

SPORTS

Ducks put finishes on frustrating year

By Jake Berg
Emerald Sports Editor

Analysis

With the end of the Oregon women's basketball season this weekend, the bad luck that plagued the team all year should also meet its demise.

Mercifully.

The Ducks, who won their first five games and finished the preseason 8-2, are now 14-12 overall and 6-10 in the Pacific-10 Conference. Oregon wraps up the year with a 7:30 matchup tonight against USC at McArthur Court and a Saturday game against UCLA.

This team, 16-year coach Elwin Heiny said earlier this year, was second in quality only to his 20-win squads of the early 1980s.

But that was before the injuries began to take their toll. Oh yes, one mustn't forget the injuries.

As was once said, they came in all shapes in sizes.

Previous to the team's exhibition debut, Heiny said his only concern for the upcoming season was keeping the starting front line of Sara Wilson and Debbie Sporcich healthy. Heiny didn't need to wake from a cold sweat to realize his worst fear.

First it was starting center Wilson who went down with a foot injury before the season even began. And the late-December game she returned in also marked the departure of forward Sporcich, who missed the first half of the Pac-10 season with a foot injury.

After Sporcich's return to the Oregon lineup, Wilson again was forced to sit out — this time for the season — with a foot injury.

The two players were a vital part of the Ducks' inside strength last year, but Wilson and Sporcich have only played a matter of minutes together this season. Last season as freshmen, Wilson and Sporcich, who started every game her rookie year, combined for 22 points and 15 rebounds in 54 games.

Unfortunately for the Ducks,

the only real story this season has been the pair's injuries. Both Wilson and Sporcich have looked good at times this season — Sporcich was a Pac-10 Player of the Week in December — but neither have played enough to make much of an impact — only 29 games combined.

The absence of other players has hurt Oregon, as well. In fact, only Missy Stowell has seen action in every game this season.

That would obviously add to any inconsistencies the team would have — four of the top five schools in the Pac-10 boast the greatest number of players who have played in every game this season.

All of this explains the Ducks winning only two of seven games in February and losing five straight at Mac Court at one point, the longest such streak in Heiny's tenure.

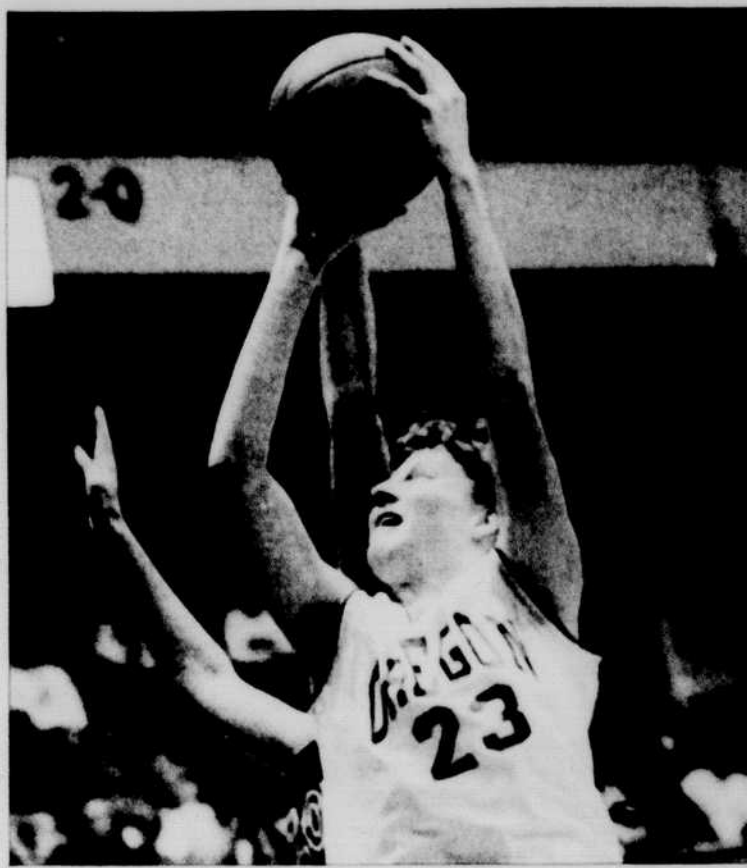
The effect the injuries have had, though, is best illustrated in the number of starting lineups Heiny has implemented this year. Oregon has put 12 different starting combinations on the court this season, and no one player has started every game this year, as Sporcich was able to do last season.

This season has to be frustrating to all involved, especially after the successful preseason. Both players and coaches were talking postseason tournaments following the preseason, but somebody forgot the regular season along the way.

On paper, this strikes a great similarity to last season. Heiny's first losing campaign during his career. That team finished the preseason at 7-3 but lost its first seven conference contests before finishing 13-15 on the year.

Heiny's team need not worry about a repeat losing record — the Ducks are guaranteed of a 500 season no matter what they do this weekend — but a win in either of the games will give Oregon a winning season.

The Ducks will be playing for pride and for a season that tragically wasn't.



The Duck's Debbie Sporcich was one of several key players lost during Oregon's unusual injury-prone season.

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