

# PRIME TIME PLAYERS

Trevor Kearney  
Oregon Daily Emerald

While the NCAA basketball tournament pits the best 64 teams in the nation against each other in a quest for arguably the most coveted title in college sports today, it shapes up to be much more than just a national championship tournament. It serves as a chance for the best individual players to showcase their talent in the national spotlight, and most of the country's top players will be participating.

## PLAYERS TO WATCH



RESPERT

■ Respected as one of the best players in college ball, Respert hit for just under four three-pointers a game this season.  
■ In averaging 24.7 points per contest, Respert shoots an amazing 48 percent from beyond the arc.  
■ Scored 31 points against Wisconsin last week.

UCLA's star forward Ed O'Bannon will be there. And, pending Arizona's petition of his NCAA suspension, so will guard Damon Stoudamire. *Sports Illustrated's* Player of the Year Jerry Stackhouse and his North Carolina teammate Rasheed Wallace will be at the tourney, while center Joe Smith and his Maryland Terrapins also represent the Atlantic Coast Conference in NCAA post season action. Arkansas Razorback forward Corliss Williamson hopes to

help his team regain the championship they won only a year ago, while Michigan State guard Shawn Respert looks to show the country that his team is more than just an average tourney team.

More than just a bunch of above average athletes, this group of individuals is considered the best of the best in college basketball this year, and makes up the list of candidates for the 1995 USBWA/RCA Player of the Year.

The 6-foot-8 O'Bannon averaged 20.5 points and 8.1 rebounds per game while shooting .541 from the field and .469 from beyond the arc. His numbers, which got better as the season progressed, earned him the co-Pacific-10 Conference Player of the Year award with Stoudamire and has helped the Bruins bounce back from a first-round loss to Tulsa in last year's tournament.

"One thing about this team is that we all understand what our roles are and what we are capable of doing," O'Bannon said. "I feel that if we continue to work as hard as we can in practice and in games, then good things will happen."

"I think last year late in the season we started to lose a lot of games, and we weren't sure of what we were capable of doing. It showed in our last game against Tulsa. Hopefully this year we can play up to our capabilities," he said.

## PLAYERS TO WATCH



O'BANNON

■ The senior was named the co-Pac-10 Player of the Year for his efforts in lifting the Bruins to the No. 1 ranking in the nation.  
■ Averaged 20.5 points per game this season including a .469 clip from behind the three-point line.  
■ O'Bannon was also named as *Basketball Weekly's* player of the year.

As of late, O'Bannon has heated up, pouring in 24 points and 10 rebounds against Oregon on Saturday. But O'Bannon, a three-time all-conference player, is no stranger to strong play late in the season. Last year, he scored 30 points and grabbed 10 boards against Tulsa, and he averaged 19.5 points and eight rebounds in UCLA's two post season games in 1993.

