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Bruin turnaround surprises Toledo

Following two losses at the beginning of the season, UCLA has won seven straight games

By John Nadel
The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Even Bob Toledo admits he didn't expect this much this soon from the UCLA Bruins. After all, they couldn't win as many as two straight games last season, much less eight.

Things have sure changed. "Our players believe we can win every game we play," Toledo said. "We preach all the time that you have to play hard, you have to play 60 minutes, you have to play four quarters."

"Our team has been ready to go every week. We have a winner's type of mentality."

That was hardly the case for most of the 1996 campaign — Toledo's first as the UCLA coach after he spent two years as offensive coordinator under Terry Donahue.

It seemed to change in the final game — against crosstown rival Southern California.

The Bruins, who brought a 4-6 record into the game, trailed 24-7 at halftime, and 38-21 after R. Jay Soward caught a 78-yard touchdown pass from Matt Koffler with 11:06 remaining.

But UCLA scored 17 points in the final 6:12 of play to force overtime and finally prevailed 48-41 when Skip Hicks ran 25 yards for a touchdown in the second overtime.

It was, Toledo said, the biggest win he's ever had as a coach. And it's still paying dividends.

"I believe that game did a lot for this program," said Toledo, whose team will go for its ninth straight victory this year and seventh in a row over USC on Saturday at the Los Angeles Coliseum. "It gave our coaches a lot of credibility."

Toledo said the Bruin philosophy was, and has been, "Keep playing, don't worry about the score. When the gun goes off, check the score."

That formula has worked won-

ders since the Bruins (8-2 overall, 6-1 Pac-10) lost to No. 11 Washington State 37-34 and No. 5 Tennessee 30-24 to start this season.

First, UCLA overpowered Texas 66-3. Seven more wins have followed, the most recent a 52-28 triumph over No. 17 Washington last weekend, lifting the Bruins to No. 7 in the country — their highest ranking since 1988.

The Bruins will represent the Pac-10 in the Rose Bowl if they beat USC (6-4, 4-3) and Washington beats Washington State in Seattle. Both games start at 12:30 p.m. (PST).

If UCLA and Washington State both win, the Bruins will no doubt play in another attractive bowl game. In fact, it's likely the Bruins and Trojans will both get bowl invitations.

Hicks, who leads the nation with 24 touchdowns and needs one against USC to set a Pac-10 career record in that department, said he's not surprised by his team's success.

"We knew we had a good team," he said. "We knew it was just a matter of time before we came together. I'm just happy it happened as soon as it did."

Ducks: Ernst is expected to lead UO attack

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with a win over California sandwiched between losses to No. 16 Washington and No. 3 Stanford.

The Cougars are led by Jennifer Stinson's 340 kills and 156 blocks. Keren Oigman recently joined Shannon Wyckoff as the only two players in Washington State history to record 1,000 kills and digs. They are two of the four active Pac-10 players to have reached that plateau.

The Cougars are third in the Pac-10 in hitting percentage at .252 and fourth in kills, blocks and digs.

One ray of hope for Oregon is the fact that junior Madeline Ernst, who had a career-high 29 kills in the win over Arizona State and was nominated for Pac-10 player of the week, missed the last matchup with Washington State due to a kidney infection.

Ernst is now back at full strength but is weary of expectations for a repeat of last weekend's performance.

"Saturday was a great match," she said. "[Setter] Casey [Crisler] did a good job of getting the ball up there for me, and the passers did a good job of getting the ball to Casey. It was a team effort, but there's no superstar on this team. We can't afford to be a one-woman team."

Nelson offered a different point of view. "She's going to get the ball a lot," the coach said. "She's our best offensive weapon. But we need everyone to play solid and have one person to have a great night. If we could get that, we would've had a lot more wins this year."

Oregon's opening loss in the Pac-10 this season came at home against the Huskies, who the Ducks

close the season against Saturday night in Seattle.

Washington is led by senior Makare Desilets, who has four triple-doubles this season and needs just nine more blocks to pass Stanford's Bev Oden and move into second place all-time in the Pac-10 with 642.

The middle blocker leads the conference with 2.03 blocks per game this season, is third in kills with 4.46 per game and stands 10th in hitting percentage at .295.

Teammate Leslie Tuiasosopo, sister of Husky quarterback Marques, is fourth in blocks with 1.54 per game and fifth in hitting percentage at .320.

"Washington presents some problems for us," Nelson said. "But it's an opportunity to go up there and play our rears off, and anything can happen."

While playing steady throughout the match Saturday led to a victory over the Sun Devils, it may not be enough to win this weekend.

"Steady volleyball can get us to compete with either of these two teams," Nelson said. "But we're going to have to play really good to win. We're certainly capable of playing great volleyball, we just need to put it all together, and what better time than our very last weekend of competition?"

This will be the last appearance in an Oregon uniform for six Oregon seniors. Co-captains Casey Crisler and Shelby Edwards, as well as Tia Stewart, Dani Cordova, Alison Pepe and Jessica Temple, will each try to make their last road trip from Oregon a successful one.

UO: Oregon State will be the test for Ducks

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since our last meet. We're very confident, and individually we're all ready."

Conditioning was the team's focal point since its double-header sweep of Pac-10 rivals UC Davis and Stanford on Nov. 8. Conditioning will be the key, Finley said, to Oregon's chances of dethroning No. 6 Arizona State atop the Pac-10.

"This should be a good tuneup for us," Finley said. "I think we could see as many as nine guys win their respective weight class. We should do okay."

Last season, the Ducks opened their competition at the Southern Oregon Open and had two wrestlers, 158-pound Scott Nor-

ton and 177-pound Troy Hughes, win decisions in their respective weight classes. Three other Oregon wrestlers finished in second place.

"I expect us to do well this Saturday," Jeremy Ensrud said. "I have a feeling that we'll be up for this one. I'm more confident having wrestled in the tournament last season, but Oregon State will be a tough test for us. We have a strong team and a lot of team unity. We have a lot of young guys who are still very experienced wrestlers."

Ensrud, along with junior Sean Morgan, looks to be Oregon's best chance of repeating its feat from a season ago. Ensrud was an All-American last season and is the

Pac-10's top-ranked wrestler at 134 pounds. Morgan ranks second in the conference in the 158-pound weight class. Both are favored in their respected classes.

Oregon and Oregon State's best matchups might come in the heavyweight classes, as several of the Pac-10's top wrestlers will meet for the first time this season. The Beavers' Shane Zajac is the conference's top-ranked wrestler at 190 pounds, and Oregon's Chael Sonnen ranks second.

Another anticipated matchup features Oregon State's Matt Orndorff, the Pac-10's second-ranked 275-pound wrestler, and Oregon's Rich Polkinghorn, the conference's third-ranked heavyweight.


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