

Tourney-bound Beavers need win

■ **OREGON STATE:** Head coach Judy Spoelstra says her team is happy to be playing in front of the crowd at McArthur Court

By Trevor Kearney
Sports Editor

Going into Friday night's Civil War matchup, the Oregon State Beavers are ranked 13th in the USA Today/CNN Top 25 poll, boast a 19-7 overall record and have a lock on an NCAA Championship Tournament bid.

The Beavers (11-6 in the conference) clinched second place in the Pacific-10 Conference, too, after Stanford beat Arizona 77-61 last night. The win ensured the Beavers of a second-place finish and was their first step in the direction of their goal of hosting their first-round tournament game.

But don't let that fool you.

Because the Beavers' second and final step is the Civil War.

"I think Friday's game is important for our opportunity to host an NCAA first round," head coach Judy Spoelstra said. "We put in a big bid, we understand that we are being looked at very seriously by the selection committee, and I think finishing on a positive note and playing very, very well is going to be the key for us."

"Even if we go down there and lose we need to play very, very well."

The Beavers are in the midst of a two-game losing streak, and both of those losses came on the road. On Saturday, Oregon State lost to USC by one point, and that loss came just days after UCLA beat the Beavers 68-56.

But those two games played in near-empty arenas, and according to Spoelstra, the Beavers, who broke the Pac-10 single-game attendance record by drawing 7,881 fans against Stanford this year, play their

worst in those conditions. Oregon State set its own regular season attendance record by drawing 63,163 fans this year, an average of 5,264 per game.

"We are used to having 5,000 or 6,000 here at home, and going on the road last weekend to an empty Pauley Pavilion and an empty Lyon's Center kind of threw us off," Spoelstra said, adding that playing in a noisy McArthur Court will help the Beavers if anything. "So noise is a good thing. I think it will help — that big-game environment is where our players step up the most."

And with the Ducks all but needing a win to get a tournament bid, big game environment is just what the Civil War will be.

"It is a big game, Oregon is our intrastate rivalry," Spoelstra said. "I think it is a motivational factor when the players know that this is a must-win situation."

But for the Beavers to get the nod to host their first round game, this game is big for them, too, making it all the more competitive.

"I don't think that they have felt they played that well in the last couple of games and that they are kind of struggling and have a tendency to not show up for big games," Spoelstra said. "So from that respect, you are throwing two teams out there on the floor that are pretty much going through the same emotional crisis."

The Beavers are led by senior forward Tanja Kostic, who holds every Oregon State offensive career record except assists and field goals made. She has chalked up 16 double-doubles this season, including a 20 point and 10 rebound performance against USC last Saturday, and has led the team in scoring every game this year except against Arizona, when teammate Anette

Mollerstrom scored 20 points. She has also had at least a share of the top rebounder in all but three games.

Against the Ducks in January, Kostic downed 19 points and grabbed 10 boards. But according to Spoelstra, tonight's contest is going to be a completely different ball game.

"We were fortunate enough to beat them here at home the first time and it was a very close game, but at the same time we feel like we didn't play very well, and I'm sure they did too," Spoelstra said. "That was a long time ago, the first game of Pac-10 play. It seems like a year ago right now, so we are probably looking at two different teams going out there."

Mollerstrom is also a strong player that has made a big impact at Oregon State. The senior forward is averaging 13.1 points, 4.1 rebounds and just over one steal per game, and together with Kostic, who is averaging an incredible 23.5 points and 10.9 rebounds this year, makes up a feared forward tandem. In addition, the Beavers have 6-foot-5 center Tina Lelas to give the Ducks post players some trouble.

The Beavers put controversy and turmoil behind them last year when long-time head coach Aki Hill was fired. However, Spoelstra, an Oregon State graduate, has picked up the program right where Hill left off.

"I think the athletes have been receptive to me and my style of coaching. I don't know if we would have been able to win 19 games if they hadn't," said Spoelstra, who is in her seventh year as a head coach. "They have been pretty positive — they are very intelligent players, very mature players. I think what they have realized is that they have goals that are bigger than any problems in the past."

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