



Archive photo
Oregon Gov. Charles Sprague holds the NCAA basketball championship trophy, which the 1939 Ducks won. John Dick is second from right on the top row.

1939 basketball player still comes to Mac Court

Dick started on championship team

By Jeff Garrett
Emerald Contributor

If you've ever looked around McArthur Court during a basketball game and seen the banner that reads "1939 NCAA Champions," you may have also unknowingly spotted one of the last remaining players from that team.

John Dick, one of two surviving starters from the 1939 Oregon basketball team that defeated Ohio State to win the first-ever NCAA championship, is still an avid Duck fan. He recently watched as the Ducks took on an Icelandic team.

having an outstanding basketball team here at Oregon," Dick said. "It turned out to be a wise decision."

During that 1939 season, the Ducks played a number of games on the road, traveling all the way to New York's Madison Square Garden for one tournament.

"Playing on the road had a different meaning in those days," Dick said. "There was a hometown advantage that you wouldn't believe."

"We played (the NCAA championship) in a Big Ten gym, at Northwestern, against a Big Ten team, Ohio State, and with Big Ten officials."

To arrive at the game, the Ducks had to travel from San Francisco, site of the NCAA western playoffs, to Evanston, Ill., on an 18-hour train ride.

"When you got off one of those shake-rattle-and-roll train rides, you had vertigo," Dick said.

Vertigo and home-town officiating notwithstanding, the Ducks went on to win all their playoff games by more than 12 points. They never trailed in the 46-33 title win against Ohio State, and they also called no timeouts during the game.

In that first-ever championship game, Dick scored 13 of Oregon's 46 points to defeat Ohio State. He later went on to become All-American and Oregon's team captain the next year.

The "Tall Firs" won that first national championship without the advent of a three-point shot and other changes that affect today's games.

"I think the three-point shot, which was something our coach was advocating even back then, might have made a difference," Dick said. "But as far as we were concerned, we had people who could shoot outside as well as within."

As far as the interior game was concerned, Dick said it got physical.

"In the Big Ten it was like playing football under the boards," he said.

Of the 13 players on the "Tall Firs" team, all graduated.

"That was the purpose for being there. We were encouraged and given lots of help, and we had to maintain our academics in order to remain eligible," Dick said.

When World War II broke out, Dick joined the Navy and remained there as a naval aviator for more than 30 years. Now a retired admiral living in Eugene, he calls naval aviation the greatest precision team sport in the world.

About the other team sport in his life, Dick knows the Ducks could again win a national basketball championship and has a simple method for it.

"Sure, why not," he said. "All they need to do is get five guys who can play the game."



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— John Dick,
1939 Duck basketball player

And the games he watches at Mac Court are a lot different from the games he played more than a half a century ago.

Like all the players on the 1939 team, which finished 29-5 and was nicknamed the "Tall Firs" because of their unusual size, Dick was an Oregon native.

"Recruiting on a nationwide basis was not as prevalent in those days," said Dick, originally from The Dalles. "There were exceptions, but for the most part recruiting was regional."

Dick, who is 6-foot-4, said his primary reason for coming to Eugene was not basketball. Instead, he wanted to be an attorney, and the University was where the law school was located.

"I was also being recruited for football at least as much, if not more than I was for basketball," said Dick, a three-sport athlete. "So that was the first decision I had to make."

He eventually chose basketball because Howard "Hobby" Hobson, the recently deceased Oregon basketball coach, was also the baseball coach, and Dick knew he would be able to participate in both sports.

Already at the University were a number of friends and athletes Dick had played with, including the four other starters who would go on to win the national championship.

"I knew we had a chance of

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