

oregon

Commentary

Oregon's Mac has the ingredients

Mike Marino

Scott McEldowney doesn't look like the typical college football coach, but he's got the vocabulary down pat.

As a senior still rings specialist at Oregon, this weekend's NCAA championships are his final fling, and his last shot at the elusive NCAA rings title. Like last year, when he was among the favorites but finished third, McEldowney stands a good chance to win the national crown. And he knows what he has to do to win.

"Get it done," he said Tuesday. "I've just got to get up and do my set."

Some athletes go completely bananas before a big meet, while others go into a deep mental psych-job so intense that it makes TM look like the Gong Show. Then there's a guy like McEldowney. I've been there before," he said flatly. "After last year it occurred to me that it's just another meet. Last year I was too nervous and when I get nervous my timing gets all off."

Last year, too, he carried the burden of being the top qualifier in the country for the NCAA meet in Tempe, Ariz., and that was pressure. "Last year I was on top and all the guys were trying to beat me," he said. "This year I'm not on top, so I can make the move."

McEldowney qualified ninth this season, but still is only .425 points behind the nation's current number one, Mike Silverstein of Tennessee. And yet, in some ways he's lucky to be there at all. Earlier this season, in the Oregon Open to be exact, McEldowney slipped on his routine and nearly separated his right arm from his body. His shoulder slipped in the middle of an "iron cross," and for the moment it was touch-and-go until he righted himself and finished his routine.

Even off the apparatus, he was subject to injury. On St. Patrick's day, 1976, a week after the Pac-8 meet and a week before the NAAs, McEldowney was involved in a car accident that grounded him for six months with a bum shoulder.

"The first couple of months I didn't worry too much," he said. "But after four or five months I started to worry. And when I came back in August, I really worried because it hurt so much. But I got it back into shape. (Oregon coach Bill) Ballester made me work."

Chalk one up for the coach's side. In the beginning, though, when McEldowney first came to Oregon from Olympia Fields, Ill., Ballester took some getting used to. "My high school coach didn't work me nearly as hard as Bill does," McEldowney said. "I had a hard time adjusting to his coaching. Coming here was like Hell warmed over."

As with most specialists, McEldowney started out his career as a frustrated all-arounder in high school. "That lasted three weeks," he said. "The coaches saw I was going to be terrible, so I moved to the rings — they came naturally to me."

"I was unflexible, so that kept me out of free ex and side horse," he continued. "And I never did like P-bars because I always fell off and hit the bars. Rings were safe."

So's cliff diving, if you fancy a quick retirement. But McEldowney's been spared of serious injury on the rings, and his retirement will come with his graduation this June, when he'll enter a partnership with his father in the Chicago insurance business.

What about his career ending? "It'll be the first time in eight years that I haven't worked out," he said. "Maybe I'll get fat."

But kidding aside, Scott McEldowney is my bet for the title. His attitude "rings" of experience. "What is gonna win it is just doing your set," he said. "The only thing that can mess it up for anybody is themselves."

Mark it down, this guy knows.

Can Oregon take the title?

By MIKE MARINO
Emerald Sports Editor

Bill Ballester, Oregon's gymnastics coach, is taking a careful approach to the NCAA meet his team hosts this weekend.

"We're here," he said. "The rest of it is gravy from now on."

Certainly, when you look at the circumstances under which the Ducks have been operating this season then it indeed seems just an honor — and a relief — to be in the national meet.

This year's team was supposed to be the one to beat in the NCAA. With good reason, too. After all, they had one of the top all-arounders in the country returning in Miki Moyal, another all-arounder who had proved, before an injury, that he could break records (Jim Kelch), and a couple of the best specialists in the world in Tom Truedson and Scott McEldowney.

Backed up with a solid corps of other fine gymnasts, the Ducks looked pretty powerful. And they were hosting nationals — what a wonderful way to cap a season, winning at home.

