

Picks, predictions and projections in the Pac-10

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When the 1993 college basketball season began, it looked like the race in the Pacific-10 Conference would be an easy one to handicap.

Arizona, UCLA and California appeared to be legitimate title contenders, and USC, Washington State and Arizona State would be competitive and have chances for an NCAA berth. Oregon, Oregon State, Washington and Stanford were thought to have little chance to escape the cellar.

The conference season is only one week old, but already some surprising results are forming. The Cardinal has been the biggest surprise, racing out to a 7-2 non-conference record before beating Washington and Washington State last weekend. USC is also off to a quick start thanks to a cupcake non-conference schedule that included Tennessee-Martin, Sacramento State and Howard.

On the down side is Washington State, which opened 9-1 before losing three of four, including its first two Pac-10 games. However, the Cougars got off to a slow start last year as well, opening 0-3, before finishing 9-9.

The rest of the conference has gone according to plan, but that is sure to change as well as the conference gets into full swing. Heading into the second week of conference play, *Emerald* sports editor Steve Mims and sports reporters Dave Charbonneau and Scott Simonson have spent many hours devising team capsules and forecasting the fates of each team.

Arizona: 1-0 in the Pac-10, 12-1 overall — The sixth-ranked Wildcats are off to another great start with their only loss coming to No. 7 Kentucky on a last-second tip-in.

However, running up an impressive non-conference and even conference record is no longer enough to silence the critics in Tucson. Arizona has run up a combined record of 48-11 the past two seasons, but both years ended with first-round NCAA tournament upsets, to East Tennessee State in 1992 and Santa Clara in 1993.

"We've won five of the last six Pac-10 titles," Arizona coach Lute Olson said. "There is no way you can satisfy some fans. It's too bad people want to judge a season by one game."

This year's edition of the Wildcats features the top backcourt in the conference, if not the nation, in 5-foot-11 point guard Damon Stoudamire and senior Khalid Reeves.

Reeves and Stoudamire are not the only forces on this team, as Olson has a solid and deep cast around them. Center Joseph Blair and forward Ray Owes are tough up front along with swingmen Reggie Geary, Joe McLean and Dylan Rigdon.

Mims' Forecast - Another season of cruising through the Pac-10, but then look out for Coppin State come tourney time. No, really, this poor postseason streak can't continue, can it? Doubtful, but if Olson continues to downplay the mammoth importance of success in the tourney as the quote above denotes, it may.

When March Madness hits, I expect Arizona to be hearing the ghosts of tournaments past, but it should persevere through the ear-

ly rounds only to fall in the Sweet 16.

Charbonneau's Forecast — I'll go with a second-round ousting. Arizona is the best team in the Pac-10, and that has as much to do with Olson as any of his players. Although the importance of coaching is highly overrated in the college ranks, Olson is one of the few coaches in the land, along with Bobby Knight and Rick Pitino, who has an uncanny ability to take whatever he has and make it a winner.

That's not to say he's short on talent this year. Stoudamire and Reeves are the best backcourt duo in the land, but at NCAA time, it's going to take more than that to go anywhere. One of the front-line players is going to need to step up and become a strong force because every team in the nation knows Arizona's strength lies in the little guys.

Love to see it: Lute Olson, the best-dressed coach in nation, show up for a game with three-day stubble, Levi's and a T-shirt that reads "My team lost in the first round of the 1993 NCAA tournament, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt."

Simonson's Forecast — Arizona won't lose in the first round of the NCAA tournament this time — the Wildcats are devoting their whole season to making sure that doesn't happen. This isn't the most talented team Lute Olson has assembled, but he unquestionably knows how to coach in the Pac-10.

It comes down to the 'Cats home-and-home series with UCLA and Cal. McHale Center is still the toughest place to play in the conference; the Bruins lost by 19 there last year. 'Zona swept UCLA and split with Cal last season. Give the Wildcats the inside track for the conference championship, but they won't get past the third round of the tournament.

Arizona State: 0-1, 5-5 — Bill Frieder's fifth year in Tempe begins a lot like his fourth did, with many question marks because of injuries.

The biggest uncertainty is 6-foot-9 center Mario Bennett, who suffered a serious knee injury in July 1992. Bennett averaged 12.5 points per game in 1991-92 when he was named to numerous all-freshman teams and was named team MVP. Bennett hit for 27 points in a 77-75 loss to St. Louis last weekend.

"Mario has been out for 22 months," Frieder said. "He's not where he was before the injury, but that will come back gradually."

Guards Marcell Capers has been lost for the season, but Frieder is hopeful of having redshirt freshman Quincy Brewer back soon. The Sun Devils knew they could count on senior Stevin Smith, who is averaging nearly 17.5 points per game, but have gotten improvement from forward Ron Riley and immediate help from junior college transfer Isaac Burton.

Mims' Forecast — Last year Frieder took an undersized and undermanned Sun Devil squad to 18 wins, but can he do it again? No. The big key to Arizona State is they have no reserve guards on scholarship. Smith is a big-time scorer and he is getting help this year, but there is just not enough depth to get them through the conference season.

If Bennett returns to form, this team is better than expected, but

that is too big of an "if." The best bet is that Bennett shows flashes of his old self, but will miss some games and show the wear of a knee injury in others. Yet, take hope Bill, this is what everyone said last year and your team proved them wrong.

Charbonneau's Forecast — Arizona State may be the most fun team to watch in the Pac-10. Although Smith's three-point accuracy has fallen a little compared to last year, you have to

believe he will regain his touch and return to form as the best long-range shooter in conference.

If that doesn't happen, however, the Sun Devils can forget the postseason.

A lot also depends on how effective Bennett will be this season. Frieder's comments about taking it slow with Bennett seem to suggest that he's sacrificing this season with the "just wait 'til next year" stance.

If Frieder takes the reins off

Bennett and he stays healthy, the Sun Devils could finish as high as fourth. Because the Pac-10 is in an "up" year, even a fifth-place finish could get Arizona State into the NCAA, but it will be a short stint if they make it.

Here's Hoping: Michigan (Frieder's former team) kicks the living crap out Arizona State in the first round of the NCAAs.

Simonson's Forecast — Good

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