

# Strange

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season — and Strange had a career high.

Perhaps it was a sign of things to come.

Strange hasn't been having the picture-perfect senior season. She doesn't lead the Pacific-10 Conference in scoring, like teammate Shaquala Williams does. She isn't a terror on the defensive end, either, placing second in the conference in blocks like center Jenny Mowe does.

And unlike teammate and friend Jamie Craighead, Strange doesn't like to shoot the three-ball — ever.

"Me and Jamie are, like, opposite," Strange said. "I won't shoot behind the three-point line, she won't shoot in front of it."

Yet on several occasions, Strange has been the anchor of the Ducks' offense, a tendency she hopes to continue tonight at 7 p.m. when Oregon takes on Stanford at McArthur Court.

In a season when the Ducks' downfall is its lack of consistency, Strange always seems to stay afloat. Her oh-so-dependable jump shot has brought fans at McArthur Court to their feet many times. Even more importantly, her shot finds its way to its target over 50 percent of the time — way more often than any other of Oregon's perimeter shooters.

"I set the stage for being consistent," Strange said. "Consistency is what the team needs, and I'm

trying to do that, you know?"

"In high school, [shooting above 50 percent was] my goal, and that was my goal all four years here. And I don't think I've done it until now. I don't know why that is, probably just confidence and stuff, and being willing to take the shot."

She came to Oregon in 1996 and played behind starter Lisa Bowyer. Unlike Mowe, who joined the Ducks at the same time, Strange's first season was relatively quiet.

"When we first got here, we weren't like, as 'high profile,' you know? We weren't expected to do that great, but now, like, everyone knows we can do it, so we're expected to do great things. And we've just grown as a team, and grown as Oregon basketball, you know what I'm trying to say?"

Strange's next couple of years were not very high profile either. The guard's old career high, 13 points against UNLV as a freshman, lasted through her sophomore and junior seasons.

On the court, Strange had her shooting touch intact. She also averaged 20 minutes a game. But despite the increase in time and some opportunities to start, Strange never was a major threat on the offensive end.

Which is why, heading into this season, Virginia Tech decided to leave the senior open. And why the senior made the Hokies pay.

"She is somebody who has the green light anytime if she's open," Runge said. "What's been really positive this year is that she's had the courage as a senior to score

with somebody in her face — to have the courage to take the shot, even when it wasn't necessarily open, when we need to score."

"She's one of the leaders on the team," Mowe said. "She keeps everyone together. It's Nicole, you know? She comes in and you're just like, 'Yaaahhh!' She's a really cool girl. She brightens up a room when she walks in."

In Strange's four years as a Duck, Oregon has gone from a team that hoped to make the NCAA Tournament to a team that expects it, and she believed that next season's team will be even better.

But her focus isn't on next season. It's on right now.

"I wish we were playing up to our potential and doing a little better, but we're all having fun still, and that's the main point," Strange said. "I don't want my senior season to end up bad. Knowing we could be so good, hopefully we'll end up really good."

Next season, Oregon will take the floor without the player in the familiar No. 14 jersey. Strange will be missed, especially by Mowe, Strange's roommate as a freshman and great friend ever since. The two would have been seniors this season if Mowe hadn't have had tendinitis in her knee, which caused Mowe to redshirt her sophomore year.

"She always teases me about it," Mowe said. "She says, 'I should be graduating with you.' We should be having our senior night together, but that's not the way it went, so it's kind of tough."

# Flores

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career assists total tonight at McArthur Court, when the first-place Cardinal (14-5 overall, 7-2 Pacific-10 Conference) takes on Oregon (15-6, 6-3) at 7 p.m.. Eight more dimes will give Flores 585, moving her into fifth-place all-time in the Pac-10.

Leading the conference in assists with 5.89 per game this season, she could become the first player in history to lead the Pac-10 in assists for three straight years.

But how things have changed during Flores' stead on the Farm.

These days the buzz-word around the Pac-10 is "parity," something unthinkable during Stanford's decade of dominance.

It was always the Cardinal. And everyone else.

Mighty Stanford. And the Pac-10.

When Flores arrived, the Cardinal owned the conference, winning it all-out nine times between 1989 and 1998. Moreover, Stanford reached six Final Fours in eight years — "Being a freshman, I thought the Final Four was just where you ended up at the end of the season," Flores said.

Not anymore.

"All of the teams have gotten a lot more competitive in the Pac-10 over the last three years or so," Flores said. "Of course you'd like to go through undefeated, but [parity] does make it more interesting."

Indeed, Oregon has gotten better. UCLA has gotten better. Oregon State, Arizona and Arizona State have gotten better. California is getting better.

Pollsters, however, seem oblivious to the Pac-10's improvement, choosing instead to view Stanford's slide primarily as the result of VanDerveer's taking a year of sabbatical to coach the gold-medal winning Olympic team in 1996.

But even the Cardinal — relatively young and vulnerable last year — has gotten better this season.

Sharpshooters Lauren St. Clair, a sophomore, and Jamie Carey, a freshman, join Flores in creating a potent outside-in approach, which took its toll on the Ducks during the astounding 42-point swing at Stanford on Jan. 15.

And Flores is playing better than ever. In a sweep of the schools last weekend, she had five assists, four rebounds and a career-high 21 points against Southern California and nine assists in the Cardinal's throttling of

the then-No. 15 Bruins.

VanDerveer's been appeased.

"She's playing exceptionally well," VanDerveer said. "I think her development is in running the offense and keeping her head up and really making great decisions."

Flores has always been a stunning player. She's so fast, so deceptively strong and nearly unstoppable on the break, when she can let her pinpoint, length-of-the-court passes fly.

"She's a tough matchup," Oregon point guard Shaquala Williams said. "She'll put pressure on you in transition. She's probably one of the few people who can match me in speed and quickness."

And with experience, Flores has improved on the intangible aspects of playing the point.

"Some people say leaders are born," Flores said. "But you can, in some ways, learn to be a leader. That's the process that I've gone through."

Yet, if none of the Flores-led squads reaches the Final Four, her desire to be remembered as one of the Cardinal's best is still fair.

"Years from now when Tara will be talking about all the great point guards," Flores said, "Maybe I can be included in that bunch."

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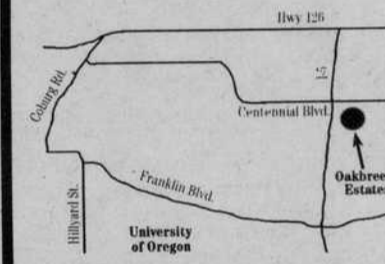
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