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**SPORTS**



Oregon forward Debbie Sporcich (left) is expected to miss the first half of the Pacific-10 Conference season with a foot injury. Oregon State's Judy Shannon is the top scorer and rebounder in the Pac-10.

**Conference teams begin battle**

Competition makes Pacific-10 women's basketball 'toughest in nation' this season

By Jake Berg  
Emerald Sports Editor

All during the preseason, opponents of the Pacific-10 Conference women's basketball teams fell under the march of the mighty schools.

Starting this week, the Pac-10 teams turn their sights on each other, promising an epic battle to be queen of the pack.

Pac-10 teams won roughly three out of every four games (76 percent) against their non-conference foes in the preseason, earning the league enough respect to have nine teams receive votes in the last Associated Press top 20 poll.

The conference season began Thursday night when the Arizona schools played at the Washington schools, and Oregon plays its opener tonight at UCLA at 7.

The Ducks are one of the bigger surprises in the conference, jumping out to an 8-2 start after being picked by most to finish somewhere in the middle of the league. But 16-year coach Elwin Heiny knows the Pac-10 will provide more challenges than the preseason schedule.

"The Pac-10 is proving to be the toughest conference in the nation," Heiny said.

And if the Ducks have a chance to make it to this year's NCAA tournament, they will have to play in spite of the injuries that have plagued the club thus far. Sara Wilson sat out the first eight games before returning, and star forward Debbie Sporcich will likely miss the first half of the conference season with a foot injury.

"I'm really pleased with our preseason record, considering our top two post players were out," Heiny said. "The team has really come together."

Another team that has really gelled is Stanford, but then who expected differently from a program that has won at least 26 games during each of the last four seasons?

Heck, it was disappointing when the Cardinal lost six games last year, but then again, three of those losses were to eventual NCAA champion Tennessee.

The Cardinal seems to be on its way to another fine season, and most have picked Stanford to repeat as conference champs.

Stanford is currently 10-0, ranked second in the nation, and sports one of the top players in the conference in center Val Whiting, who is fourth in the conference in scoring and second in rebounding.

Oregon State, like Stanford, has one of the Pac-10's premiere players in senior Judy Shannon. She leads the league in scoring and rebounding with 24 points and 11 boards a contest.

But that may be all the Beavers have, it seems. Oregon State (17-11 last season and now 5-5) is the only Pac-10 team to not receive votes in this week's national poll.



Oregon coach Elwin Heiny says his team is fortunate to be 8-2 with the losses of Debbie Sporcich and Sara Wilson.

Gone is center Natalia Mattick, who elected to return to her native Germany after an impressive freshman year, and Izzy Maryntschak, the team's leader in assists and three-pointers.

A team not short on three-point shooters or a top freshman from last year is USC.

Sharpshooter Joni Easterly and center Lisa Leslie return to bolster the team. Leslie, last season's Pac-10 Freshman of the Year, averaged 19 points and 10 rebounds last year, and Easterly leads the Pac-10 in three-point shooting, hitting 57 percent.

The Trojans finished 18-12 last year in a season that saw them make it to the NCAA tourney's second round. The loss of only two regular players could signal a return there.

Washington is a school that annually makes an appearance at the season's final tourney, and an 8-2 start and 13th ranking nationally could mean another trip to the tournament.

Coach Chris Gobrecht always churns out a quality team, and although the team's best player, Karen Deden, was lost to graduation, the Huskies' preseason record has not shown a lack in production, despite a conference-low 38 percent shooting from the floor.

Shaunda Greene is one of the Pac-10's top scorers, averaging 16 points a game.

The league's most impressive scorer from last season returns to UCLA for her senior campaign. Rehema Stephens, who tore up opponents for 23 points a game last year, has fueled the Bruins to a 7-3 start with 18 points and nine rebounds a game.

Washington State was a pleasant surprise to Cougar fans last season, joining Washington, Stanford and USC at the NCAA tournament. The