a future in the sport seemed laughable.

Born in Kodiak, Alaska, Matson waited to give football a try until the end of junior high when he moved to the state of Washington. He was so clueless about the sport that most of his on-field action came during a specialized time for children who weren't very football savvy.

"If you weren't that athletic or you just didn't get the game, you played

during the fifth quarter," Matson said. "I played in the fifth quarter a lot because I didn't know what was going on. I'm from Alaska and we didn't have football there."

After moving back to Alaska for less than a year, Matson returned to Edmonds, Wash., to attend Kamiak High School. Having enjoyed his brief time on the field, Matson decided to dedicate himself to becoming a better football player.

Ample hours spent in the weight room and endless work on technique turned Matson from a clueless newcomer into an all-state outside linebacker. During his senior year with the Knights, he led the state with 135 tackles. Matson was determined to succeed at the collegiate level, having transformed himself into a sturdy, 185-pounder, who could bench press 250 pounds and squat 430.

The joy of his stellar senior season quickly turned to disappointment, however, when Matson received little attention from Division I schools. Washington, Washington State, Idaho and other northwest universities didn't think enough of Matson's abilities to offer him a scholarship.

While Oregon showed interest in the high-energy defender, it too refused to offer Matson an immediate scholarship. What Duck coaches did

offer Matson was encouragement and an opportunity to walk on and prove himself worthy of one.

"When he showed up here, he just wanted an opportunity," Oregon linebackers coach Don Pellum said. "I told him, 'You have to earn anything that you get.' He said, 'All I want is a chance.'"

After Matson settled on Oregon, however, it didn't take long for him to second-guess his decision. The athletic dominance he experienced in high school was no longer evident. His competition was bigger, faster and stronger than before, and Matson's chance of playing seemed hopeless. Pellum said Matson even considered quitting for a couple days before righting the ship.

After a few days of soul searching, Matson convinced himself that Oregon was his rightful place. He was then informed by head coach Mike Bellotti that he needed to move his way up to second on the linebacking depth chart and start on at least two special teams in order to earn a scholarship. Matson got to work immediately, using his redshirt year during the 2000 season to improve his physical skills.

If the re-energized Matson needed any added motivation, it came from spending time around David Moretti, who starred at middle linebacker for the Ducks from 2000-02.

"In high school, there was no one that loved football as much or would lift weights as much as me," Matson

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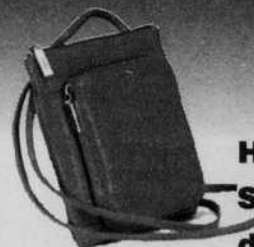
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