



ERIK R. BISHOFF | PHOTOGRAPHER

Jerry Matson is highly respected by his coaches and teammates for the hard work he put in to earn a scholarship at Oregon.

Matson: Years of hard work finally pay off

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said. "When I got here, David Moretti was the same kind of guy. I would be in the weight room and I'd hear the clinking of weights late in the night and I would be like, 'Who is still here?' It was frustrating having someone stay later than me. I wasn't used to it. Having someone so similar and so dedicated, it really spurred me on to keep lifting."

With Moretti entrenched in the middle, and the likes of Kevin Mitchell, Wesley Mallard and David Martin roaming the outside, Matson focused on special teams during his redshirt freshman and sophomore seasons. His constant hustle garnered respect from teammates and coaches and earned him additional reps with the linebackers.

While Bellotti told No. 52 to focus on his weak-side linebacker position, Matson chose to study the middle and strong-side linebacker positions as well, giving him a better chance at playing time. The decision paid off when Matson was able to compete for the starting middle linebacker position after the completion of his red-shirt sophomore season.

After three years of hard work, the walk on's heart and determination earned him more than just respect and a chance to compete for playing time. They earned him a scholarship.

"All along, even before he earned a scholarship, he was an acknowledged leader of this team," Bellotti said. "People would ask during our spring meetings, 'Who are the leaders of this team? Who are the people you respect and who would you go into a foxhole with?' (Matson's) name kept coming up because he worked very hard and people knew what he was about."

Matson was determined to fill the opening at middle linebacker entering his junior season, but lacked the polish necessary to start in the Pacific-10 Conference. Pellum continued to work with his pupil, however, knowing Matson had the motor, he just needed the vision.

"Jerry's always played with a great passion," Pellum said.

"He's always run around really fast. A lot of the time, he'd go the wrong way or do the wrong thing, but you saw him run around and you saw a burst and you saw a flash and you said, 'You know what? If we get him straightened out, with his eyes in the right spot, heading in the right direction, he might be pretty good.'"

Pellum's observation proved correct as Matson won the starting job entering the 2003 season. He continuously confirmed himself worthy of the task, finishing the season with 81 tackles, including 16 for a loss. He also intercepted a pass and returned it 22 yards for a touchdown in a victory against UCLA.

"In the fourth quarter, he's going just as fast as he was in the first quarter," outside linebacker Ramone Reed said. "I know if I was a lineman, I'd probably hate going against Jerry. Even if somebody gets a good hit on him, he just bounces back up like nothing ever happened. He's awesome. He's an inspiration to me. When I'm down or I'm tired, I look over at Jerry and I'm like, 'I can't let him down because he won't let me down.'"

Despite his impressive statistics, what Matson's coaches and teammates admired most was his ability to stay hungry despite having met his goal of achieving a starting position. He continued to work hard in practice and was always one of the last players to leave the weight room.

Now a senior, Matson has built himself up to a 225-pound punishing tackler, who benches 325 pounds and squats 520. He's a sure tackler and continues to contribute on special teams.

"Every year, I've been top-11 on special teams," Matson said. "I kind of take pride in it and I like to show guys that you're not too good for special teams as you get older."

Matson's teammates continue to be impressed by his hustle.

"Jerry's one of those guys that just will not be denied," Reed said. "He's one of those guys who thrives off people telling him he's too small or he's not good enough."

"He's the hardest working player on this team."

Matson's hard work is evident off the field as well. He graduated from the University in the spring of 2004 with a degree in business administration and is scheduled to receive his MBA this summer.

Matson realizes when his football days are over, it will be another uphill climb toward achieving his goal of being a successful business man.

"When it's time to get a real job, I'll be the bottom man on the pole," Matson said. "But I've been doing this since my freshman year of high school. I put a little work in and I get something out of it and keep on doing it."

With practice having ended on a chilly Tuesday evening, Matson takes a rare break, sits on the back of a motorized cart outside of the Casanova Center and starts discussing his final weeks as a football player at Oregon.

Only when the hardest working man on the team is at rest does he realize the end is near.

"I'm getting philosophical," Matson said. "I have two games left to be mean and hit people and do the things you'll never get to do for the rest of your life. You can't run and cut someone down or lay someone out on the street. You have to take advantage of your time at practice. Sometimes it's painstaking to go an extra day, but it's so close to the end that I just have to take it in and enjoy it."

Whether Oregon goes to a bowl game is yet to be determined. Whether the Ducks have two or three games left won't change the fact that Matson's legacy will stay with the team long after he's moved on with his life.

"He's highly regarded on the team because everyone knows his story," Pellum said. "The fact that he's a walk-on and that he's earned it and that he's been starting for two years, but he continues to work with the same ethic that got him here. Sometimes guys, once they achieve that goal, they don't put out the same effort."

"Jerry is one of those self-made guys."

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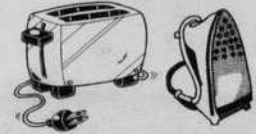
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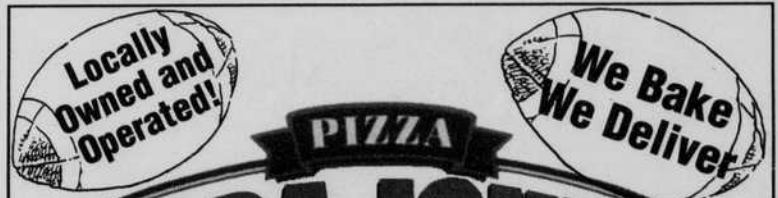
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