

Crash landing

The 'Flying Ducks', Oregon's winningest team in history, they're grounded for good

By MARK JOHNSON
Of the Emerald

The budget ax fell on four sports last spring, and the highly successful Oregon gymnastics team was among the victims.

Now five months after the fact, the Emerald Sports staff has compiled a series entitled "Feeling the Cuts" to report on the fate of these teams, and what lies ahead in the future for them.

Part Three reports on the 'Flying Ducks' — grounded now by money problems. Tomorrow's installment concerns the ill-fated baseball program.



Graphic by Max DeRungs

Now that the dust has settled over the cutting of four sports, the University has found that men's gymnastics, men's baseball and women's golf have vanished into oblivion. And so has much of the outrage, surprise and disgust.

Now that five months have passed since the programs were cut, much of the campus may not realize they ever existed at the University. One man that won't forget is Bill Ballester, former coach of the men's gymnastics team — the 'Flying Ducks'.

"Nobody cares — it's gone," Ballester says. "Many people don't even know its gone. Some people come up to me now on

campus and ask me 'how is the team doing?'"

"One thing that bothers me now is how people are beginning to come forward and say 'I had no idea that gymnastics was going to be cut', and saying that they would have been supportive of other ways."

"I'm more bitter now than when it happened," Ballester says. "I don't think it was necessary. Olum's decision was a mistake. I know how much he hated the idea of cutting sports and how hard he fought to save them, but he was still the guy who made it."

Ballester compiled a 132-20 record in 10 years of coaching at the University, for an 871 percentage that cannot be touched by any current or former University coach in any sport.

"I'm the winningest coach in the school's history; gymnastics was higher academically than any other sport, and it was fourth in generating revenue," Ballester says. "We were either first or second in the Pac-10 for eight years in a row, and within the top five in the NCAA for five years in a row. It just doesn't seem right; it goes against everything I believe in. To win and still get cut — the credibility is gone."

Ballester is currently the athletic liaison in the office of the associate provost for the University, a part-time position he has been associated with for several years. He acts as the communication go-between for the administration and the athletic department. But not coaching his gymnasts leaves a gap.

"Personally, I'm bored. After 20-some years coaching I need the challenge to go into the gym."

Greater than whatever harm was done to the coaches and supporters of the team, Ballester is more concerned about the injustice impressed upon his athletes. When the announcement was made to cut gymnastics, most other schools had already committed to other athletes as the recruiting season was near its end.

"One miracle that did come of this was the way all the kids got good scholarships within four days of the announcement that gymnastics had been cut," Ballester says. "I felt good in terms of the schools they went to — schools that appreciate them."

Kelly Crumley, an All-American in the all-around optional competition, transferred to the University of Iowa to spend his last year as a Hawkeye.

Crumley says his transfer was relatively smooth, but "the timing was kind of bad. Some schools had money at the time, but we just tried to say that gymnastics might not be dropped and waited. I'm just glad that Iowa waited too."

"It probably didn't affect me as much as some of the other guys who had to go to other schools alone." Crumley was joined at Iowa by former Duck teammates Brett Garland and Robert Leverage.

"The team here is good," Crumley says, "but not as good as Oregon's was."

Ballester also voices his concern about the treatment of the athletes' memories now that they are gone. With 19 All-Americans and a host of Pac-10 and NCAA trophies credited to the gymnasts, Ballester criticizes the arrangement of the trophies in Mac Court.

"Go and take a look at the way they stacked the All-Amer-

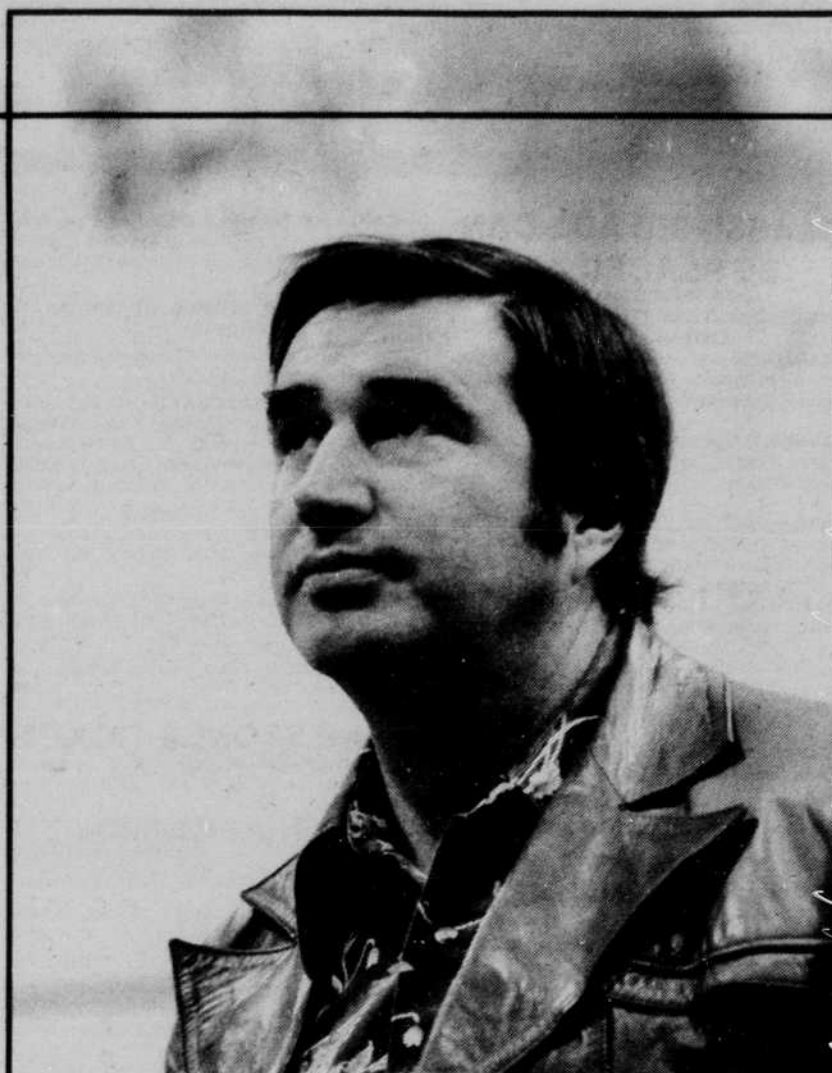


Photo by Bob Baker

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icans on top of each other," Ballester says referring to the photos in the case stacked like a deck of cards behind a wooden plaque. "That's insensitivity. I would rather have them go up and tell the athletes that (they were not appreciated). There has got to be a better way — they did represent the University of Oregon. It doesn't seem quite right; they're bitter enough as it is."

Although the actual decision to cut gymnastics was a shock, Ballester says the idea was not a new one.

"We heard for five years that we might be cut and never knew the ground rules. After a while you just got tired of hearing about it. We would come back at the end of the season, after our showings at the NCAA's and hear that talk time and time again. It was a nice welcome home — good job guys."

Ballester finds the reasons

used to cut gymnastics (lack of money and regional interest) contradictory of gymnastics' actual situation.

"If they talk about money," Ballester says, "why drop the fourth greatest revenue-generating sport? And how can you say that gymnastics doesn't have community interest in this town? We were known as the gymnastics capital of the U.S. with great feeder programs in the Northwest."

"I'd like to think that I'm a good coach by the way there was a positive effect on the lives of the athletes. But I do think that if anything constructive comes of this it would be to develop a better process. When you begin to affect peoples' lives, directly or indirectly, the process needs to be developed and then refined. Some people are losing sight of the value of athletics in a University program."

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