

Ultimate frisbee team ready for national championships

Sixth-seeded UO must finish first or second in its pool to advance to the semifinals

By Mirjam Swanson
Freelance Sports Reporter

Anything short of reaching the national championships would have been a serious disappointment for the Oregon Club Sports women's ultimate frisbee team.

The national championships are this weekend, and the Ducks are not disappointed.

"We are really, very, very excited," co-captain Jody Dozono said. "This has been a big goal of the whole team from the beginning of the season, and we've been working pretty hard to get here."

The Ducks will be in Blaine, Minn., battling it out with the other 11 best teams in the nation during the three-day tournament. To advance to the semifinals, they must finish first or second in their pool, which includes Georgia, Wisconsin, Carleton College, Cornell and Rutgers.

Oregon will face Georgia and Wisconsin on Friday and the other teams on Saturday. It's a schedule that should benefit Oregon, co-captain Rachelle Depner said.

"Georgia and Wisconsin should be the easier of the five games," she added. "That should help us, considering the travel and time change. The games against Carleton College and Cornell will be the toughest."

Oregon begins the tournament as a No. 6 seed, but that does nothing to dishearten the team.

"We'll have to improve on that seeding to get to the semifinals," Depner said. "But I feel confident that we can do it."

If the Ducks can play their way into ultimate frisbee's final four, they will face either Yale, North Carolina Wilmington, Rice, MIT, Indiana or Stanford, which make up the other pool.

Stanford, the No. 1 seed, is the defending national champion

and the only other team representing the West. Although the two teams hail from the same region, they have yet to face each other this season. The Ducks would love the chance to do so.

"Hopefully, we'll get an opportunity to play them," Depner said. "It would be a tough game, a good game. They're a younger team than they were [last year], but they're still good."

The Ducks feel ready for what should be a challenging few days, said Oregon head coach Corey Pike.

"We expect really strong competition from everyone who is there because everyone is there to win it," she said. "But we're pretty prepared; it's been a long season and now we're ready to perform."

Oregon players think that if they can perform to their full potential, winning the national championship is not implausible.

"It will be very tough," Dozono said. "But it's not unreachable, it's very doable. If we execute and win the long points, we can take it."

While the Ducks plan to go all out physically for a chance at the title, they say they will also have to play smart.

