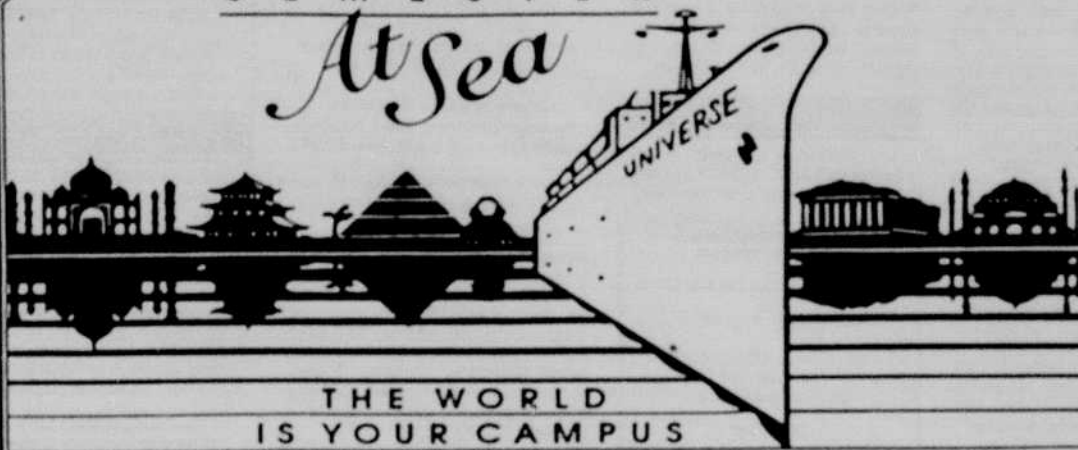


S E M E S T E R

At Sea

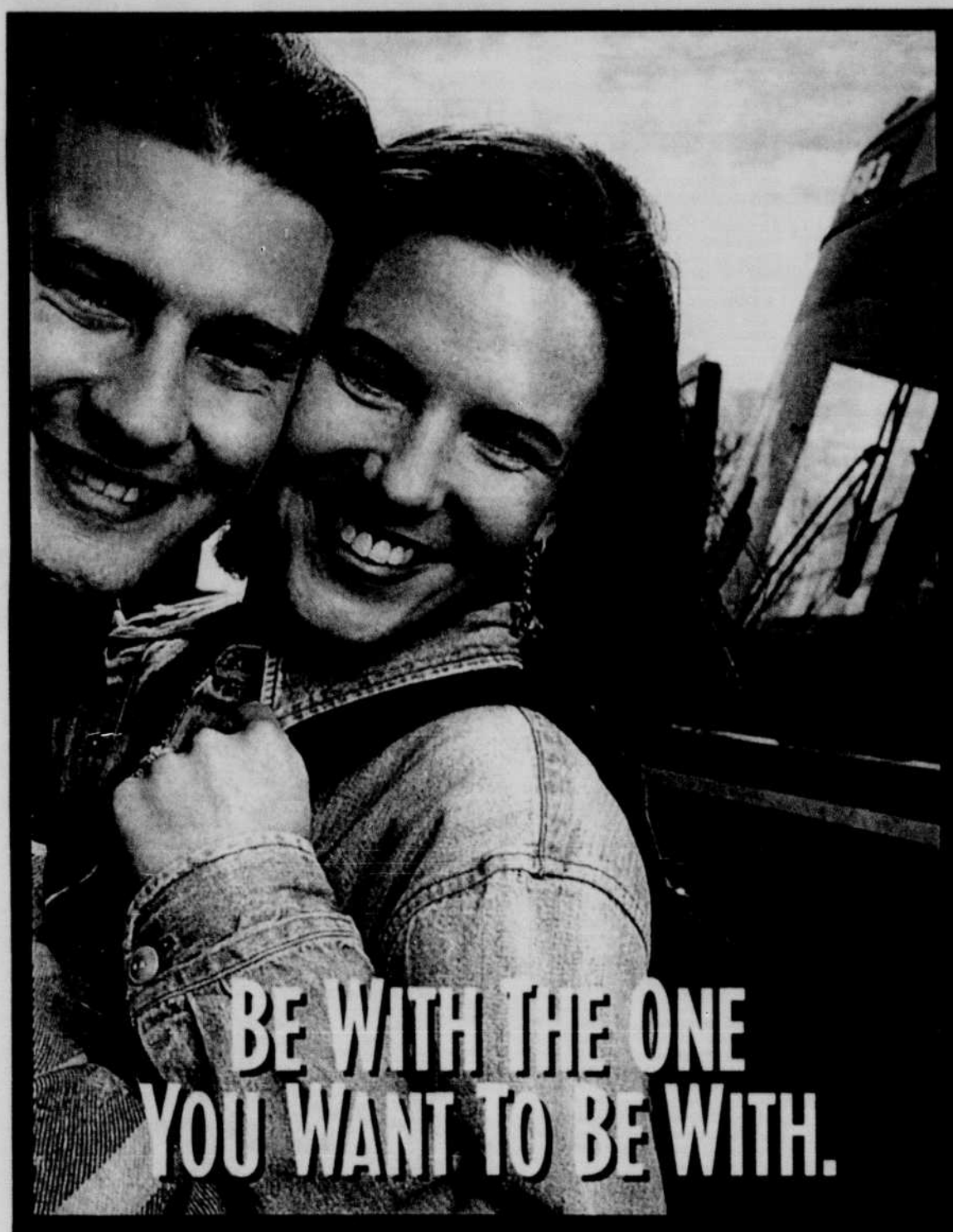


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NCAA

Continued from Page 9

and North Carolina's Jerry Stackhouse and Rasheed Wallace.

The Big Ten saw great success in the 1980s when Indiana grabbed two trophies, but this year's embarrassing plunge, seeing no Big Ten squad advance to the Sweet 16, spoke volumes for the current level of competition in the 11-team league. While in years past the Big Ten has traditionally been one of the elite, it was a watered-down version of its once great self in 1994-1995.

After the ACC, the Southeastern Conference and the Big East have valid arguments for claiming to be among the top two or three basketball conferences in the nation.

The SEC is solid at the top based on the annual strength of Kentucky, Arkansas and the rotating greatness between Mississippi State, LSU, Florida, Vanderbilt and Alabama, but the quality fades a bit once you start talking about teams like South Carolina and Mississippi. In defense of the SEC, the quality of the upper-division teams certainly makes that of the lower-division squads pale in comparison.

The Big East exists as arguably the best league from top to bottom, with the 10-team conference annually biting and kicking for the East's best players, thus diluting the effectiveness of any one team for any length of time all the more. Even perennial cellar-dwellers like Miami have come around to further solidify the exciting conference.

And don't forget the Big Eight. Behind the strength of powerhouse Kansas and a supporting cast of Missouri, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and Iowa State, proponents of the Big Eight can also argue their case. This season, six of the eight teams made it to postseason play — with considerably more success than their Midwest competitors in the Big Ten.

