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Lacrosse: Fleming, Poponyak endure injury-stricken season

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letting Fleming and Poponyak do most of the talking. But on the field, Bradley is the Ducks' most potent offensive threat. She has scored in all three of Oregon's games and began to see double teams on Sunday, thereby opening up shooting lanes for other players.

Fleming, a midfielder, has seen most of her action this season as a spark plug off the bench. After breaking her nose last week in practice, the former soccer star immediately promised she would be ready for the UC Davis game. Playing with a small nose splint that restricted her breathing, Fleming almost single-handedly willed the Ducks back into contention against the Aggies with two second-half goals. "This break-out game was awesome for her," Larsen said. "She was really fired up."

While all three girls have faced the typical freshman-athlete struggles of finding confidence and learning new roles on a new team, Poponyak, the verbal leader of the group, has faced an additional hurdle after injuring her knee.

The left-handed goalkeeper had surgery Nov. 5 on her right knee after tearing her anterior cruciate ligament in fall workouts. Fortunately, Poponyak had her girls at her side.

"It was really nice having them," she said.

Fleming and Bradley drove their crutch-bound pal wherever she needed to go and helped her around her dorm. Poponyak has now thrown herself into physical therapy and looks forward to being cleared May 1.

"She's done a wonderful job of doing her treatment, keeping herself in shape, getting herself stronger and keeping her quickness up," Larsen said.

Interestingly, all three Ducks struggled with their confidence after arriving in Eugene.

"We really thought we'd be on the bench, and none of us would play," Poponyak said.

Incredulous as it now sounds, they were also worried about making the travel squad.

"We were worried we could never compete with (the east coast girls)," Bradley said.

"We really had to show them that they were actually qualified to be on the team and quite good," Larsen said. "Getting that confidence and having them believe was one of the biggest things."

With their best lacrosse still ahead of them, the "Cali girls" have overcome their limited experience to become key players in the Ducks' inaugural season.

"That's the biggest upside is that they have so much to learn ... about the game," Larsen said. "They have some of the things you can't teach."



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