

Sixth

Oregon's wrestling team is surprising everyone this year, from its critics on down to its coach.

"Some people didn't even think we would be around this year, but here we are doing better than ever before," says Oregon coach Ron Finley.

The Ducks are off to their best start ever, with a 13-1 dual match record and a sixth-place national ranking — the highest in Oregon history.

"This is the most balanced team that I've ever had," Finley says. "I've had some outstanding wrestlers in the past, but I've never had a team that was so strong at every weight class. We don't have a weak spot anywhere."

"The students voted last year to save both gymnastics and the wrestling programs, and we feel we've responded to their confidence in us with our best season so far ever," said Finley.

Returning Pac-10 champion Jeff Stuebing leads Oregon this year with a 15-2 record, but he has plenty of support from the rest of the Duck squad as seven other wrestlers also have 10 or more wins.

"One of the reasons that we are doing so well is that not only are Stuebing, Bill Nugent (11-2) and Ryan Kelly (14-1) doing like we expected, but people like Mike Erb (11-2), Cliff Porter (10-3) and Rick O'Shea (13-4) are doing much better than we ever expected," Finley says.

O'Shea, a 158-pounder, is an excellent example of how the Ducks have been doing this year. Only a freshman, he surprised returning letterman Rafe Mumford, and Finley, by winning the varsity position.

"Rick has already gone past our expectations and he keeps on improving all the time," says Finley. "He makes up for what he lacks in skill and experience with his determined aggressiveness. He is such a tremendous competitor that he won't allow himself to be stopped."

Oregon has had some outstanding performances in every match this season, but as a team the Ducks haven't been consistent on the mat every time.

"We've had a problem of everyone

A hot national ranking in the bag, Oregon hopes to pin the Pac-10

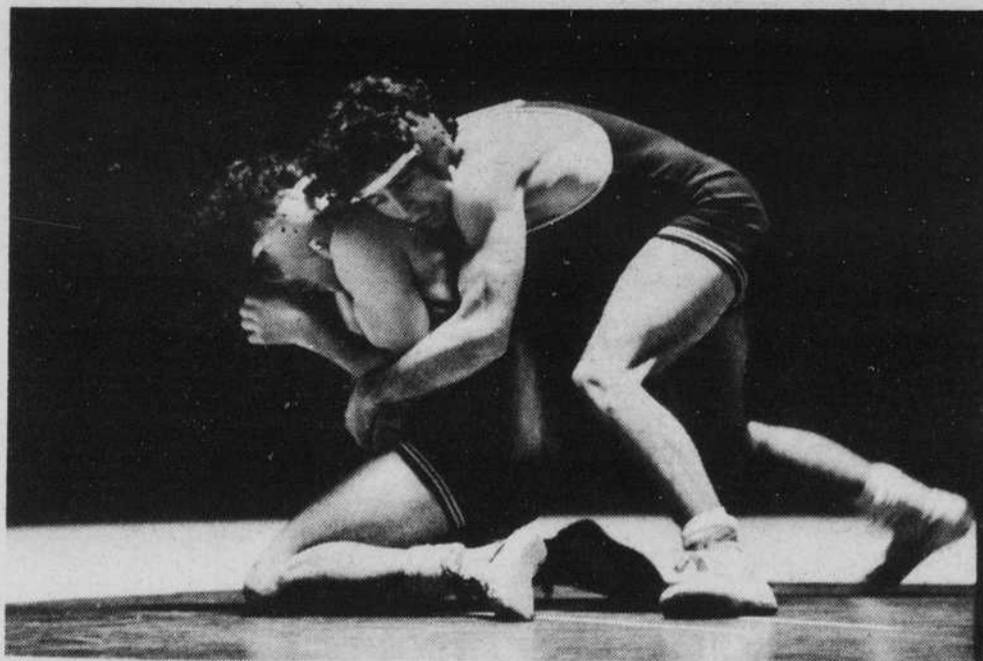


Photo by David W. Zahn

being consistent at every match. Individually, we've had our ups and downs, especially against the weaker teams," Finley says.

"But we've risen to the occasion when we've had to. When our backs have been to the wall, we've always come out fighting."

