

A tough road looms for Ducks

The Oregon softball team plays at No. 1 UCLA, then at No. 5 Washington

By Tim Pyle
Oregon Daily Emerald

There are road trips, and then there are tough road trips.

The Oregon softball team's task this weekend just might need an entirely new classification — mission impossible.

After a stretch of 11 of 13 games at home ended with a 4-3 win over Simon Fraser of the NAIA on Tuesday, the No. 18 Ducks (36-20 overall, 7-11 Pacific-10 Conference) are rudely reintroduced to the rigors of life away from Howe Field this weekend.

In probably the nation's toughest road trip, Oregon plays in Los Angeles against No. 1 UCLA in an 11 a.m. doubleheader Saturday before flying to Seattle for a 1 p.m. doubleheader at No. 5 Washington on Sunday.

Ducks head coach Rick Gamez, in his 11th season as a head coach and his third season with Oregon, said there is "no question" that this is the most difficult trip he has faced.

"It's by far the toughest road trip, but everybody in the Pac-10

has to make it," said Gamez, who became the fastest head coach in program history to win 100 games with Tuesday's victory.

So why does every team in the Pac-10 have to make this grueling trip?



The absence of softball programs at Southern California and Washington State upsets the scheduling balance that exists

for other Pac-10 sports, such as men's and women's basketball. With the Bruins (49-2, 16-2) and Huskies (38-13, 9-8) being the only Pac-10 programs in their respective areas, conference officials have paired them.

So No. 8 Oregon State makes the same trip as the Ducks, but in reverse order.

Last season, Oregon managed a split with UCLA, which was suffering a down season resulting from NCAA sanctions, before being swept by a score of 14-1 at Washington.

This season, Gamez said he would consider a 2-2 record for the weekend a success.

That would be a significant improvement from April 17-18, when the Bruins and Huskies visited Howe Field and handed the Ducks four consecutive defeats, their longest losing streak of the season.

After UCLA cruised to a 6-1 victory in the first game behind the dominating pitching of Courtney Dale, the Bruins broke out their bats in game two to lay a 16-1 whipping on Oregon.

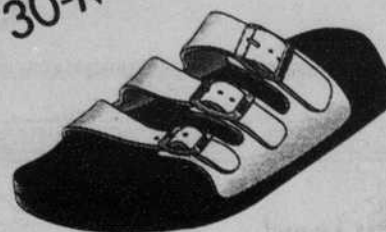
The next day, the Ducks built a 5-0 lead on Washington in game one, but the Huskies rallied with eight unanswered runs for an 8-5 win. In the second game, ace Jennifer Spediacci led Washington again, securing a 5-2 win with her high-octane pitching and a two-run double.

"The big thing is that we've got to have a little more intensity," Gamez said.

Oregon senior Katie Mackey said the Ducks had a team meeting this week to resolidify their goals for the rest of the season.

"We're trying to focus on every single pitch in every single ballgame," said Mackey, who paces the team with 40 runs batted in to accompany her 11 home runs and .301 batting average.

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