As a part of the Pac-10, Oregon fans generally consider

the conference as one of the best. But if the truth be known, the Pac-10's stock isn't what it once was. That is until this season.

UCLA's championship, while it got a monkey off Jim Harrick's back, more importantly puts the Pac-10 back on the map.

In fact, if UCLA weren't in the conference, the Pac-10 would only have three national championships to its credit with Oregon, California and Stanford being the only saving grace. But combined with the Bruins' record 11 titles, the Pac-10 owns 14 of the 57 trophies handed out to the tournament winner. For economics and math majors, that's almost 25 percent. Wow.

But that's not the point. Oregon's title in 1939 has nothing to do with today's Pac-10. The modern version of the Pac-10 has Arizona's feast-or-famine tournament performances making a mockery of the league's postseason performance record as of late as the Wildcats have been victimized more than once by a 10+ seed and the other conference teams haven't exactly done any better. UCLA players can tell you all about recent tournament embarrassment. Just ask them about a certain Oklahoma team they encountered last year.

This season, the Pac-10 teams have shown that they are to be reckoned with. UCLA blew by one of the East's best in Connecticut and one of the South's best in Arkansas. Arizona State shredded its non-conference foes. Hell, Washington even beat Michigan. Now that's something to write home about.

If nothing else, now people will have to think twice before leaving the Pac-10 out of any list of the top two or three best basketball conferences. The conference needed a strong year, and it got one.

Next on the list is to find a way to beat the WAC in football.

Chris Metz is the sports editor for the Emerald.

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