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Runge: Ready to make big step

Continued from Page 7
 bought into her program. And anytime you have people that buy into what you're selling, amazing things can happen," Litzenberger said.

And amazing things did happen. Oregon's 20-9 overall record that year was good enough to earn it a home berth in the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 1987, and its single-season turnaround was not only the best ever in the conference, but it was also the sixth-best ever in the nation.

While she clearly impacted Oregon and sparked its turnaround in 1994, Runge was not quick to take all the credit.

"I think the appropriate word is we, not me."

It is just that attitude that makes Runge such a special coach, Litzenberger said.

"Ever since the first time I met her, I have been impressed with her because of her ability to work hard, her understanding of the game and the fact that she has no ego."

Litzenberger said Runge treats the program, including the coaching duties, as "ours," not "mine."

"She lets her assistants do what they do best ... and not many coaches in the country do that," he said. "I think that shows great respect by her, and I think that shows great respect for her. She's one of the great coaches in this country and one of the people that I respect a great deal."

Part of Litzenberger's respect for Runge stems from her ability to keep Oregon among the conference's top teams.

While 1994 was Oregon's breakthrough year, its success did not stop there.

In the 1994-95 season, the

Ducks finished in fourth place in the Pac-10 with an 11-7 record (18-10 overall) and made their second straight trip to the tournament.

The following year, the Ducks went 10-8 in the conference and 18-11 overall and again advanced to the Big Dance.

And this season, the Ducks finished in sole possession of second place in the Pac-10 for the first time ever and will make their fourth straight appearance in the tournament Saturday against San Diego State.

"A lot of programs go one or two years, they're successful and then they struggle for a while," Litzenberger said. "The great thing I think about what Jody Runge has done at Oregon is she has continued that success over a long period of time. And that's much, much more difficult to do."

In addition to winning, Runge has brought an emphasis on academics with her to Oregon. Runge herself was a two-time academic all-Southeastern Conference selection and was thinking of a career in optometry before coaching came along.

Through Runge's efforts, the Ducks became one of the nation's top 10 women's basketball programs academically and is the only school in the Pac-10 to have six players named academic all-Pac-10.

"She has always believed that the No. 1 reason athletes are in school is to get their education," Litzenberger said.

Despite her and the Ducks' past success on and off the court, Runge still wants more.

"We want [a top 25] reputation," she said. "One way or another, whether it be beating Stanford or getting two or three wins in the NCAA Tournament, we

"We want [a top 25] reputation. One way or another... we want to become a team that gets ranked and stays ranked."

— Jody Runge
 Oregon Head Coach

want to become a team that gets ranked and stays ranked."

Scheduling more teams from the nation's most powerful conference, the SEC, is another way Runge said the Ducks can establish themselves nationally. She said she has tried, but it is difficult "getting people to come out here and play because it is so far away from everybody."

A win over San Diego State Saturday would most certainly give Oregon a second-round date with defending national champion and perennial power Tennessee on its home court. And a win over the Lady Vols would force the rest of the nation to take note of the rising star in the west.

As a former Kentucky Wildcat, playing at Tennessee is nothing new for Runge.

"Tennessee was certainly our big rival when I was at Kentucky," she said.

And she made no bones about the fact that she did not like the Lady Vols.

"I had a big poster with a big orangutan on my wall my whole college career with a big orange in its mouth that said 'Suck a big Orange.'"

"We just hated Tennessee and it was always a great rivalry."

If the Ducks can get by the Aztecs, Runge will get a shot at rekindling that rivalry, but this time with a little different twist.

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