

Report: Guards provide most depth on Oregon offense

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but Oregon also got Henry Madden back from an injury and academic problems and added highly recruited prep stars Mike McShane and Tyron Manlove. Talk of the 1997 tournament was tough to hide.

With nine games to go, there is still talk about the tournament, but now that talk is about how it may have slipped through Oregon's fingers. The Ducks may be 12-6 overall, and they may have started out 10-0, but wins over teams like Portland State and Boise State may mean very little come mid-March.

Oregon hit the Pacific-10 Conference like a brick wall. After a win over Oregon State, the Ducks dropped four straight and beat only UCLA and perennial cellar-dweller Arizona State.

But in typical Oregon fashion, the Ducks are predicting a better second half. If they can win all of their home games plus one on the road, they will end the year with an 18-9 overall and 9-9 conference record. A .500 record in the Pac-10 may not be impressive, but going 6-3 in the second half may be good enough to sneak into a tournament.

This means the Ducks must beat teams they lost to earlier, starting with the Washington schools this weekend. Then comes a trip to the Bay Area to face California and Stanford, back home for the Arizona schools, back down to California to play against Southern California and UCLA, and finish it off at home against Oregon State. This final game may play to the Ducks' advantage if they are walking a thin line of postseason play. Although beating the Beavers isn't necessarily impressive, it is a mark in the win column.

The first half of the conference season may have been a disappointment, but there were both highlights and lowlights. The Emerald ranks the Ducks' first-half performance by position, offense, defense and the intangibles.

GUARDS A-

If you mention the word guard to anybody in the Pac-10 and then

say the word Oregon, what immediately comes to mind is Kenya Wilkins. With a role as a team leader both on and off the court, Wilkins is the full package. In the first half of the season, he has already become Oregon's all-time assist leader with 576, twice was named the Pac-10's Player of the Week, named tournament MVP for the Far West Classic, set a school record with nine steals against Boise State and is continually building on Oregon's career steals record.

Wilkins is more than just a name in the record book. He is currently the second-leading scorer on the team, almost triples the amount of assists than anyone else on the team and hits almost 81 percent of his free throws.

With a guard like Wilkins, the backcourt will always be strong. Add Jamal Lawrence, who is the team's top scorer, averaging 15.8 points per game, and the guards have the possibility to light it up. In fact, Wilkins and Lawrence have combined to lead the team in scoring in 13 of its 18 games.

The first guard off the bench, Terik Brown, spends about 15 minutes in the game and averages 5.5 points. He said the guards need to step up in the second half of the season.

"Obviously, we have been up and down because we've been winning and losing," Brown said. "The guards need to go out and play hard. The ones who are out there the most are giving it their all. Sometimes we just have to work even harder and go that extra mile."

The guards are important to Oregon's style of offense. Wilkins, Lawrence and Brown have combined for 647 of the Ducks' 1399 points this season, roughly 46 percent of Oregon's scoring.

FORWARDS B

Jamar Curry broke his wrist before the season began. Despite the fact that he won the team's slam dunk contest at "Late Night with Jerry Green," there was still a little bit of concern about it at the beginning of the season. But Curry never skipped a beat, playing

in all 18 games and averaging 11.4 points per game.

Henry Madden has come off the bench in all but six games, but averages 21.6 minutes and arguably plays with some of the highest emotion on the team. Madden also averages the most points for any players off the bench.

Oregon's third forward, Andre Larry, has seen limited time on the floor, only about 6.8 minutes per game, but scored 11 points and pulled down five boards against Arizona State.

The biggest problem the forwards have had in recent games may be rebounding. The Ducks were out-rebounded by USC by 20 boards, and despite leading the league in rebounding last season, Oregon hasn't won that battle on a consistent basis lately.

"I can't see the reason [for being out-rebounded] except we're getting our butts kicked inside the paint," Madden said. "We need to box out and be more physical in the paint. We can't let other teams dictate how they are going to be on the offensive boards."

