

Is Monson a savior?

Players believe in coach

By Doug Levy
Of the Emerald

It was only 10 minutes into the fourth day of practice, and most players on Oregon's basketball team probably weren't warmed up yet.

Don Monson was warmed up. The team was running a three-on-two drill, and Reggie Wallace, a freshman from National City, Calif., found himself alone for a layup after two fine passes. All he had to do was go straight up for two points; instead, he tried a finger roll and missed.

"Hold it!" screamed Monson. "We make two pretty passes, and you throw up that garbage? Forget being All-American and make the layup!"

It was pure Monson. Oregon's new coach has built a reputation on stressing fundamentals while winning 100 games in five years at Idaho.

"He (Monson) is going back to basics because we've abused them before," says senior captain David Brantley, referring to

Oregon's 9-18 record of 1982.

For Monson, coaching the Ducks is just another challenge. At Idaho, he inherited a team that had won 26 games in four years and turned it into a club that won 52 games and played in two NCAA tournaments from 1980-82.

Monson performed his magic with unheralded players and a willingness to work them as hard as he needed to. He sees the same situation at Oregon.

"My first impression," says Monson, "was of a group of players with a good attitude. We might be short on talent, but we can make up for it in other ways."

So there was Monson the first day of practice, blasting his players when they goofed, patting them on the butt when they didn't.

"He doesn't play any favorites, that's for sure," says Gary Gatewood, Oregon's third-leading scorer a year ago (8.7 ppg).

Blair Rasmussen, whose 14.8 scoring average helped him earn second-team all-Pac-10 a year ago,



Don Monson

understands Monson's shouts and lectures.

"That's his job," says Rasmussen. "There's nothing personal involved — it's just constructive criticism."

What it boils down to is that the coach dearly wants to win.

"I'm not used to losing," Monson says, chuckling at the statement. "I know myself — if I can't turn it (Oregon's program) around in three years, I'll probably go somewhere else."

The Pac-10's rookie coach certainly has won everywhere else he's been. In 26 years of coaching, Monson has won an astounding 401 games while dropping 195. He knows people at Oregon want similar results.

"I know expectations are high," says Monson. "I can see it every time I'm on the street. People come up to me and wish me luck — I know they want a winning season."

His players do too. "They're frustrated — they lost a lot of close games last year," says Monson.

The Ducks seemed to lose every game down the wire last year but "we're very confident this year," says Gatewood. "We have a majority of our starters back. Blair's a hell of a center, we have good forwards, good guards, and..."

"And we're confident in him (Monson)," says Brantley. "If we carry out what he expects, we can win."

Monson won't go that far. He cautions that the Ducks may have a losing record by Christmas, thanks to a killer schedule of Minnesota, Wichita State and Brigham Young. Then he straightens up in his chair.

"If I didn't think I could turn this program around, I wouldn't be here. People demand a winner. That's fickle, but it's fair."

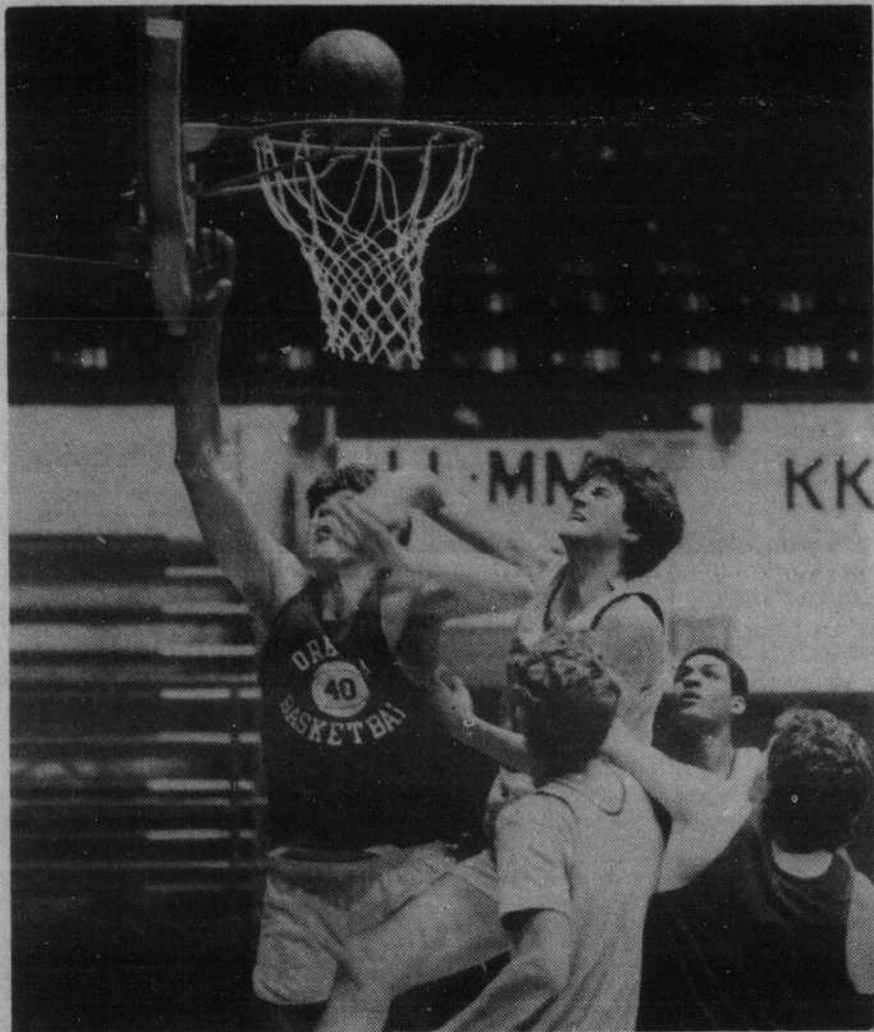


Photo by Mark Pynes

Despite the efforts of Jeff Stevens (right), Blair Rasmussen is headed for two points at a recent Oregon basketball practice. Kenny Sprague (back) looks on.

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