If the Ducks continue improving, they should be in excellent position to vie for the conference championship — especially with the return, possibly this week, of Barry Boyles and Alan Goldman.

"With Boyles and Goldman back in the lineup, we will definitely be a team to contend with when it comes around tournament time," says Finley.

Boyles, who is out with a knee injury, had a perfect 6-0 record before he was hurt. Goldman, fourth in the Pac-10 last year, is out with a pinched nerve in his neck.

"Barry is perhaps our best bet for an All-American this year," Finley said earlier this season. "Many people felt he was as good as Scott Bliss (who placed second at nationals) the last couple of years."

"Alan was wrestling well before his injury and we hope to get him in shape for the conference tournament," Finley says.

Oregon is expected to fight it out with Arizona State University for the conference crown, with Oregon State a clear choice for third, Finley says.

"There is no doubt that we will have our hands full with Arizona State at the conference tournament," he says.

Duck makes foe's job a grind

Miller throws weight behind ranked Ducks

Wrestler Mike Miller is the kind of foe opponents love to hate.

"Mike's one of the most frustrating wrestlers there is," says Duck coach Ron Finley. "His style is more 'counter-wrestling' than aggressive."

"He's a very intelligent wrestler. He wrestles smart. But no matter what you do to him, you usually end up on the bottom."

Miller, a senior out of Eugene's Sheldon High School, is the Ducks' top 177-pounder and a main cog of the sixth-ranked Oregon wrestling team. His 23-9-1 record last season brought him to the attention of Duck fans, but a late-season knee injury kept him out of post-season competition.

"It was a cartilage tear," Miller says, "and I couldn't get into my referee's position because it wouldn't bend enough."

But Miller is healthy again — or at least as healthy as he usually is.

"Mike has competed more while injured than any other guy," Finley says. "But in all his four years, I've never heard him complain."

That, says Finley, is one of Miller's most impressive qualities.

"Whatever we ask, Mike's the guy to do it," Finley says. "If we need somebody to fill a spot, he's always been there to volunteer."

"You just have to keep working," says Miller. "Perseverance, more than anything else, makes a good wrestler. But being behind somebody who's good, that makes you work harder."

During his early years at Oregon, Miller was behind such top-flight wrestlers as Randy Besaw, Jeff Stuebing and all-American Don Brown.

"But this year," he says, "I'm not behind anybody."

Still, Miller has some tough matches ahead. Among his scheduled opponents this season are OSU's Marty Ryan (ranked 11th) and Dave Allen of Iowa State (third). But that doesn't worry Finley.

