

Bob Welch

Sparse crowds

'What do we do for an encore?'



Sometimes the realities of sport are painful.

They're especially painful to guys like Ron Finley and Bill Ballester, guys who spend five years building their teams into national powers and walk into Mac Court to see less than 1,000 fans.

Five years ago, then-athletic director Norv Ritchey made a commitment to a total quality athletic program at Oregon. He hired Finley to get the floundering wrestling program in gear and brought in Ballester from Illinois to do the same with gymnastics.

Finley's wrestlers won the school's first Pac-8 title last year; Ballester's gymnastics were ranked sixth in the nation.

Still, the crowds haven't come. The wrestling attendance, partly because of dull opponents, has ranged from 200 to 1,200. Gymnastics has drawn only a little more than 1,000 fans in their two meets.

"I remember when we first came here, Fin' was really concerned about the crowd situation," said Ballester. "But I said 'Hey, when we start winning, when we make a name, the fans will come.' Now both teams have made a name but where are the fans?"

In a search for reasons, Ballester ponders the lack of publicity, lack of promotion and abundance of Oregon basketball and the new student ticket plan. In the end, he just shakes his head.

"We beat two of the country's top teams and come home to meet Louisiana State, second in the nation last year, and less than 500 fans show up. I can't figure it out."

Nor can Finley.

Both the gymnastics and wrestling teams drew solid crowds last year and the year before. "Last year," said Finley, "we were averaging 1,500 to 2,000 a meet."

Lest you think Finley and Ballester are just thirsty for glory, realize that the effect of the crowd transcends the ego.

"It's killing our recruiting," said Finley. "A kid narrows his choice down to Oregon and Oregon State and sees 2,500 fans in Corvallis and less than a 1,000 here—you don't have to be a genius to decide where he's going to school."

It's also killing both teams' chance to lure national powers to McArthur Court. "Louisiana State comes all the way out here and finds a crowd of 500," said Ballester. "Hell, that's embarrassing; we had bigger crowds than that in high school back in the Midwest. Furthermore, we guaranteed LSU \$1,000 to come and barely made that at the meet. There's no way we came up with a thousand against Brigham Young."

If the lack of fans is hurting recruiting and scheduling, then it's also taking its toll on the athletes.

"People don't realize how much a good, loud crowd means to the team," said Finley. "How can you give up in a match when 5,000 people are yelling for you to keep going, to keep struggling?"

Both coaches emphasize that they've got a salable product.

"People come in and rave to me on Mondays about the great gymnastics they saw on 'Wide World of Sports,'" said Ballester. "Well, they aren't seeing anything there that they couldn't see at Mac Court."

"There aren't 10 men in the world who are better on the sidehorse than Curt Rodgers or Tom Truedson. There aren't 10 any better than Bob Rikli in the floor exercise and Scott McEldowney on the rings. I know it sounds strange—and some will say I'm just boasting—but we've got some of the best gymnasts in the world competing on this campus."

As evidence, Ballester need only remember last year's meet with the Japanese All-Stars. "They were the best in the world yet we won two or three events against them," said Ballester.

The new \$4 minor sports passes have no doubt scared off a lot of students; they've sold poorly. But if the product is really enticing, anyone will shell out four bucks.

An Iowa-Iowa State wrestling match recently drew 14,000 fans. And four years ago, nobody thought Oregon basketball was much, but it was promoted hard and extremely well and look at it now—you've got constant sellouts.

You've also got wild, frenzied fans who like action, excitement, Ronnie Lee and an occasional frisbie, fans who might not find such things at a wrestling or gymnastics meet.

Finley and Ballester disagree. "I think gymnastics can be an emotional sport," Ballester said. "Back in Illinois we had cheerleaders, bands, yelling—all that stuff. Gymnastics doesn't have to be sterile. I think gymnastics fans can go into frenzies just like they do over the Kamikaze Kids. I encourage it, in fact."

