

Volleyball: Ducks will make their home debut Sept. 12

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Oregon was coming off a 7-22 season with only one win in the Pacific-10 Conference. Although the Ducks only bettered their overall record by one win and still finished last in the Pac-10 in Nelson's first year, attitudes had changed.

Nelson had fully expected the rebuilding process to take several seasons, but now, only two years later, she is calling this team the best Oregon has had in many seasons.

"We are very excited about our team this year," Nelson said. "In the couple years I've been here, we've been young and inexperienced. For the first year that's actually going to change. I think experience is finally going to be a positive instead of a negative for us."

"I think this is the best team Oregon has had in a long, long time, and I think the win-loss column is finally going to show

some of that improvement."

The Ducks lost two seniors at the end of last season but picked up three key freshmen to add to the roster. Outside hitter Amy Banducci, middle blocker Annie Pogue and setter Michelle Graham will add to the Ducks' depth.

Graham is expected to take some of the pressure of senior Casey Crisler, who has been Oregon's only true setter for the past two years. Banducci and Pogue will add athleticism to the Ducks. Nelson calls Banducci "extremely strong and intense," and Pogue is a left-handed hitter, giving Oregon some extra offensive schemes to play around with.

Nelson said these freshmen bring the team to another physical level.

"The things that are setting this group apart is that we're taller, we're stronger, we're faster," she said. "We're better volleyball players, and our training is really starting to pay off."

With the graduation of Amy Barnes, the Ducks not only lost last season's leader in kills, aces and attack percentage, but also Oregon's team leader both on and off the court.

"I think we're a team with a lot of leaders, which means good things most of the time," Nelson said. "Losing one strong leader has been hard, but I think we've had some time to adjust to that now. We have six seniors and four juniors, so there's a lot of people who want to take that leadership and have the responsibility of taking over the team when it needs to be done."

Oregon's key returnees include junior middle blocker Alli White, who led the team in blocking last season, junior outside hitter Madeline Ernst, who was among team leaders in attacks, and Crisler, who has been an integral part of the team since walking-on in 1994.

"We're going to have high goals for ourselves this year," she said. "We're seniors,

we've been here, we've know what the Pac-10 is all about. It's not an eye-opening experience for any of us."

White said the Ducks already have their goals for the year laid out.

"I think our main goal for this year is to be seventh or above in the Pac-10, and I think we can do that," she said. "We've been working up to this season for these past three years. We think this season is going to be the season that we really blossom."

Oregon takes its self-proclaimed new and improved show on the road for two tournaments before returning home on Sept. 12 for the Oregon Nike Invitational featuring Idaho State, Gonzaga and British Columbia.

The Pac-10 season starts on Sept. 19 when Washington comes to town — the Ducks' first step toward showing off the power of rebuilding.

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