

Can someone finally dethrone the Bruins?

UCLA just keeps on winning — and it just might do it again

By DAN LINDAHL
Emerald Sports Editor

The obituary was written, the coffin ready and the grave dug. All that remained was for UCLA to quietly lie down and expire, leaving the Pacific-8 basketball title to someone other than the Bruins for the first time since the Civil War.

Coach Gary Cunningham's team gave strong indications that it wasn't going to go down without a fight, however, as the Bruins swept the Washington schools in the first weekend of league play. The feeling still remains, though, that the 1978 Pacific-8 season could bring about the death of UCLA.

"UCLA is down," said Washington State Coach George Raveling, whose club was clobbered 70-55 by the Bruins Sunday. "I'll be very surprised if they win the conference."

The list of reasons for UCLA's demise is long and somewhat convincing. The Bruins lost the best player in college basketball in Marques Johnson and their starting center, Brent Vroman. The last few years have seen them lose more and more games, and in 1977, they were actually locked up in a race for the Pacific-8 title before getting stunned by Idaho State in the Western regionals.

A scanning of the Bruin roster makes them seem mortal. And conference coaches believe it more than ever.

"It's a little bit of both UCLA coming back to the rest of the league and everyone else improving," said Oregon Coach Dick Harter, who knows all about beating UCLA.

"I can't really say that UCLA will win the Pac-8 this year," admitted Stanford Coach Dick DiBiasi. "But most everyone agrees that they have to be considered the favorite because of the past."

DiBiasi is correct in that assessment. While league coaches strongly believe that the Bruins are ripe to be knocked off, no one short of Raveling is willing to predict it.

UCLA's past is hard to argue with, though. A string of league titles that runs back to creation and enough national championship banners to wall paper a mansion belong to the Bruins. It's hard to go against that kind of heritage.

But if the Bruins' time has come, it will be a matter of one team rising up and playing well itself, not just a UCLA collapse.

"The main problem of teams like the Northwest schools is that we give UCLA a good fight but then lose to someone we're supposed to beat," said Oregon State Coach Ralph Miller. "Then at the end of the season UCLA is one game ahead of everybody else." But also there is the problem of simply beating the Bruins themselves.

Harter, whose clubs have beaten UCLA three consecutive times but still don't own a Pacific-8 championship, has learned the trick of stopping the Bruins. But no one else in the league has joined the party.

"UCLA can be beaten. We beat UCLA. Someone else needs to

too," said Harter.

OSU's Miller agrees with the simple, but sticky problem.

"UCLA can always be beaten, but the question is can they be beaten enough," said Miller. "The rest of the conference has failed at that in the last four or five years."

One factor lending to UCLA's appearance of vulnerability is the absence of a dominating center from its ranks. No longer is there a Lew Alcindor or Bill Walton present to patrol the key. However, the rest of the league is without a center of explosive scoring potential, as well, which puts the Bruins about even.

OSU's Miller tends to play down the lack of great centers, though.

"You have to understand what people think when they mean weak centers. Sure, we don't have a guy the caliber of a Walton, Jabber or even James Edward from Washington," said Miller. "All of the postmen are young. Very young. But the emphasis can't be only on scoring. I always thought Bill Russell was a helluva center and he couldn't put the ball in the hoop."

Of the returning centers, California's Tom Schneiderjohn has appeared to be the top big man and that is partially why the Bears were almost universally seen as a sneak threat to UCLA's reign.

"Cal has good balance and depth, and one of the better front lines in the league with Schneiderjohn, (Doug) True and (Doug) Villotti," said Raveling. "I was shocked that they weren't picked as a contender in the publications."

Miller agreed with Raveling. "I said all along that Cal has got the best opportunity to beat UCLA," said Miller. "They started slow but came on very strong at the end of the season."

Cal has started slow again this season, losing to both Oregon and Oregon State in the first weekend of league play.

The miserable failures of Cal and Washington State in the first week of the season have made UCLA's hold on the league title look that much stronger. And de-



Photo by Steve Schneider

Oregon Coach Dick Harter who will be among the Pac-8 coaches cheering for UCLA losses.

spite the weakening of UCLA's position, they have always been a virtually unanimous favorite to win the league.

"UCLA should be the favorite because they have as much, if not more, talent than the rest of the league," remarked Miller. "It's true that they had a bad recruiting year, but the last three weren't so bad."

"UCLA has to be the strong favorite," agreed Harter.

Also a factor in UCLA's favor is the youth and inexperience present in the league.

"They (UCLA) don't know what young means," said Miller. "The rest of us, I think, are going to find out."

After Cal, the Bruins are the most experienced team in the league. And while UCLA has David Greenwood returning, most of the other Pacific-8 schools are without their guns of a year ago.

OSU lost Steve Johnson, Oregon Greg Ballard, Washington Edwards, and WSU Harold Rhodes.

"This year is going to be a tough (Continued on Page 7B)

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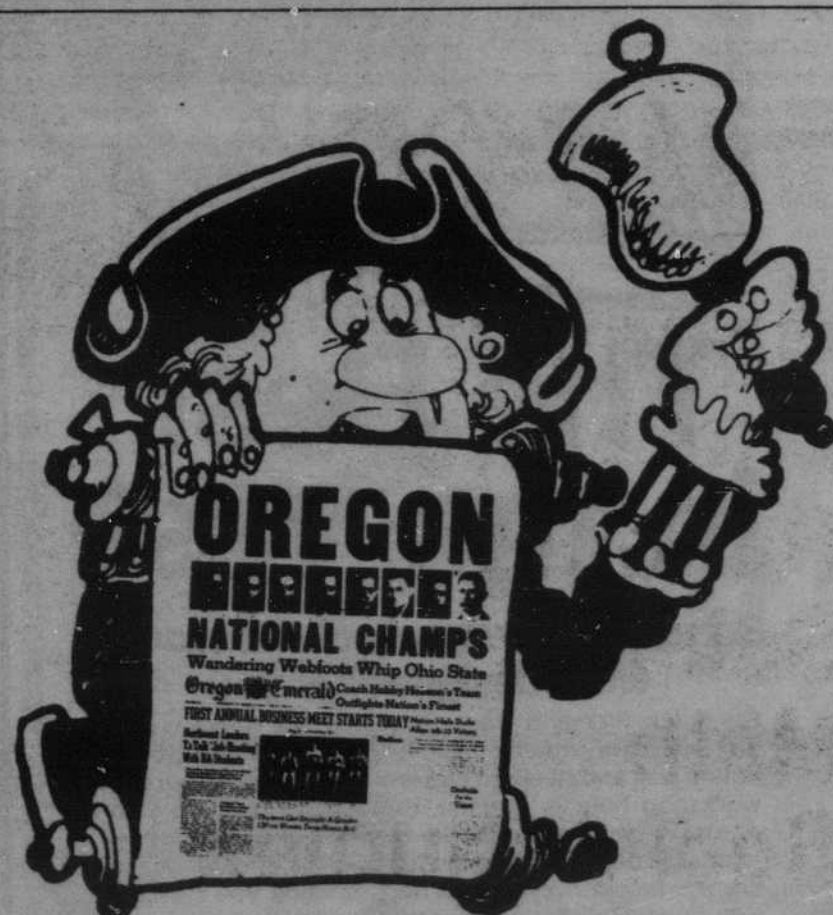
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