Said Finley: "Anyone who's ever seen a wrestling match, knows it can be exciting. We're defending Pac-8 champs. We've got big names—guys like (Greg) Gibson and (Bob) Bragg and (Kevin) Kramer."

Saturday the wrestlers host ninth-ranked Minnesota at 2 p.m. Eighth-ranked Oregon State visits Tuesday and 20th-ranked Washington comes to Mac Court next Friday.

Ballester's gymnasts host Portland State Monday night at 8 but the big meets won't come until after when the Ducks host Arizona State, the Pacific Northwest Championships and the Pac-8 Championships.

"If we can't get the support of the community, then it's not worth having gymnastics here," Ballester said. "I think we've proved ourselves, proved that we're worth watching. What do we do for an encore?"

Aqua Ducks host SOSOC tonight



Photo by Jackie Wilson

Nobody's ever accused Oregon swimmer Rich Kent of being a conformist. Two years ago he shaved his head to cut down his time. Now, it's a goggle-swim cap combination. Kent has picked up the nickname "Masked Marvel" for the headpiece and a few jeers, but it seems to be working — he's undefeated so far this season.

Tonight's dual swimming meet against Southern Oregon State College may be little more than a workout for the Aquaducks, but Coach Don Van Rossen sees it as more of a challenge.

"We have to enter every meet with the idea of winning — I have to test the team's competitive qualities," contends the head Duck.

The men's team may be shooting more for time than points, as they attempt to repeat a 673-177 victory over the Red Raiders in the four-way Oregon Intercollegiate Invitational two weeks ago.

The most interesting feature at Leighton Pool at tonight's meet may be the attempt of Rich Kent to maintain his unbeaten streak.

Kent has become known throughout the Northwest for his unique bathing cap-goggle combination, earning him the comic book nickname of "Masked Marvel."

If the meet with SOSOC is a battle, Friday and Saturday's Oregon AAU Championships is the war.

The coed encounter will feature the best swimmers at all levels in the state, including some who were good enough to compete at the national tournament last year.

Events in the Southern Oregon contest start at 4 p.m. The AAU's getting under way at 1 p.m. Friday with later sessions at 7 p.m. Saturday, the meet will begin at 8 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Louisville A.D. brings list to six; Van Brocklin to visit Monday

David Hart, athletic director at Louisville University since 1973, will arrive in Eugene today to be interviewed for the vacant University athletic director post, the Emerald has learned.

Hart increases the list of candidates to six, joining former Iowa Athletic Director Forest Evashevski; North Carolina Assistant Athletic Director Bill Cobey; Indiana Assistant Athletic Director Bob Hicks; former pro football coach Norm Van Brocklin and Portland businessman Bob Brodhead.

Van Brocklin, it was learned, will be in Eugene Monday and Tuesday to meet with University officials and influential members of the community.

Hart held a previous job as athletic director at Robert Morris College in Pittsburgh. Prior to that, Hart was a football coach for 15 years. He was head coach at the University of Pittsburgh from 1966-69 and was defensive backfield coach at Navy in 1965 and Kentucky in 1963.

He also coached football for 10 years in two Pennsylvania high schools.

He earned a Bachelor of Science Degree from St. Vincent College in 1951 and a Masters in Education and Administration from Pittsburgh.



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118—Hart, O. p. Contreras, F. 4:19.
126—Travis, O. drew, Hasson, F. 7-7. 134—Shoji,
O. p. Bell, F. 3:14. 142—Dixon, O. p. Christianson,
F. 7:06. 150—Dewitt, O. d. Moz, F. 6-4.
158—Clark, F. d. Bailey, O. 5-1. 167—Besaw, O. p.
Porter, F. 5:32. 177—Strobel, O. p. Parker, F. 4:57.
190—Shanley, O. d. Bendrosian, 17-4.
Heavyweight—Gibson, O. p. Nishimori, F. 1:13.
Team—Oregon 46, Fresno State 5.