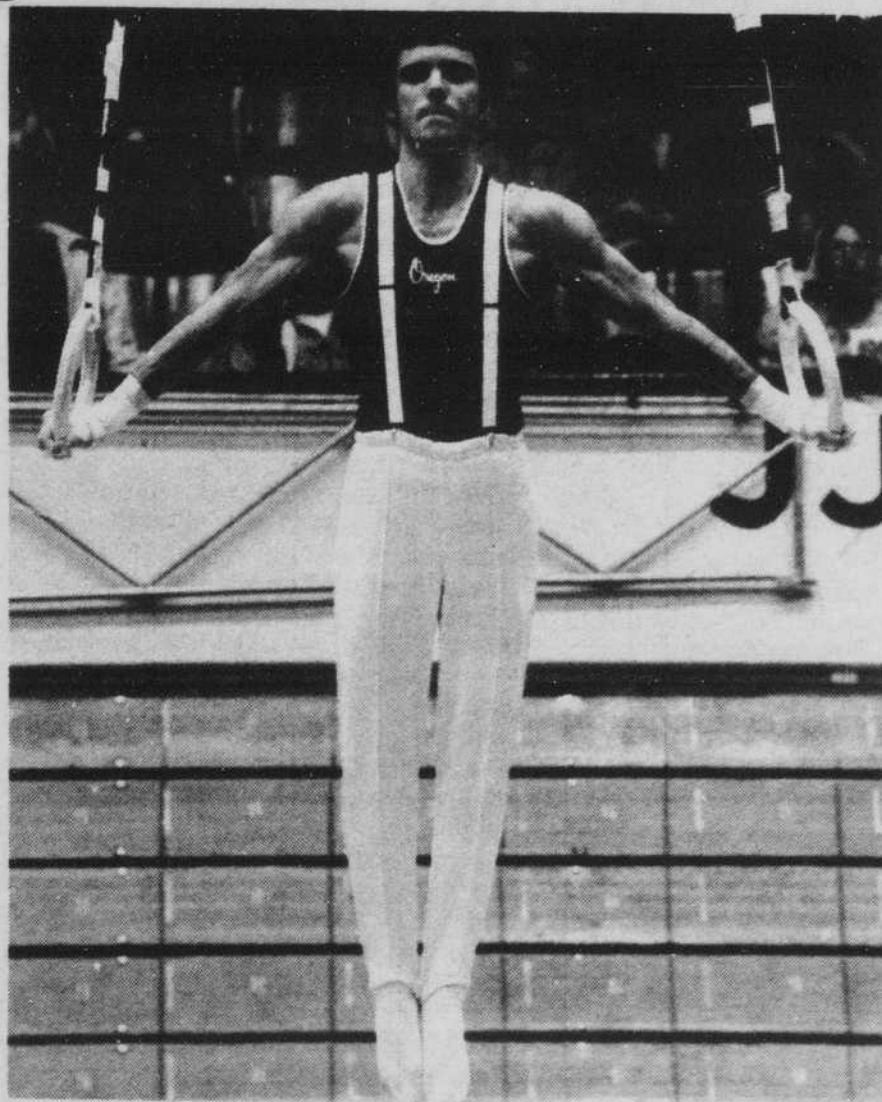
But in the fall, disaster struck. Moyal broke his arm while practicing on the high bar, and immediately Ballester was taking the point of view that the Ducks would have to scramble to even win the Pac-8 title, let alone a national crown.

Then the deluge began. Kelch got the flu, McEldowney injured his shoulder and had to receive cortisone injections, Mark Knupp, one of the solid JC transfers Oregon picked up in the recruiting season, was bothered by his bad back. Even Ballester felt the wrath, injuring his arm while spotting for Jim Hamilton.

Why, then, is this hospital ward still in contention for the 1978 NCAA team title? Because in "Ballesterese," they "sucked it up."

"We had some people step in when we needed them to," Ballester said. "And now the kids are staying loose — it's the only thing we can do now, because we're obviously not the favorites in the meet, Oklahoma is."

"But," he added, "without Miki we had no right to be here."



Scott McEldowney has a legitimate shot at winning an individual title Saturday night in the still rings.

One of the guys that steered the Flying Ducks this far is sophomore all-arounder Gene Christensen. With Moyal out and Kelch still easing into competition from his injury, Christensen was forced into a very tough role early.

"But he's come through," Ballester chimed. "Now he's very close to having a qualifying score for the USGF (United States Gymnastics Federation). He's established himself as one of the better gymnasts in the country."

Christensen didn't qualify for any individual honors, but it is his all-around score that could be one of the crucial keys in the Oregon hopes.

The same is true in the specialist field. Truedson (Pommel Horse), and McEldowney (Still Rings) both have had the top scores in the nation at one time or another, and both could easily cop a win in their specialties.

But it's the number two, three and four guys that need to come through. On the horse, that means the other Oregon specialists, Mike Weidemann and Gordon Hocking.

In the rings, Oregon's number two is himself no slouch, Jerry Bush. Bush also qualified for the individual event competition, and the former walk-on from Cottage Grove stands to improve on his ninth place finish of last year.

And the Ducks? Can they improve on the fourth place slot that they took last year? Where are the weaknesses?

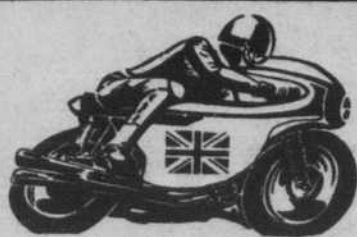
"All six events," Ballester laughed. "No, we're sound with four good people in every event. After that, there's no depth. But Oklahoma and Arizona State are in that position, too."

If they manage to keep that company through the team finals Saturday afternoon, then they've got a heckuva shot.

Illinois star chooses Oregon

Kelly Crumley, one of the top high school gymnasts in the country, has announced that he will attend Oregon next year.

Crumley, from Addison Trail High School west of Chicago, was the Illinois prep all-around champion, in addition to winning the state's high bar and floor exercise events.



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