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Ducks struggle to shoot straight

By Steve Mims
Oregon Daily Emerald

Whether it be in the backyard or on a Nerf hoop in the basement, the first thing most basketball players learn to do is shoot. Yet, as their careers progress it often remains one of the toughest things to do consistently well.

Nothing upsets fans more than when their team has trouble shooting the ball, because, after all, isn't that the easiest part of the game? Who hasn't hit a 20-footer in the driveway and thought, "If I can do it, why can't they?"

Basketball has changed a lot since Dr. Naismith invented the game, things like three-pointers and zone defenses have joined the lingo, but one thing remains the same: The team that puts the ball in the hoop more often will always win.

One of the reasons Oregon has won only four of 11 games this year is because they have had a terrible time shooting the ball. The Ducks are shooting only 42.5 percent from the floor, 32.6 percent from three-point range and 64.7 percent from the free throw line, ranking in the bottom half of the Pacific-10 Conference in all three categories.

"I'm concerned," Oregon head coach Jerry Green said Tuesday, taking a break from viewing recent game films. "We get shots, we just have to be able to make them. We try for 50 percent but haven't done that much. However, a lot of that has to do with the other team."

As Oregon's offense has developed during the last year and a half since Green took over the program, the Ducks have been getting better shots. Oregon players are finding themselves open on the perimeter or down low, but the shots just aren't falling.

"Our early problem was the quality of shots," Green said. "We were a perimeter team early, but now we are making a major push to get it inside more often."

A smart move considering Oregon's best shooters statistically are those who play down on the box. The only Oregon player who has made more shots than he's missed is forward Damon Runyon, who is shooting 62.7 percent from the floor, a pace that would break Richard Lucas' school record of 61.9 percent if it continues.

Center Zach Sellers and forward Henry Madden are the only other two Ducks shooting a respectable percentage, 50 and 48 percent, respectively. Sellers gets most of his shots after offensive rebounds or when the ball is sent down low, and Madden gets some down there as well, though his percentage would be higher if didn't throw up some untimely shots from outside as well.

Oregon's two other main weapons down low, Jeff Potter and Aaron Johnson, have struggled early, shooting 42 and 38 percent, respectively. Green said the inconsistency of the inside game is the responsibility of the whole team.

"Sometimes we look inside, sometimes we

don't," Green said. "Sometimes the big guys work hard, sometimes not. When nobody is open inside, the big guys must continue to work inside."

When the Ducks don't look inside, they have struggled to find the hoop from the perimeter.

Orlando Williams, Oregon's main scoring threat, is shooting 45.1 percent, not bad considering most shots come from deep and other teams often key on him. Williams ranks eighth in the conference in scoring at 17.4 percent, and has put the ball up 144 times, that's 60 more shots than the next closest Duck.

Williams ranks fifth in school history with a career three-point shooting percentage of just below 39 percent, including 41.8 percent last year. This season Williams has been streaky, but is currently slumping at 32.5 percent.

Of Oregon's five returnees this year who have put up at least 10 shots, only Runyon is shooting higher than his career shooting percentage. Johnson's 38 percent shooting is even below his paltry career shooting percentage of 41.4 percent, and Potter has a ways to go to get up to his 47.2 career percentage.

Jordy Lyden showed signs of being a scorer his freshman year when he was named to the Pacific-10 Conference all-freshman team, but has struggled this year after his foot injury. Lyden, just ahead of Williams on the school's three-point list, is actually shooting better behind the three-point arc (37.5 percent) than he is from the field (35.3 percent).

The hottest Duck lately has been point guard Kenya Wilkins, who seems to gain confidence with each performance. Wilkins' shooting percentage has jumped from 28 percent to 37 percent since the Far West Classic last month. Wilkins has hit nine of his last 14 three-point attempts to lead the team at 40 percent.

Free-throw shooting is one area where the Ducks have improved since the beginning of the season. Early in the year the Ducks resembled Chris Farley in his recent ESPN commercials, ("A little help please") but Oregon is almost at 64.7 percent now.

"A lot of people are shooting free throws better," Green said. "We look a lot more comfortable at the line, but we're still not as good as we need to be. Our average is up to 64 percent and our goal is 70 percent."

The biggest turnaround at the line has been Potter, whose average is up to 77.4 percent, nearly 10 points higher than his career average. Williams and Lyden are the only other Ducks ahead of Green's team goal of 70 percent, but Runyon and Darryl Parker are both nearing that level as well.

"The free throw is the one common thing in basketball," Green said. "It never changes, the only thing that changes is the mental attitude."

And as even the backyard superstar knows, as the mental attitude rises, so does the shooting percentage.

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