

Women look for transition

By Paul Danzer
Of the Emerald

Transition year.

It's a term overused by sportswriters who can't think of anything better to say, and by coaches who don't know what to expect from their teams. But if there ever was a team which truly deserved the label, this year's Oregon women's basketball team is it.

For starters, no longer is all-everything Bev Smith around to carry the team unscathed to the top of the Northwest Women's Basketball League. For that matter, the NWBL is also no more. It merged with the NorCal Conference to form the new 10-team Northern Pacific Conference (NorPac).

Those two changes alone were enough to knock the Duck women from the "sure bet" category to the role of "contender." But there are new faces and names, such as Heather McDuffie and Lauri Tennant who will help fill in coach Elwin Heiny's puzzle as the season progresses.

McDuffie and Tennant are a pair of freshman guards who Heiny hopes will have the team clicking like a fine-tuned engine by the time the NorPac championship tournament comes to Eugene March 11.

However, Heiny will have to wait longer than he had hoped to see if the freshmen will mesh into a smooth combination. Tennant, who is second on the team in scoring after four games, will be lost to the team for at least seven more weeks with torn knee ligaments.

She is so important to Heiny's plans that he is now somewhat glad that the Ducks open conference play with six straight home games starting January 14th, then go on the road for five straight conference games in February. He is hopeful the 5-10 freshman from Gresham's Sam Barlow High School will be ready to contribute by then.

Tennant's status will not only influence how quickly the Ducks make the transition to life in the NorPac, but it will also be a key element in how quickly the Ducks make the transition from offense to defense on the court as well.

With Smith out of the picture, Heiny wants to shift gears with this year's squad, turning the Ducks from a deliberate team with a "get the ball to Bev" offense, into a transition team which looks to get the ball and run. The new-look Ducks feel that despite their youth (Mary Ann Stoican is the only senior on the team) they have a substantial pool of talent to draw from.

"We feel that our talent is very good," says Heiny. "We would like for more people to perform, and perform consistently, rather than just one or two players."

Despite the fact that the Ducks will miss Smith's scoring punch this year, Heiny says that the biggest void created by Bev's graduation is a lack of intensity. "It didn't matter what she played, if it was ratball in the gym or whatever, she hated to lose," Heiny says of Smith. "If the team was behind, if no one else would, she would take it upon herself to just play that much tougher and

pull us over the hump.

"**This is one thing we've lacked**," Heiny said of the season opening road trip to the midwest, "this desire not to lose." The result is that they have lost — three times, while winning just one counting game. That is quite a change from last year when the Ducks lost just five times in 26 games, the last one coming in the opening round of the National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament to Missouri.

But Heiny, who has posted an impressive 118-33 record in six years as mentor at Oregon, is not about to push the panic button. "Right now, we have to start functioning as a team," says the coach. "We've had some problems with discipline on the court," he adds, referring to players not carrying out their assignments.

"I think that's a learning stage that their going through," he says. "I think that will improve as time goes on."

"We need an easier game now."

Looking at the schedule, one might think that they will get that game when Portland State comes to town Friday night. However, Heiny is concerned about the Vikings, who are coached by former Oregon assistant Bev Bland. "It's not a game that we can say we will win."

One thing Heiny can count on is the play of 6-3 junior center Alison Lang. Lang will be the centerpiece in Heiny's puzzle this year. Last season Lang led the Ducks in scoring (21.2), rebounding (11.5), field goal percentage (.594) and blocked shots (3.8). She was only one of seven players in the nation who were nationally ranked in scoring, rebounding, and field goal percentage. Not a bad centerpiece.

"We would like to get her the ball whenever she's open," Heiny said of the Kodak All-American nominee. "We know that if she gets the ball, we can score."

Along with Lang ("There is hardly a player around who can match her", says Heiny), the Ducks have three other reasons to consider height as one of their strengths this winter. Their names are Helen Higgs, Gail Gatchell, and Chris Metzger.

Higgs, a 6-4 junior from Anchorage, Alaska, will spell Lang in the middle, and team with her when Heiny goes to a big front line. Sophomores Metzger and Gatchell will share big forward responsibilities.

At the small forward position Heiny leads with the steady Stoican. A solid outside shooter, who also likes to post smaller players up inside, Stoican has played in all 87 games during her three years at Oregon. Last season she averaged 7.9 points per game and scored in double figures 10 times.

Behind Stoican the Ducks have JC transfer Lori Carver and freshman Karin Bishop waiting in the wings.

In addition to McDuffie, a strong shooter from AAA prep runner-up St. Mary's, the guard group includes versatile sophomore Tracy Beckes, and sophomore point guards Lisa Vetter, and Janet Harris, along with junior Penny Gienger.

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