



Matt Garton/Emerald

Men

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But after a knock-down, drag-out season that had the Ducks lose seven games by six or less points, head coach Ernie Kent and his players are more than satisfied with a chance to end the season in New York.

Oregon (16-11 overall, 8-10 Pacific-10 Conference) will meet Georgia Tech of the Atlantic Coast Conference at 9 p.m. Wednesday at McArthur Court in a first-round NIT game to be televised nationally by ESPN.

"To have the opportunity to host a game here at home and to play a team the caliber of Georgia Tech, that's like a dream come true," Kent said. "For this community to have a first-round opponent like that on ESPN national TV, I couldn't think of a better way to showcase this program across the nation to recruits and alumni."

Earlier in the day, the Oregon players found out something forward A.D. Smith said most of them were assuming — that they did not receive an NCAA Tournament berth.

The NIT has a field of 32 teams, half as many as the NCAA, with the first three rounds being played at the competing schools. The semifinals and final will both be played at Madison Square Garden in New York on March 23 and 25.

"It's another level of competition," said senior Terik Brown, one of only two Ducks active the last time the Ducks went to the NIT in 1997. "Everybody comes to play, and it's just so exciting. It's what you play for, to get to the postseason and do as well as you can, and we have that opportunity right now, to finish up on a good note."

First the Ducks must get through the first three rounds, which may include a game against a familiar opponent: Southern California, which the Ducks would play should the Trojans beat Wyoming.

"Not to look far ahead at all, but I think all of us noticed that pretty quickly," Smith said. "Who knows, if that were to happen, whether it would be in Eugene or L.A., but certainly it would be something we'd look forward to."

It was the 85-84 loss on Jan. 7 to the Trojans on a last-second, half-court three-pointer by Adam Spanich that began a streak of eight games in which the Ducks

were within four points of the opposition at the end of regulation. The only win of that span was an 87-83 win over Washington State in triple overtime.

The Ducks redeemed themselves with a 60-55 win at USC on Feb. 6, which began a streak of a different sort, one in which Oregon won six of its last eight games.

"That's typically been my teams — they tend to peak in February and really come on at the right time, and this team is no different," Kent said. "I felt like, from the UCLA game on, that we've just been getting better and better at a very rapid pace. When we hit Washington up here, we were extremely efficient."

The Ducks lost to UCLA on a buzzer-beater by Baron Davis, but would lose just twice more, to nationally ranked Arizona and Stanford. Included in the wins was a 77-63 victory over the Huskies.

All of those games came against opponents the Ducks had already played this season. Wednesday brings an unknown quantity, a perennial contender that has also had a difficult season.

Georgia Tech (15-15, 6-10) began the season 10-3, which included losses to Washington and Kentucky, but it had a win over North Carolina in Atlanta.

Since New Years, the Yellow Jackets are 5-12, including a 78-49 loss to the Tar Heels in the first round of the ACC tournament on Friday.

Georgia Tech is led by forward Jason Collier, a transfer from Indiana who averaged 17.5 points and 7.5 rebounds this season.

Despite their recent troubles, the Yellow Jackets are usually a national power, the kind of big-name school that Kent said he hopes will help pack McArthur Court on Wednesday.

"I'm looking for a huge sixth man," Kent said. "If you want an opportunity for the students to paint their faces, and line up outside and get ready for this game, for fans who have been in those seats a long time to get an opponent of this caliber, [this is it]. All those people who wonder, why don't we get those big opponents? Well, we can't get them in here."

"Now we have one of them, and it's an opportunity for us to show who we are."



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