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Cagers slow tempo; hope for upbeat year

Oregon's dance card was crammed full last fall, filled with teams who wanted to boogie or jitterbug with the worst defensive basketball team in the Pac-10 Conference.

The Ducks were your proverbial "easy pickin's," allowing over 80 points a game in conference play. Oh sure, they scored a bundle themselves, but not enough to prevent them from losing 18 of 27 games.

But the Ducks have donned new dancing clothes this year, trading in their flash-n'-dash for the more sedate world of the Jim Haney waltz.

They may be the first team in conference history to go from last in scoring defense to first — in one short, change-filled year.

"I think it is important to re-establish ourselves as a team that works together, that believes in one another, that gains pleasure working as a team, rather than individual pleasure," says Haney, in his fifth year as the Oregon coach. "It means getting back to where we were two years ago."

Two years ago, Oregon won six of its final eight conference games after starting the season dismally. The type of team play that ballclub exhibited is what Haney would like to see this year.

"We took a fairly young team then, somewhat like the group we have this year, who hadn't really proved anything. Nobody knew who they were," Haney says.

Oregon isn't tall on talent this year, but Haney has stocked his roster with players who fill roles well and who are willing to sacrifice individual stardom for the team's benefit.

The leader this fall has been 6-6 junior forward David Brantley, who's averaging 11.6 points and 7.3 rebounds per game. Haney has used him at power forward, small forward and even briefly at center.

Sophomore Blair Rasmussen has nailed down the center position, thanks partially to his height (7-0) and frequent flashes of seemingly unlimited future potential. Rasmussen is averaging 4.3

rebounds and 7.0 points per game.

The power forward spot — when Brantley's not there — has been occupied by sophomore 6-7 transfer Mike Matheson, who moved north after the University of San Francisco folded its basketball program. Only two players on the Oregon roster have played fewer minutes than Matheson, but Haney has stayed with him as a starter, although 6-8 sophomore Jerry Adams has seen a lot of time on the court lately.

Probably the most accurate barometer of Haney's change in style is the promotion of a walk-on player from last year — 6-3 Greg Bell — to the starting point guard spot this fall.

Bell, a junior pre-law student, shoots rarely — he's three of six from the field — but provides a steady hand to the Ducks' ball-control, pass-oriented offense. He is second on the team in assists.

His backcourt mate is 6-3 junior Gary Gatewood, who is averaging 8.0 points and four assists per game.

Off the bench, Haney can call on 6-7

sophomore swingman Bryan Trendell, who has used an unfailing jumper from the baseline to emerge as the Ducks' leading scorer (12.0 points per game), or 6-4 senior guard Paul Bain.

Haney is predicting nothing out of the ordinary for this year's club, but he seems to like the look and play of this year's Ducks much more than last fall.

"Last year at this time everything looked rosy," says Haney. "We had high expectations. We could spiel off players' names who had fine ability, yet when it was all said and done, there wasn't much substance behind the shell that was on the outside. This year, certainly, people aren't reeling off names of people who can play for Oregon basketball."

"The exterior might not be as luxurious, and yet within, we're stronger than we've ever been."

Story by
Photo