"You don't improve much unless you face guys tougher than you. The better

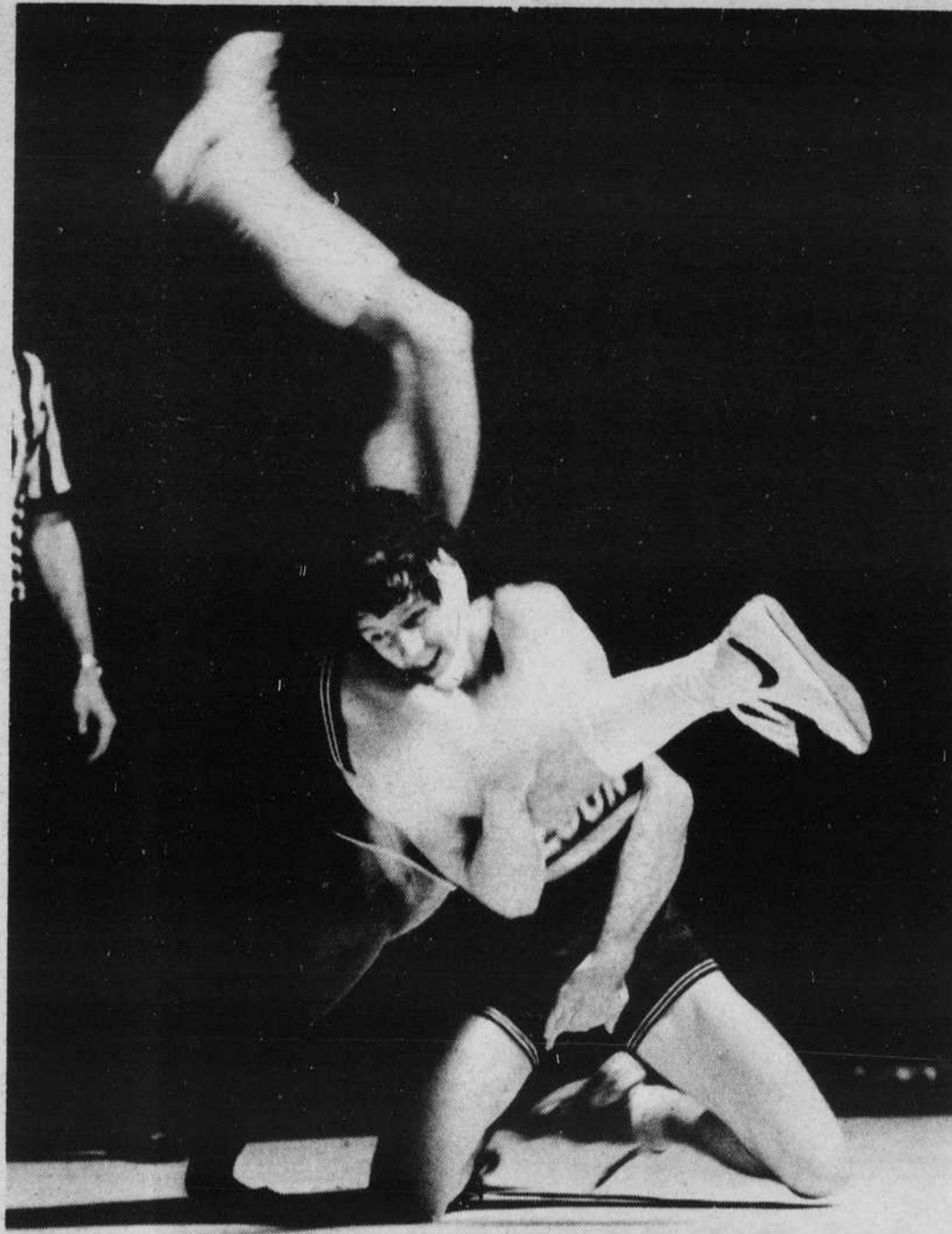


Photo by David W. Zahn

Duck wrestler Mike Miller (117) throws an opponent on his way to victory, and a possible Pac-10 title.

Mike's opponent, the better he wrestles. "But Mike must get more aggressive," Finley says. "And force his opponents to make mistakes instead of waiting for them to make them."

"But he can definitely finish in the top two in the conference."

Although Miller spends more time capitalizing on mistakes than making them, he recalls one goof he made while in junior high.

"I was in the seventh grade and I was wrestling for Pleasant Hill," Miller says.

"We were at Creswell, and we were killing 'em. Everybody from Pleasant Hill was throwing a head-and-arm, and everybody was pinning his man."

"So when it was my turn, I threw him a head-and-arm, and down we went. I got excited and bridged too far. The referee pounded the mat, and I was jumping up and down, because I thought I pinned him."

"Then the referee raised the other guy's hand — I'd pinned myself!"

Story by Jim Vitti

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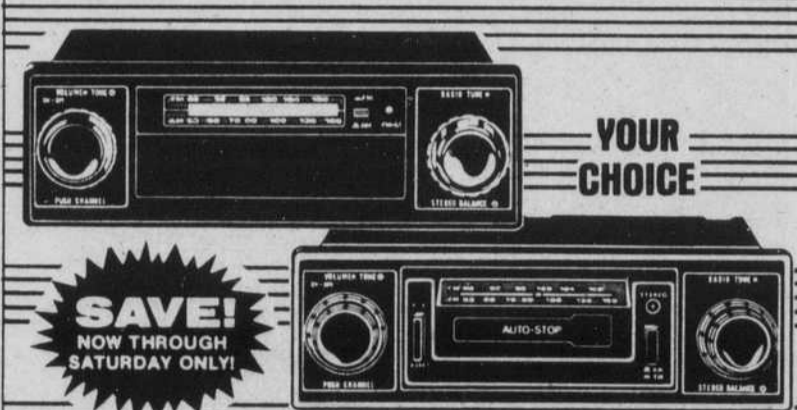
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