

UO takes part in top tourney

■ A youthful Oregon hopes to gain valuable experience at the Las Vegas Invitational

By Brett Williams
Oregon Daily Emerald

Tourists from everywhere flock to Las Vegas to see if they can make it to the top. The Oregon wrestling team is gambling that its hard work will pay off when it competes today and Saturday at the Las Vegas Invitational.

The tournament, not sponsored by the NCAA, is a tuneup for some of the best wrestling programs in the nation. More than 40 schools from around the country participate annually.

"This tournament is like [basketball's] Preseason NIT for wrestling," said Chuck Kearney, in his second season as Oregon's head coach. "This is the who's who of college wrestling."

The tournament consists of 32-man brackets, and some teams are entering partial squads. Unlike the last tournament the Ducks participated in, team scoring is kept in this tournament.

Oregon's youth will be tested early and often. Only two of the Ducks' starters — junior Doug Lee and sophomore David Watson —

have experience in a competitive college match.

"No one else has wrestled in a college tournament of this magnitude," Kearney said. "This will really open their eyes to college wrestling. We're so young that the experience we need we can only gain through competition."

Kearney said many of his athletes are ready to break out of shells and become top wrestlers, and this tournament is an excellent opportunity to make such a

statement.

"Brian Watson is really close to making that step," said Kearney of David's freshman brother. "Eric Webb and Leif Williams are the same. We could walk out after this weekend and say that they really matured."

Freshman Tony Overstake gets his first start of the season in the 149-pound weight class. Senior Mark Castle, who wrestled ahead of Overstake in Oregon's first three competitions, is recovering from injury and was not cleared to participate.

Kearney said he feels positive about having Overstake in the

starting lineup.

"He's a kid that will rise to the level of competition," Kearney said. "It's extremely good for him because he's on the border of becoming a good college wrestler."

Despite his inexperience, Overstake is confident he will perform well this weekend.

"I'm going to go as hard as I can, and I expect to win," Overstake said. "I was talking to coach, and he said I can surprise some people because I'm a freshman. I'm just going to wrestle as hard as I can and do my best to win."

The Las Vegas Invitational is the beginning of the Ducks' most difficult month of the season. Oregon hosts defending Pacific-10 Conference champion Cal-State Bakersfield on Dec. 11 and No. 4 Oklahoma State on Dec. 16.

Lee said the competitive tournaments give the Ducks a good tuneup before Pac-10 play begins.

"It's important mentally because it will give us confidence later in the season," said Lee, who wrestles in the 184-pound weight class. "How you do in the pre-season gives you confidence when you face the same wrestlers later in the year."

No. 5 and No. 7 clash for SEC title

By Paul Newberry
The Associated Press

ATLANTA — It's like old times in the Southeastern Conference championship.

No. 5 Florida and No. 7 Alabama, who met in four of the first five title games, face each other again Saturday night after a two-year hiatus, with a trip to the Orange Bowl at stake.

"It seems like every time we go, it's always against Alabama," Florida coach Steve Spurrier said.

This year, neither team has a chance at the national title and there are no individual honors at stake.

Alabama (9-2) overcame the personal troubles surrounding coach Mike DuBose and a humiliating 29-28 loss to Louisiana Tech to get this far. Florida (9-2) was eliminated from the race for No. 1 with a 30-23 loss to top-ranked Florida State two weeks ago.

"This is the biggest game of the year in the SEC unless you're in the national championship game," Spurrier said. "And we're not going to be in it."

The SEC champion earns an automatic bid to the Bowl Championship Series, expecting to face Michigan in the Orange. The loser Saturday probably will head to the Citrus Bowl against Michigan State.

Alabama won its last conference title in the first championship game, defeating Florida

28-21 at Birmingham's Legion Field in 1992. The Tide went on to beat Miami in the Sugar Bowl and claim the national title.

"Most of the time it's been a very competitive game that's gone down to the wire," said DuBose, an assistant during Alabama's previous trips to the title game. "The one I remember most is the only one we won."

Florida won the next four SEC titles, beating Alabama three times. Tennessee has been the Eastern representative the past two years, defeating Auburn and Mississippi State in the championship game.

DuBose seemed unlikely to get this far in August, when he admitted to lying about his personal relationship with a school employee who settled a sexual harassment claim against him. Alabama punished the coach by cutting two years and \$360,000 from his contract.

After the Sept. 18 loss to Louisiana Tech, which pulled off the upset by throwing a fourth-down, 28-yard touchdown pass with two seconds remaining, angry fans called for DuBose's ouster. The mood changed dramatically two weeks later when Alabama shocked Florida 40-39 in overtime.

The Tide lost only one more game the rest of the way, to Tennessee, and wrapped up the Western Division championship with

victories over Mississippi State and Auburn.



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