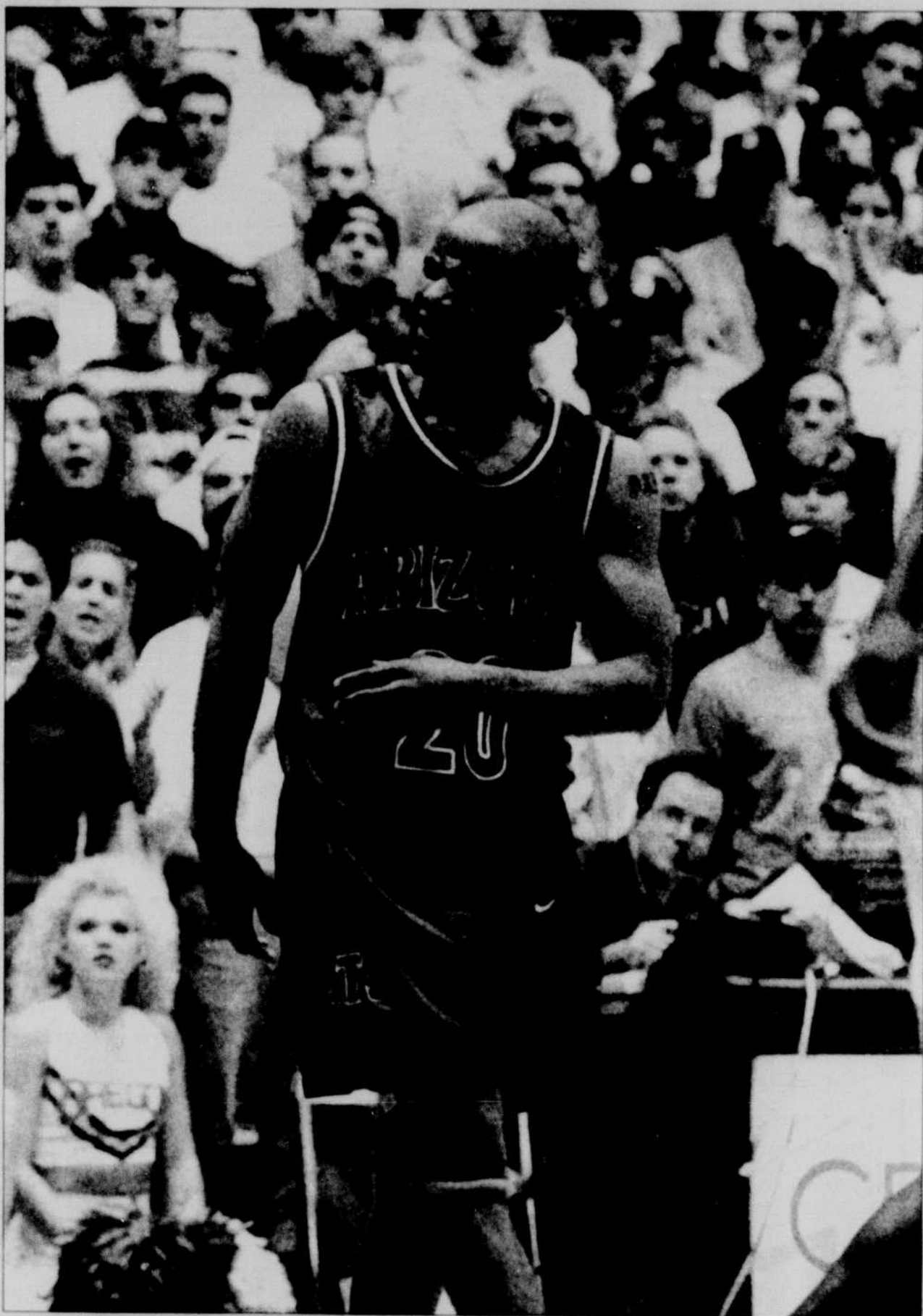
"I think it is just my time of the year," he said.

With a No. 1 ranking, he said, the Bruins face constant pressure to win, but a 16-2 conference record and a 26-2 mark overall shows the team's ability to cope.

"It is a nice problem to have as far as the pressure and to have teams gunning for you," he said, adding that the team's focus wasn't changing going into the post season. "I think we are going to try to force our type of game and play our type of basketball. Hopefully things will work out for us."

North Carolina is represented in the player of the year race by sophomores Stackhouse and Wallace, both of whom are in the top echelon of the college basketball world.

Stackhouse averaged 19.3 points and 8.1 rebounds per



Averaging 23 points a game and over seven assists per contest, Arizona guard Damon Stoudamire could be one of the biggest impact players in the tournament. But it remains to be seen if he will be able to play after a recent suspension from the team and NCAA investigation for suspected involvement with a professional agent.

game as a forward while shooting 51.3 percent from the field and 71.3 percent from the line this season. His play in the ACC tournament last year earned him the tourney's MVP.

Wallace, a center, has a 66.1 field goal percentage and an average of 2.9 blocked shots per game — good for third and 18th in the nation, respectively — to go along with a 17.7 point scoring average.

The duo is part of a North Carolina team that was favored to go into the Final Four last year, but was upset by Boston College. According to Wallace, however, this year's team has become more unified, and that unity has translated into not only more success, but more fun.

"The team this year is more team oriented," Wallace said. "We stick together, and each player knows their role on the team. We go out there and have fun."

Michigan State's Respert ended what he called a second-half slump by scoring 31 points in his team's 97-72 whipping of Wisconsin Saturday.

"I was doing really good early on, but the defenses have adjusted to me in the second half," Respert said.

But Michigan State's opponents didn't do enough to deflate his 24.7 point scoring average, nor did opponents phase his 3.9 three-point field goal average or his 48 percent three-point percentage.

"What I have done is just do a good job of being patient and looking for my shots," he said. "I think I can get a shot pretty much anytime, it's just whether it's a 30 percent shot or a six percent shot."

However, the pressure that opponents put on him late in the season, he said, doesn't really carry over into the tournament.

"It's so much tougher the second half of the season," he said. "Teams know what your strategies are, they know what you are going to do offensively. When you get into the tournament, the first or second game you are facing somebody new, and they kind of have no idea about you and you kind of have little or no idea about what they are going to do."

And in terms of the tournament, Respert feels that just

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