

NICK MEDLEY/Emerald

Nicole Strange (with ball) and the Oregon women work out in Ames, Iowa, in preparation for Saturday's first-round game vs. Rutgers.

Oregon aims high in Iowa

Defense could be the deciding factor in the Ducks' first-round game

Alex Pond
Sports Reporter

AMES, Iowa — If there is any pressure associated with the NCAA Tournament, the Oregon women aren't feeling it.

Relieved to get the regular season behind them, the Ducks are relaxed and ready going into Saturday's Midwest Regional first-round matchup with Rutgers here at 1 p.m. PST.

Oregon, the region's 12th seed, is 17-9 overall after going through the Pacific-10 Conference sea-

son 13-5, while Rutgers, the fifth seed, comes in at 20-9 overall after compiling a 15-5 record in the Big East Conference.

The two teams will be playing for the right to face Iowa State or Kent in the second round at 4 p.m. PST on Monday.

"We're all excited because we think we have a big chance to win the first- and second-round games," said point guard Natalie Hughes. "It's kind of hard, though, sitting in the motel waiting around to play and practice."

Making their fifth straight appearance in the tournament, the Oregon players have been relaxed and laid back since arriving in Ames late Wednesday and, for that matter, since the tournament field was announced Sunday.

"There's been a real change for them emotionally on closing the book on the Pac-10 season," Oregon head coach Jody Runge said. "I think for so long it was like, 'We've got to win, we don't

Turn to **WOMEN**, Page 15

The Scorers



NATALIE HUGHES
The Australian native leads the Ducks from the point guard position with 15.5 points per game and had a career-high of 30 earlier this season.

NATASHA POINTER
As a 5-foot-6 freshman guard, she has made a quick impression on Big East teams. She leads Rutgers with 14.2 points per game.



TELEVISION
KVAL-TV,
TCI Channel 8
Sat., 1 p.m.



The Coaches

JODY RUNGE
In her fifth season with the Ducks, the Iowa native has now taken Oregon to five straight NCAA Tournaments.

C. VIVIAN STRINGER
She is the only coach in NCAA history to take three teams to the tournament. This will be her first trip with Rutgers in her three seasons.



No. 23 Ducks face Portland State in home opener

UO will play two games with the Vikings today and two with the No. 12 Beavers on Saturday

By Joel Hood
Sports Reporter

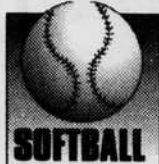
With 10 wins in their last 12 games, confidence isn't the only thing the Oregon softball team will bring to the plate in its home opener today.

The No. 23 Ducks will also bring a national ranking.

Oregon opens its home schedule today with two games against Portland State and a Saturday doubleheader against Pacific-10 Conference rival Oregon State. The games on both days will begin at 1 p.m. at Howe Field next to McArthur Court.

The No. 12 Beavers will be the Ducks' first Pac-10 test of the season, but they are already

the sixth top-25 opponent for Oregon since its season opener against then-No. 2 Fresno State on Feb. 13. The Ducks' 15-6 start is one of the best in school history and includes a 4-1 against ranked teams.



SOFTBALL

An improbable start that is beginning to open eyes around the country as Oregon jumped to No. 23 in the nation this week after a seven-year hiatus from the top 25. And a good indication, head coach Rick Gamez said, that this team will not be intimidated by the Beavers No. 12 ranking.

"I just think the team is geared up to final-

ly be playing at home," Gamez said. "The team is confident and playing well. They're excited to be playing at home and to have their fans there."

Jennie Cook (8-5) will start at pitcher for the Ducks in the first game against Portland State. The junior leads the team in wins, earned run average (1.99), strike outs (44) and innings pitched (84.1). Cook, who is also scheduled to start Game 1 against Oregon State, ranks fourth on the Ducks' all-time wins list with 33.

She also leads Oregon in home runs with four, runs batted in with 13 and ranks fifth in

Turn to **DUCKS** Page 20

On tap

■ **WHAT:** Oregon softball

■ **WHERE:** Howe Field, next to McArthur Court

■ **GAME 1:** Oregon vs. Portland State, today at 1 p.m.

■ **GAME 2:** Oregon vs. Oregon State, Saturday at 1 p.m.