

Season not what Oregon hoped for

But head coach Cathy Nelson is excited about the talent and potential of next season's team

By Rob Moseley
Sports Reporter

This is definitely not what Cathy Nelson envisioned four months ago.

After returning five starters and 11 letterwinners from a 1996 team that finished 5-8 in its last 13 matches and seemed destined to break out of a five-year slump in 1997, the Oregon volleyball head coach had what could be considered lofty goals for a program that had won one-third of its matches just once since 1991.

"We talked about getting up to seventh in the Pac-10, having a .500 record and sweeping our in-state rivals and nonconference matches," Nelson said. "We did not meet any of those goals."

What did happen, because of a combination of injuries and underachievement, was a 10th-place finish in the Pacific-10 Conference, a .300 record and losses to Santa Clara, Montana and Oregon State.

"We never put it together like we had the year before and like we all thought we were going to," Nelson said.

After starting a 7-2 mark in the preseason, including a victory over Portland, the Ducks hosted Washington and Washington State, two ranked teams, and entered their first road trip with an 0-2 record in the Pac-10.

While the Washington match featured the first appearance of the season for junior Alli White, the returning team leader in kills who returned from a preseason knee injury, it was also the last match at full strength for junior Madeline Ernst, the Ducks' top offensive weapon.

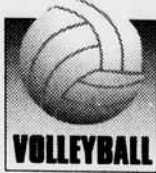
Up next was a trip to the Bay Area for matches with Santa Clara, plus California and Stanford, but disaster struck before the Ducks could make the trip.

Ernst, third on the team in kills last season with 270 and an all-tournament selection in each of

Oregon's three preseason events, was debilitated by a kidney infection. The illness kept her out of action for the loss to the Broncos, and although she returned against the Bears, she was at less than full strength.

"I would say that was a turning point," Nelson said. "That really was a big blow to the team and our confidence. Madeline didn't miss that many matches, but she did not get back into stride for quite a long time."

By the time Ernst and White were finally playing together at full strength, Oregon was in the midst of an 11-match losing streak, including nine in the Pac-10.



"Had I known going in that we were not going to have Madeline for awhile and Alli White for most of the season, that would've changed our goals," Nelson said. "As a team we recognize those are two pretty key players, but even without Madeline, we should have beat Santa Clara and Montana. There were a lot of matches on our schedule that were winnable. We just didn't play well."

After another sweep of Portland on Oct. 21, the Ducks settled into a six-match losing streak during which White made her final appearance of the season before being forced to sit out the team's remaining matches with a shoulder injury.

Oregon avoided an 0-18 Pac-10 finish by winning a stirring five-set match with Arizona State in McArthur Court on Nov. 15, but dropped the final two matches of the season in Washington last weekend.

"We never got a chance to see how good we could be because we were always saddling something, whether it was injuries or someone having a bad game," Nelson said. "It was a constant struggle to try and put something positive together."

That struggle will continue next season, but Nelson said she

is excited about the team's chances.

White is expected to recover completely from off-season shoulder surgery, and with Ernst, Michelle Christ and redshirt freshman Annie Pogue leading the offensive attack, the future is still bright for Oregon volleyball.

"We're going to continue to be a much, much better team," Nelson said. "Most teams that lose six seniors can't say that."

That senior class, consisting of Dani Cordova, Casey Crisler, Shelby Edwards, Alison Pepe, Tia Stewart and Jessica Temple, is a source of pride for Nelson.

"They had to go through some really tough times getting here as freshman, having the coach fired and a new coach come in," she said. "They didn't ask for me any more than I recruited them, but none of them left. They all decided to stick it out, and they worked as hard as they could."

"We're definitely going to miss them and the contributions they made, but at the same time we've got some great [players] coming back and some good things to look forward to."

One of the unknowns for next season, along with a group of recruits that Nelson is "very excited" about, is redshirt Pogue. Nelson said while it was difficult for the outside hitter from Campbell, Calif., to spend a season on the bench, the experience will be rewarding in the long run.

One Pac-10 coach who believes the Oregon program is headed in the right direction is Arizona's David Rubio.

"It's tough when you're losing. I've been there," the coach of the 20-6 Wildcats said. "They're going to be a completely different team next year. The work ethic is there, and they are fundamentally good. They're just undermanned [this season]. But they're doing a wonderful job here."

While that is strong praise from such a successful coach, it remains to be seen if the Oregon program can rise up from the ashes to regain the status it held in the 1980s as a force in Pac-10.

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The Ducks return home for the first time after opening the regular season with two games on the road.

"Coming home to play is very comfortable," Runge said. "Playing on the road is always very hard. We would have shot the ball a little bit better, maybe, if we were at home, or played with a little bit more confidence because we were at home. We had a lot of young kids that had to play, and that's a tough situation, but we'll get over it, get past it, work on our mistakes and get better."

The Saints, a professional club team from Portland, were a late addition to the Pepsi Shootout, added when another team backed out of an earlier commitment.

"I'd rather have it be a regular game, but that's not the way it worked out," Runge said. "We'll use it as a game to continue to improve."

San Diego State and first-year head coach Barb Smith come to Eugene looking to bounce back from a 75-67 loss to Toledo on Sunday.

Forward Olivia DiCamilli is the Aztecs' leading scorer, averaging 12 points per game, and Courtney Bale leads them on the glass, pulling down eight rebounds per game.

San Diego State has already defeated one Pacific-

10 Conference team this season, beating Oregon State 63-56 on Nov. 16.

"I think they'll be a very aggressive, man-to-man defensive team for 40 minutes," Runge said. "They're very athletic, and they'll be a good team."

If Oregon and San Diego State meet in the championship game Saturday, the Aztecs could be out for revenge. Oregon beat them 80-60 in the first round of last season's NCAA Tournament.

Portland State dropped its first game of the season Sunday at Nevada, 63-47, and opened the season with a 69-53 win over Denver on Nov. 21. The Vikings are led by Monique Zampera, who averages 10 points and five rebounds per game.

"Portland State will just be really scrappy, with good shooters," Runge said. "They aren't as big as we are, but they really get after it and are a very aggressive team."

Oregon guard Lisa Bowyer said she does not know much about this weekend's opponents, but is more concerned with how the Ducks play.

"We're going to dictate whether we win or not," she said. "If we have a good defensive game, our offense is going to come and we're going to have a good weekend."

Oregon won last year's Pepsi Shootout with wins over Idaho State and Utah.

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