

Davis, Wirz return to lead experienced group

The Oregon men hope to challenge for an NCAA title in Dellinger's final season

By Scott Pesznecker
Oregon Daily Emerald

On the brink of entering the 1998-99 season, the Oregon men's and women's cross country teams have two things in common: both finished last season strong, and both want to finish this season even stronger.

Although both the men and the women lost runners who were major contributors to their team's eighth-place finish at last season's NCAA Championships, the coaches said that each team has enough returning veterans to keep the teams strong.

The men's team has six returning seniors, all with NCAA experience. Two of those seniors, Matthew Davis and Oliver Wirz, make up Oregon's first returning All-American duo since Rudy Chapa and Alberto Salazar in 1979.

"This team has more seniors with championship experience than any I can think of," men's coach Bill Dellinger said. "Having those types of guys back makes it easier for everybody — they know what to expect from me and vice versa."

"With all the talent added together, the only factor will be keeping them healthy."

Dellinger, who will be entering his 32nd and final season of coaching, said he does not feel any added pressure because this will be his last. Instead, he said he just "looks forward to seeing them have a good season."

However, one thing is clear. Both Dellinger and his team are focused on preparing for this season's NCAA Championship, and both hope to improve on last season's eighth-place finish.

With all of the experience returning, Dellinger said this team has the potential to finish in the top three.

"We want to go as far as we can," Dellinger said. "We all want to win a national title. Stanford and Arkansas are going to be tough. This team has its work cut out for them, but if everyone returns, it should be good."

But if this team is going to surpass what it did last season, Dellinger said, it must train harder.

"We all know what's coming up," he said. "Now we need to prepare ourselves to do it. The guys need competition, and they need the season in front of them. Right now they are in shape, but we're not ready for the NCAAs at this point."

While the key runners on the men's side are intact and appear ready to go, health has been a problem for the women's team.

Freshman Erica Braswell, the Alabama 1,600-meter and 3,200-meter champion last spring, has a stress fracture and is questionable for the first races of the season. Returning sophomore Pam Fields is also injured.

"We have to replace [Milena] Glusac and [Karen] Knudson," women's coach Tom Heinonen said. "Our top recruit Braswell has a stress fracture, so she'll be



Ross Damonn (foreground) and Andrew Bliss will provide the men's team with depth this season.

off to a slow start. We'll have to sort things out."

But the women can look forward to five returning NCAA veterans, one of them being two-time All-American Marie Davis. Davis led Oregon in six of seven harrier races last fall. Heinonen hopes juniors Heather McMahon and Liz Howell, both with NCAA experience, also step up big this season.

"Going into the season, we look similar to last year," Heinonen said. "But we ended up getting eighth, so that's a solid starting point. We've got four or five people

we're counting on to come back healthy and fit. Then we've got a group of 20 others from whom several will need to step it up a level."

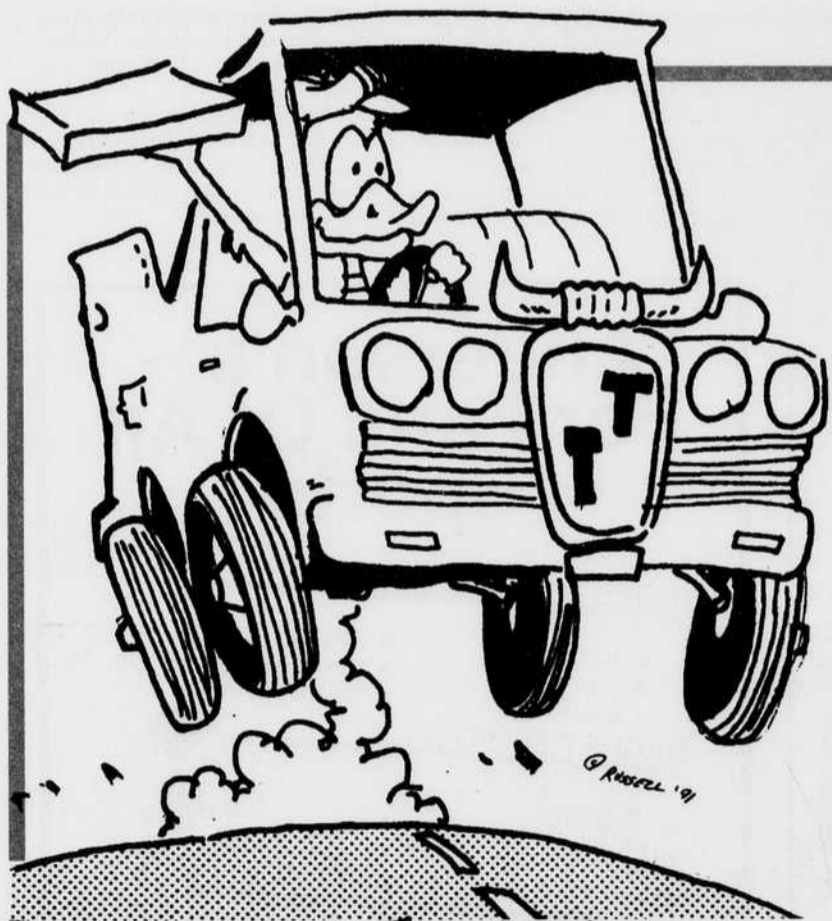
"Everybody who's healthy feels that she can be a stronger, more fit runner. If each person was better, we'd have a better team without a doubt. How well we overcome missing runners and injuries remains to be seen."

Heinonen said while the senior leadership will be critical in guiding the women through a successful season, another strength of the team is its overall size. The team

consists of 28 runners.

"There will be lots of healthy competition for the seven spots on the traveling squad," he said. But the starting five will likely consist of veterans Annie Ebner, Kylee Wells, McMahon, Howell and Davis.

"Our goal is to finish well," Heinonen said. "It's not how well we start, but how well we finish. We want to run our best races at the three championship meets at the end of the season, including the Pac-10 meet which will be held in Eugene."



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