

UO women

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set that it needs to reach the next level or even to attain the type of success that it did last season, when the Ducks benefited from former guard Lisa Bowyer's relentless in-your-face, in-your-head brand of aggressive play.

"We miss the Lisa Bowyer personality," Runge said, "because she exhilarated everybody that way, with the things that she did."

Missing Bowyer, take II

Not totally unexpectedly, the Ducks are missing Bowyer in another department as well: defense.

Although Oregon isn't far off last season's all-time Pacific-10 Conference bests in both field-goal percentage defense (.364) and scoring defense (59.2) this season, the Ducks have uncharacteristically allowed individual players to have huge offensive games against them.

The most points that any one player scored against Oregon last season were the 23 that current WNBA guard and former Colorado State standout Becky Hammon scored early in the season.

But this year, without their defensive standout Bowyer to disrupt the other team's best offensive player, the Ducks let Southwest Missouri State's Jackie Stiles put up 38, DePaul's Lanae Williams score 37 and San Francisco's Sarah Wanless drop 26.

"Definitely, defensively we're missing her," Runge said.

Dion hanging in there

Junior guard Lindsey Dion, such an integral part of Oregon's



Jeffrey Stockton Emerald
Junior guard/forward Lindsey Dion is pushing forward despite an ailing right knee.

all-around game plan, has been — and will be for the remainder of the season — hindered by a torn lateral meniscus in her right knee, which occurred against Southwest Missouri State.

She suffered the same injury last season in the Ducks' final game against Iowa State, and it took her more than three weeks to completely recover, Runge said.

Unfortunately, with Pac-10 play beginning Saturday at Oregon State, Dion doesn't have the luxury of taking the necessary time off to heal.

"She's not at risk of being more injured," Runge said. "It's just that it bothers her. It's definitely a distraction not to be able to play the way she wants to play. You protect it even though you're not at risk, so we're just gonna make the best of it."

Dion, a typically hard-nosed-yet-clean Oregon player, will wear a knee brace for the remainder of the season.

"It's OK," Dion said. "It's not any worse and it's not any better, but it's not gonna get better until I can rest it. It's fine."

New Orleans gives Dikta da can

NEW ORLEANS— Mike Ditka bet just about everything on Ricky Williams this season. On Wednesday, he paid with his job.

Ditka was fired by the New Orleans Saints after three straight losing seasons, and he said he would never coach again.

Beloved in Chicago for 11 seasons after leading "Da Bears" to the Super Bowl in 1986, Iron Mike could not stop a downward slide in New Orleans that saw the Saints finish 3-13 to match the second-worst record in franchise history.

"We tried, but we didn't get it done," Ditka said. "That's the bottom line. When you don't get it done you're going to get out of there, and in a hurry."

The 60-year-old Ditka said he had hoped to stay on as coach despite the team's troubles but decided he would never lead a football team again.

"Nope, never, no," Ditka said.

Last spring, Ditka puffed an eight-inch cigar triumphantly after trading eight draft choices — all the 1999 picks and the No. 1 and No. 3 for 2000 — to get Williams. At that time, Ditka proclaimed the Texas running back the "final piece of the puzzle" for the Saints and again talked of taking the team to the Super Bowl.

But Williams, who was injured for much of the season, gained only 884 yards and two touchdowns rushing — including 7 yards on 14 carries in the final game.

"I understand it fully: You're 3-13, you have the expectations we do, you bring in Ricky Williams, and it doesn't work out," Ditka said. "I mean, we got

to be realists."

Ditka originally signed a three-year contract and said he should be fired if he couldn't accomplish his goals. He went on to rack up a 15-33 record, including a 6-23 record in the last 29 games, and a league-leading 14-game road losing streak.

This year's record is the worst ever for Ditka. His previous worst mark was 5-11 with the Bears in 1992.

New Orleans scored just 260 points this season, while giving up 434.

Also fired by owner Tom Benson were general manager Bill Kuharich, senior vice president Terry O'Neil and the assistant coaches — in what Benson described as the first step in returning the Saints to the spot the team enjoyed in the late 1980s, when it had its only winning years and made four trips to the playoffs.

"This was a difficult decision," Benson said. "Mike Ditka is one of the greatest football people ever."

The Saints 45-13 loss to the Panthers on Sunday at the close of the season was among the worst in Ditka's coaching career. It wrapped up the seventh-straight season New Orleans has finished without a winning record.

Despite the poor showing, Ditka said Benson's decision was surprising.

"I really thought we'd get another year," Ditka said.

Financial terms of Ditka's departure were not disclosed, but he signed a contract extension two years ago. The new deal runs

through 2002 and is reportedly worth \$2 million a year.

Benson did not meet with reporters or answer questions. His statement said the search for a new general manager and coach would begin immediately and continue until he finds candidates to "take us where our organization and our fans want to be."

Under Ditka, Chicago dominated the NFC Central with 52 regular-season victories between 1985-88. That was the most wins by an NFL team in any four-year period.

Ditka ranked second among Bears coaches in both tenure and victories. He coached the Bears to six NFC Central titles, three appearances in the NFC title game and a Super Bowl title in 1986. The Bears were 18-1 that year. After the Super Bowl, Ditka was honored as coach of the year.

After being fired by Chicago, Ditka worked as an NFL commentator for four years. He was hired by the Saints on Jan. 28, 1997.

His first year was marked by sideline tantrums, yanking players out of games and even a threat to quit, which he rescinded later. The Saints were 6-10 and 6-10 in Ditka's first two years.

"With all the ranting and raving that people saw, he always left it on the field," said quarterback Billy Joe Tolliver.

"He had his say and moved on. He was never devious. He's a man's man and a stand up guy and I have a lot of respect for him."

— The Associated Press

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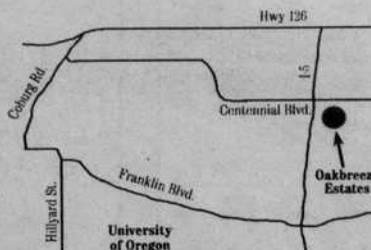
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