

Bob Welch

Track

It's back and better than ever



Somewhere between Oregon's impressive sweep of the 1500 meters and freshman Don Clary's magnificent triumph in the 5,000 Saturday, some 4,000 fans realized there's something special about this year's track team.

There's an added dimension to the team, a certain style of competitiveness and team unity that's been lacking in recent years.

"The thing I like about this team is that there's no single star," said athletic director John Caine after tasting Oregon track for the first time. "There's just a whole lot of great competitors. They're obviously together as a unit."

Coming from San Jose, Caine isn't exactly unfamiliar with track. "There's a lot of enthusiasm down there," he said, "But it's nothing like up here."

To be sure, part of Oregon's magnetic lure exists simply because the Ducks are good. But what really makes the Ducks so intriguing is that they weren't supposed to be good.

This was supposed to be an off year; the post-Geis period. An 18-year-old freshman from Alaska wasn't supposed to be out-kicking John Ngeno, the 1975 NCAA three and six-mile champ, in the 5,000. And a guy like Dacre Bowen, an unknown walk-on the last two years, wasn't supposed to be undefeated after three races with a quarter-mile time that ranks him fourth on the Oregon all-time list.

Such pleasant surprises have given Oregon a sense of mystery.

In years past, the Ducks were too predictable. Paul Geis would breeze for 11 laps and then sprint to his weekly win in the three-mile. Nobody in green and yellow would win a quarter-mile. And you'd leave the meets with an empty feeling, as if you'd seen an instant replay.

Things are different this year. And so is the team attitude. Some may scoff at the idea of team unity in a so-called "individual" sport like track, but the Ducks are living proof that it helps.

Last season a couple of bad apples spoiled the whole bunch. There were times when Oregon runners cared more about beating each other than they did the competition. And scattered internal conflicts diluted the team's cohesiveness.

Saturday, you may have noticed Bob Smith, a six-miler who doesn't even get to run dual meets, sprinting across the infield to encourage Matt Centrowitz as he fought down the stretch to win the 1500. Or a dozen other instances of teammates inspiring teammates.

To be sure, most fans did notice it. Cold, rainy days aren't normally conducive to fanatic cheering, but there was plenty of it going on Saturday. When Clary's victory lap took him in front of the new west stands, the unison foot-stomping continued for about five solid minutes.

Nothing against Oregon basketball, but it was refreshing to see people getting excited about something else for a change. Just like Kamikaze fans appreciate a good dive as much as a good shot, the crowd Saturday applauded more than winners.

The fans roared when Denzil Davis outleaned WSU's Mike Cornell to place second in the 400; when John Woodman clocked a solid 14.1 in nearly upsetting Kip Ngeno in the high hurdles and even when the Cougar's Gary Minor jogged back after thinking he'd won the 200.

Consider the outstanding marks they had to shout about: Rich Perkins' 199-1 in the hammer; Jeff Carter's 251-10 in the javelin; Voorhees' 62-2 1/4 in the shot and 194-2 in the discus; Gary Barger's 8:48.8 in the steeplechase; Tinker Hatfield's 16-7 1/2 in the pole vault; the Oregon sweep in the 1500, with Centrowitz clocking 3:39.8 (equivalent of a 3:57 mile), Peter Spir 3:41.4 (3:58) and Randall Markey 3:41.7 (3:58); Dacre Bowen's 46.9 in the 400 meters; Dave Hagmeier's 52.2 in the intermediate hurdles and Terry Williams' 13:51.4 in the 5,000.

It was all topped off, of course, by Clary's shocking upset in the 5,000.

His 13:45.2 clocking is amazing for a number of reasons. First, because his previous best was 14:05.8. Second, because he was so far out of the race with a half-mile to go you actually felt sorry for him. And third, because he passed the three-mile mark in 13:21, a time which is:

- More than 14 seconds better than Paul Geis' time that won the Pac-8 meet last year.
- A second better than the late Steve Prefontaine's time that won the NCAA title when he was a freshman.
- The fourth best three-mile in Oregon history.

At the risk of looking too far ahead, you've got to wonder what a guy like Clary might run on a sunny day as a senior. Or what the Ducks might do at the Pac-8 meet May 14-15 at Berkeley.

For now, suffice it to say that Oregon track, threatened in recent years by mediocrity and a shifting limelight to national and international meets, is back.

And better than ever.



Photo by John Johns

Gary Barger's 8:48.8 win in the steeplechase was one of many outstanding efforts Saturday

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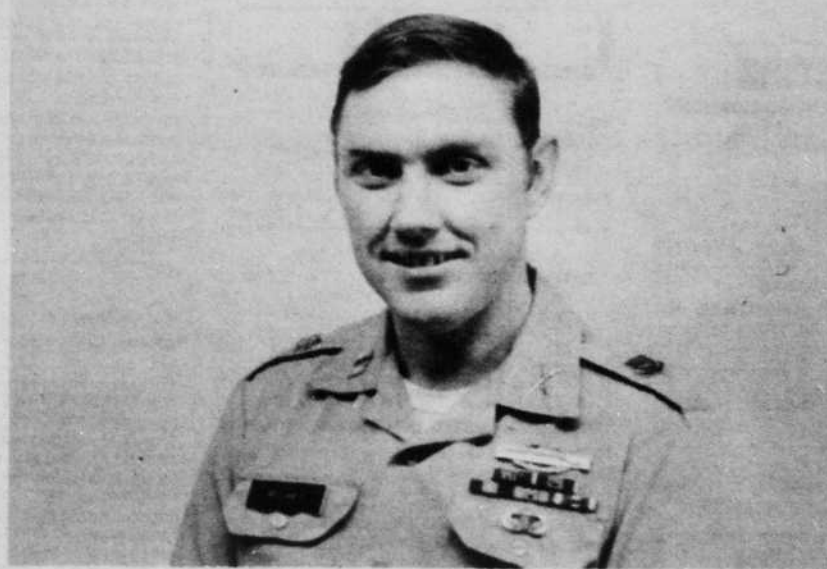
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Monday's rain douses Ducks

Oregon's scheduled baseball game with Willamette Monday was cancelled because of — would ya believe it? — rain. The wet stuff also scrubbed the women's softball team's game against Oregon State. The latter will be made up Thursday, weather, of course, permitting.

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