Larry, Madden and Curry have combined for 24 blocks, the most by any position. But a team can only block so many shots and rebounding is a far more important thing for the forwards to concentrate on. It may have been only a couple of games that the Ducks have been out-rebounded, but they have all been in losses and that says plenty.

POST C

The post position starts and ends with Kyle Milling. Although listed as a forward in Oregon's starting line-up, Milling is all over the floor, from jumping for the opening tip-off to leading the team in rebounding to being third on the team in scoring.

But this isn't enough for Milling. He would like to see the post players, including Rob Ramaker, Jonathan Nelson and Mike Carson, get the ball more on offense.

"I think we've played pretty good even though we haven't been given to many looks throughout the year," Milling said. "Teams have been concen-

trating on shutting down the inside game by double and triple teaming. It has been frustrating for me."

Milling is Oregon's only threat down low, making it easy for teams to concentrate on him. Ramaker can more often be found on the perimeter than inside the paint, and although his three-point shot is improving, it is tough to rebound from 20 feet away. Ramaker is not scoring consistently and is still dealing with knee surgeries he had in the off-season.

One of the most improved players in recent weeks has been Nelson, who has proved to be a formidable back-up for Milling and Ramaker. But after two-and-a-half years, Carson may be Oregon's least improved player. Green has had high hopes for the 7-footer in the past, but so far Carson has not lived up to them.

OFFENSE B

How many weapons does Oregon need to be a legitimate force in the Pac-10?

It has Wilkins, Lawrence, and Milling. There are nights when Brown can find nothing but the bottom of the net and there are nights when Curry is on fire. So what is wrong here?

The Ducks had no problem scoring before the Pac-10 season started, but now they are ranked fifth in the conference. The offense, like the team, has been streaky.

"If one guy gets hot," Brown said, "other guys like to feed off of him. But we have a lot of offensive weapons on the team. It's just a matter of using them, whether we go down low to Kyle Milling or Jamal Lawrence outside for the double or Jamar Curry taking it to the hole. We just got to play our strengths instead of trying to fight our weaknesses."

It shouldn't take much for Oregon to get more points. The Ducks have lost by 10 points or less in four out of their six losses. The key to winning these close games may be free throws. The Ducks are hitting only 65 percent of their free throws and tend to miss them down the stretch when they are so crucial.

DEFENSE C+

Oregon isn't the biggest team in the conference and there are times when this hurts. When teams like Washington and Stanford, who have athletically talented big men, play Oregon, they almost beat the Ducks single-handedly. Anybody remember Tim Young's 20 points and 21 rebounds?

When teams are grabbing more offensive rebounds than the Ducks are taking down defensive boards, there is something wrong. Oregon needs to hang out in the key as long as possible in order to have a fighting chance.

Milling is frustrated with the rebounding situation.

"Teams have just been sending four or five guys to the boards against us and are starting to get confident rebounding on us," he said. "It is hard rebounding with two on four. We need to start being the aggressors."

INTANGIBLES C

The bench — What started out looking to be a strong point and then went downhill fast is now picking back up. With Brown and Madden coming in and putting up quality minutes, the first seven can play with anybody in the Pac-10. Now as Nelson and Larry are getting more minutes, they are showing they can keep the team in the game when the starters are on the bench. McShane is giving a valiant effort at trying to step in for the great Wilkins. He's capable of giving Wilkins a breather, but he is a true freshman and sometimes shows it.

McArthur Court — With "the Pit" being sold out virtually every week, the Ducks should be using the crowd to their advantage. Instead they are 1-3 at home in conference play. Now they only have five games left at Mac Court to turn around their season.

"The thing I regret most about this season so far is that if we had been as good as our fans have been, we would be undefeated right now," Green said.

Chris Hansen contributed to this article.

SCANDAL'S

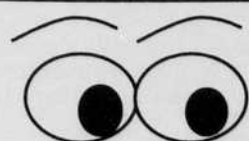
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