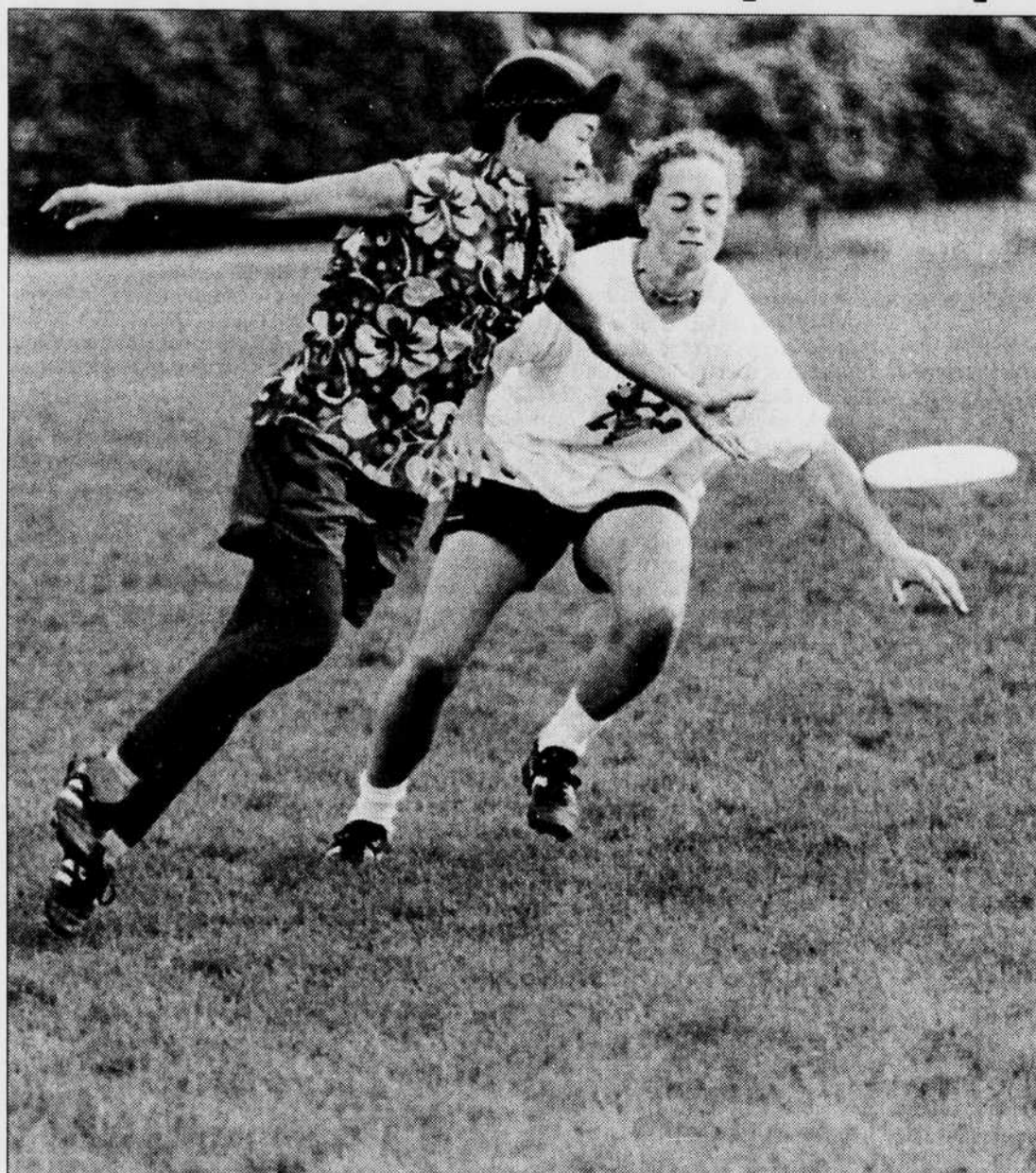
"We have to maintain mental focus," Pike said. "We have to take care of ourselves physically because we're going to take a lot of mental and physical strength."

Oregon's chances for success are increased by having a coach who understands winning. Pike took control of the team last year, bringing plenty of experience. She won a world title as a member of Women on the Verge, a Seattle-based club.

With her extensive knowledge of ultimate frisbee, she redrew Oregon's offense, teaching her players new zone plays which created a potent attack to match an already tight defense.

"It really caught the team up to the college level, which has grown a great deal in the past five years," Pike said.

The team's mix of new and experienced players gives them the luxury of being able to make substitutions without losing a lot on the field. It's an asset that should



Jody Dozono and Annie Brownell fight for the disc during practice this week.

NICK MEDLEY/Emerald

help the Ducks conserve energy at the tournament.

Pike sees more than a good rotation in her group of players.

"Each time they come to the field, the veteran players bring more skill and more leadership," she said, "and the rookies have improved incredibly with their choices they make during games and with their disc skills. It's incredible."

Many of the team's most experienced players have played alongside one another for four or

five years, and it shows on the field.

"We really read each other well," Depner said. "We'll know when someone is going to cut before they do it."

For all the team's leadership, skill and communication, the Oregon players say the intangibles make the team special.

"I have to say, I've never played on a team with so much heart," Dozono said. "That makes a big difference."

Pike, who is no stranger to suc-

cess, said she feels it, too.

"They have so much mutual respect for each other," she said. "They are willing to be excellent and to do what it takes to be excellent."

Pike's team understands that it will take the will to be better than ever to defeat the top teams in the country, and they're looking forward to the challenge.

"It'll be tough, but definitely possible," Depner said. "If we play like we know how to play, we could win it."

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