

Oregon netters hit the road for NCAA tourney

By Ashley Conklin
Emerald Sports Reporter

Oregon's volleyball team was one of 32 teams invited to the NCAA Tournament when tournament pairings were announced Sunday, but the Ducks have to open the tournament on the road.

Oregon will play Pacific-10 Conference foe Arizona on the road Saturday even though the Ducks had a better conference and overall record and have a higher seed in the tourney.

After finishing 8-19 last season and finishing tied for ninth in the conference standings, Oregon rebounded to post a 10-8 conference mark and a 21-8 overall record this year. The Ducks finished tied for fourth in the conference with USC.

Meanwhile, the Wildcats were 8-10 in Pac-10 play this season and 16-12 overall. Arizona tied for sixth in the conference with California.

Despite the better records, the higher conference finish and higher seeding - Oregon is seeded fourth, the Wildcats fifth - it will be the Ducks that will be forced to travel.

"I was very surprised to be seeded higher and have to travel," head coach Gerry Gregory said. "It was an economic thing where Arizona could guarantee more fans than we could and so, consequently, they (the selection committee) took Arizona."

The Ducks and Wildcats split their two matches this season, with each team winning at home. Oregon won the latest match in three games on Nov. 17, but Gregory feels the two teams are very evenly matched.

"I've got a lot of respect for Arizona," he said. "They're very physical and very talented."

"I think both teams will play as well as they can," Gregory added. "Both teams are good and I think it will be a tremendous, hard and tough match."

The most enjoyable part of the Ducks tournament selection is that it comes after last season's disastrous finish which saw Oregon lose 13 straight matches, Gregory said.

"This is a reward for the team," he said. "They hung together and improved after last

season." "They're very supportive of each other as well as having a lot of talent," Gregory said. "Just hanging in there got the job done."

The winner of the Oregon-Arizona match will face the winner of the Pepperdine-UCLA match in the second round. The Bruins were undefeated in Pac-10 play this season and were ranked second in the country for most of the

year, but Gregory feels the Ducks could beat UCLA if they get past Arizona.

"The writing was on the wall for the No. 4 and No. 5 seeds that the winner would probably have to play the No. 1 seed in the second round," he said. "I told our team that they are one of the few teams in the country that can beat UCLA, that is if we can beat Arizona."

Oregon started the season winning its first nine matches,

including tournament championships at the Utah Tournament and the Oregon Invitational. The Ducks also had a modest six-match win streak in the middle of conference action and ended the season winning four of their last six matches.

Although the Ducks have now made it to the NCAA Tournament for the third time in four years under Gregory, they have not enjoyed good success in the tournament.



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