

Freshman sparks big change in Stanford

By Steve Mims
Oregon Daily Emerald

It has become almost routine. One team picked to finish near the bottom of the Pacific-10 Conference before the season starts, ends up surprising everyone and bursts into the top half of the conference by season's end. Despite this inevitability, the story of this year's Stanford Cardinal is an amazing one.

Stanford has cruised through the first four weeks of the conference season at 4-3, picking up a couple upsets, some near upsets and a lot of respect along the way. It may not seem like that impressive of a record, but this is a Stanford team that won only two conference games all last season.

Stanford lost five lettermen off last year's squad, and with only three newcomers, prospects for this year were questionable. However, the emergence of one of the newcomers immediately sparked Stanford in the right direction.

Brevin Knight, a freshman from East Orange, N.J., has become the leading candidate for freshman of the year in the conference, regardless of what Charles O'Bannon continues to do for UCLA. Knight was inserted into the lineup as starting point guard for Stanford's first game, and he's been a fixture ever since.

Knight stepped into the public eye in Stanford's fourth game, an 82-70 upset at Santa Clara. In that game, Knight scored 23 points and dished out eight assists as Stanford beat its first legitimate team of the year.

One week later, Knight scored 21 points, had nine assists and a Pac-10 record 10 steals in Stanford's 91-75 win over McNeese State. In his fifth collegiate game, Knight already etched his name into the conference record books.

Two days later, Knight had another monster game, scoring 23 points, handing out 11 assists and making four steals as Stanford beat Virginia 84-72.

Despite the quick start, Stanford head coach Mike Montgomery was cautious at the beginning of the Pac-10 season, saying that he wasn't sure any team could survive the Pac-10 by relying on a freshman.

"If you have to rely on freshmen, you're in trouble," Montgomery said. "The position is so loaded in the conference it will be interesting to see how (Knight) will handle it."

Montgomery didn't have to worry how his freshman sensation would handle the pressure, and his confidence in the youngster paid off immediately. In Knight's Pac-10 debut, he hit a 15-footer as time ran out to give the Cardinal a 67-65 win over Washington. Knight came back in his next game with 18 points, six assists and five steals in Stanford's 75-64 upset of Washington State.

"I didn't come to Stanford with the feeling that I was going to back anyone up," Knight said. "I came in with the idea I was going to work hard and try to start because I felt as though I could play at this level, just like

I played at the high school level."

Knight's only inconsistency in conference play has been shooting, as his numbers have dropped to 35 percent in shooting from the field and 19 percent from the three-point range. Still, Knight is averaging 12.3 points per game and ranks second in the conference in steals (3.3) and fifth in assists (5.7). Knight could break the school record for steals in a season during his trip to Oregon this week, as he needs seven to top Mike Bratz's record.

"Brevin's been able to hold his own," Montgomery said. "But we expect him to get better. His impact as a freshman has been tremendous."

Knight has received most of the attention for Stanford's early success, but he has had plenty of help. Knight and sophomore Dion Cross have been overshadowed as a top backcourt in the Pac-10, which features the likes of Damon Stoudamire and Khalid Reeves of Arizona, and Tyus Edney and Shon Tarver of UCLA.

Cross is Stanford's leading scorer at 15.3 points per game and has become one of the top long-distance threats in the conference. Cross has hit 36 of 74 three-pointers, including at least one in all but one game this year.

Montgomery blamed some of his team's troubles from a year ago on injuries, and gave credit to those players coming back and helping the team get off to a good start this year.

"We knew we were missing people last year," Montgomery said. "We got them back and added two players so we thought we had the talent to be competitive. We've got enough people to make things happen."

One of those players who was gone last year is 6-foot-7 forward Andy Poppink, who played in only three games a season ago because of a back injury. Poppink has come all the way back into the starting lineup, where he is averaging 13 points and seven rebounds per game.

"Poppink's done a nice job," Montgomery said. "He runs the floor really well and can guard athletic players at the '4' spot."

Montgomery's top returnee from a year ago, senior forward Brent Williams, has improved his play as well. Williams is leading the Cardinal with 16 points and 7.3 rebounds per game in conference play, and has hurt opponents both inside and outside.

With his team in place, Montgomery has led the Cardinal to a 88-79 win over nationally ranked rival California as well as a 76-67 win over USC last weekend. Stanford opened up last weekend by giving then-No. 1 UCLA a big scare before losing 69-65.

"We turned it over against UCLA," Montgomery said. "We didn't dazzle against the Bruins, but we got the USC win, which was needed."

Montgomery brings his Cardinal to town this weekend, and don't be surprised if Knight does dazzle in Eugene.

Duck guard suspended

Junior guard Brion Smith has been temporarily suspended from the Oregon men's basketball team for disciplinary reasons, head coach Jerry Green announced Monday.

The Houston, Texas, native had played in all 16 of the Ducks' games this season as a backup at the point guard position, averaging one point, 0.6 rebounds and 0.8 assists a game in seeing eight minutes per contest.

Smith will not work out with the team during the suspension, Green said.

Smith transferred to Oregon prior to this season from Cisco Junior College in Cisco, Texas.

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