



Oregon head coach Jody Runge (background) and the Oregon players celebrate during the second half of the Ducks' game.

## Win: Arizona had runs of 10-0 and 11-0 in first half

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times, got the ball back, then jumped toward the basket and let the game-winning shot fly. It was just her fourth basket in 12 attempts from the field.

"I thought Natalie Hughes really did a good job, broke down our defense, then hit the jumper," said Bonvicini, whose team dropped into a second-place tie with the Ducks at 5-2.

Hughes' last-second heroics almost overshadowed the spectacular night of reserve Natasha O'Brien.

The 5-foot-11 junior from West Beach, Australia, was the most unlikely of heroes. She was supposed to provide an offensive spark for the Ducks this season, but had yet to score more than 11 points in a game and was averaging just 2.2 a contest in conference play.

Thursday was her breakout game. O'Brien, who missed the 1996-97 sea-

son because of an NCAA suspension for competing in a semi-professional league, scored seven points during a crucial 15-4 Oregon run to start the second half, and her three-pointer tied the game at 42 with 14:26 to play.

She hit nine of her 14 attempts from the field, including four of seven from behind the three-point line, to finish with 22 points.

"I think a lot of people, including Tash, have been wondering where she's been, and I'm telling you, that's a great boost for her confidence," Runge said.

Reserve Nicole Strange joined O'Brien in providing a shot in the Ducks' arm off the bench when she came in and scored six straight Oregon points to put the Ducks in front 61-55 with 3:49 left.

"That's the sign of a great team when you're bench kids come in and [play well]," Runge said.

At halftime, it didn't seem likely

Strange, O'Brien or any Oregon player could have brought the Ducks back.

Arizona, despite 15 first-half turnovers, used a 10-0 run and an 11-0 run to lead by as many as 12 on four occasions in the first half and took a 38-27 lead into the locker room.

The Wildcats hit 73.9 percent from the field in first half (Oregon shot 32.4) and outrebounded the Ducks 18-10.

"I thought we played scared in the first half," Runge said.

The second half was a very different story.

Oregon scored 12 of the first 14 points in the second half to pull within one, 40-39, and O'Brien's three-pointer tied the score at 42 two minutes later.

The Wildcats retook the lead briefly at 45-44 two minutes later, but after O'Brien scored on the next possession, the Ducks never trailed again.

## Reserves: Strange excels after half

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A strong rebound and putback with 10:40 remaining gave Oregon its first lead, 44-42, since it was up 5-4 with 17:17 left in the first half.

Another O'Brien jumpshot from the left corner put the Ducks one up after the Wildcats regained the lead, then her final three, wide open from the right side, gave Oregon its biggest lead of the night to that point, 49-45 with 9:23 left.

O'Brien then passed the proverbial baton over to the other hero of the night, Nicole Strange, who played just one minute in the first half.

"I was confused why I wasn't playing," said Strange, who has started 10 games this season but came off the bench Thursday.

She more than made up for it, scoring all eight of her points in the final 5:51.

"I wanted the ball so bad," she said, "and I just kept shooting every time I got it."

It kept going in. All her shots were short- to medium-range jumpers, including three in a row, the second as she was fouled, which gave Oregon a six-point lead, 61-55, with 3:49 remaining.

"That's her shot right there," Oregon forward Brianne Meharry said. "All those shots she took, the baseline jumpers, stuff like that, that's how she plays and that's her strength. I think that obviously helped us a lot. She hit some key baskets."

Strange's final two points came on a jumper in the middle of the lane with the shot clock winding down. The bucket gave Oregon a four-point cushion after the Wildcats cut a seven-point deficit to two.

A couple of jumpers by the Wildcats tied the game and set up Hughes' dramatics.

Strange finished four for five from the field in nine very productive minutes.

"I missed the first shot and sometimes when I miss the first one I put my head down," Strange said, "but I didn't. I just kept shooting and they kept going in, thank God."

For O'Brien, the game was a coming out party of sorts after slowly returning to form because she sat out last season because of a suspension handed down by the NCAA.

"It's taken me awhile to get used to [playing again], and I just had to take advantage of my chance when I got it tonight, and I made the most of it. I'm glad I've started to get things going," O'Brien said.

She said she became more and more confident as more and more shots began to fall.

"When I first got out there," she said, "I took a few shots that didn't drop and I thought 'Here we go, I'm not gonna be out here long,' but then I hit a couple in a row and it was just 'give me the ball.'"

Yes, Hughes was the hero, but without Strange and O'Brien, the Ducks would have never been in position to pull out the win.

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