

Rebuilding takes similar patterns

By Steve Mims
Oregon Daily Emerald

Rebuilding is a process that almost every college athletic program is forced to go through at one time or another. It's the time when the number of wins and talented players begins to drop, and it's usually not long before the pink slip falls onto the desk of the head coach.

When the two Washington schools visit Eugene this weekend, three different teams going through this process will be showcased.

Washington (0-4, 2-11), which is suffering through a disastrous first year under new coach Bob Bender; Oregon (1-2, 5-7), which is showing improvement almost every game under second-year head coach Jerry Green; and Washington State (1-3, 11-5), which has moved near the upper division of the Pacific-10 Conference under head coach Kelvin Sampson.

Sampson, now in his seventh season in the Palouse, is the dean of the three coaches. Sampson took over the program after some down years following George Raveling's departure to Iowa. Unlike Green and Bender, Sampson's first year was a breeze, compared to what was to follow.

After winning seven and four conference games, respectively in each of his first two years, Sampson suffered through a disastrous 1-17 Pacific-10 Conference season in 1990 that saw his team lose its final 17 conference games of the year. Sampson was reminded of that year this week.

"Thank God that's over with," he sighed.

Sampson's plan to change things around in Pullman was based around a simple theory.

"I came in with an idea of what to do," Sampson said. "When you don't have talent, you're going to lose."

Sampson decided the most important thing was to build respect for the program early and then begin to fill in the holes with younger players.

"I knew the recruiting must improve," Sampson said. "We got some junior college players right away for credibility."

Junior college transfers Neil Derrick, Terrence Lewis and Tyrone Maxey were brought in following the disastrous 1990 season, and in their second season, the Cougars won 22 games and qualified for the National Invitational Tournament.

Following that success, Sampson moved on to the high school ranks, adding numerous state players of the year, including forward Mark Hendrickson last year. Hendrickson would have been the leading contender for Pac-10 Freshman of the Year in 1992 if not for the play of a certain Kidd.

This year, Sampson plays four freshmen, including guards Dominic Ellison and Isaac Fontaine, who have started eight games apiece. Ellison, a point guard, is averaging 8.6 points per game and shooting 41.7 percent from three-point range.

The addition of four freshmen to a cast that finished 9-9 in the Pac-10 a year ago has Sampson optimistic about the future.

"Our program is solid," Sampson said. "We are one of the solid teams in the conference. We aren't in the great category, but we are in the next tier down."

The results Sampson has garnered so far have been successful, but he is quick to point out that there is no automatic formula for building a winner.

In addition, Sampson said he believes he is at a disadvantage recruiting players to Pullman, as compared to some of the more glamorous schools in the Pac-10.

"There are no definite answers," he said. "You must continue to recruit the best players, and in the Pac-10, that's always tough. A lot of it is based on location and tradition. It can be tough to sell Washington State."

The job Sampson has done in building a program has opened a lot of eyes across the country, and during the last off-season, his name seemed to pop up for almost every coaching vacancy. Washington State has lost its share of coaches in recent years to more prestigious schools, like when Raveling went to Iowa or in football when Dennis Erickson took the Miami job, but Sampson said he rarely thinks about moving on.

"Honestly," Sampson said, "I never think about it except when people bring it up. I'm at a school where we are just trying to get better."

Sampson made it clear he believes his team is capable of playing with anybody, and a recent narrow defeat to UCLA when the Bruins benefited from a couple of questionable calls, has

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