

Giant-slayer USC eyeing postseason

Two very different women's basketball teams took the floor Saturday night at McArthur Court, each trying to accomplish the goal that every team has when they hit the hardwood — to win.

Yet there was something greater at stake for each combatant.

The Ducks, trying to remain in control of the Pacific-10 Conference title chase, also wanted to show the conference that its earlier loss to Southern California was a stroke of bad luck rather than the sweet-stroke jumper of guard Tiffany Elmore at the buzzer.

The Trojans had little hope — then — for postseason play, but they still had plenty of pride to play for. And after much talk about their win over Oregon on Jan. 27 being a mistake, Southern California wanted to prove it could hang with stronger teams.

The ensuing 40-minute debate was fierce.

But when all was said and done, the Trojans said more and said it louder.

"There were a couple things said about the last time we played them being a fluke, and [that] they just didn't work hard. And personally that's the kind of stuff that puts a fire in your eyes," forward Danielle Golay said. "Anytime you lose away, there's always an excuse. It's great to be able to reinforce that loss on their home court, because it wasn't a fluke."

The Trojans, projected by many to finish the season somewhere around seventh in the con-

ference, have surprised many, including the Pac-10's toughest teams.

After enduring three road losses — a 20-point loss to UCLA, a four-point overtime loss to Arizona State and a 15-point loss to Arizona — the Trojans came home and beat Oregon, 74-73.

Three losses later, USC avenged the first part of its season, beating UCLA, Arizona and Arizona State on its home floor.

And on Saturday, it was Oregon's turn to lose.

The Trojans' win was their first Pac-10 road victory of the season. It was also their first sweep, and it



Scott Pesznecker

happened in front of 6,037 hostile fans.

"Basketball's a game of matchups," USC head coach Chris Gobrecht said. "We happen to be a tough match up

for the top teams in this conference. There's probably a lot of reasons for that. Now it's like our big goal is to go out and beat the teams we're not supposed to beat."

USC last won the Pac-10 title in 1994. A few more wins, and the Trojans could be heading for a trip to the NIT.

And they have to be eyeing their home game on March 5. It's against first-place Stanford. Look out.

Basketball

continued from page 7

USC's constant pressure and never got going.

"Usually when you start out slow, you figure, 'OK, we've gotta pick it up sometime, there's no way we can play a whole game like that,'" junior forward Brianne Meharry said. "But that's what we did tonight."

Oregon wasn't ever completely out of the game. It just wasn't ever in it, either.

With three minutes, 32 seconds to go, the Ducks emerged from a timeout trailing 60-53. But sophomore guard Shaquala Williams pushed through the press and made a lovely up-and-under hesitation layup, bringing Oregon within five.

Then, after forward Danielle Golay — who led USC with 19 points — hit a jumper, Angelina Wolvert answered with a layin, and the Ducks were back down five with two and a half minutes left.

Moments later, Jenny Mowe came up with a tremendous block on the baseline, which led to another hesitation Shaq layup at the

other end, on the assist from senior guard Nicole Strange.

With just less than two minutes to go, the Trojan Women led by only three, 62-59. Oregon, it seemed, has finally got its groove back.

But then, with 1:12 left, Mowe stepped to the free throw line with a chance to pull her team within one. But the junior missed both shots.

Forty seconds later, Wolvert was called for her fifth foul and joined Meharry as the second Duck to foul out.

"It wasn't until I fouled out that I realized we weren't going to be able to pull this off unless we came down and hit some big shots," Wolvert said.

And that didn't happen.

Williams knocked down a desperation three from the top of the key with eight seconds left, and she then drew a foul with :02 on the clock. It was all too little, too late.

"We ran through our whole arsenal of offenses, but we couldn't find anything that could get anybody an opportunity to score," Oregon head coach Jody Runge said. USC "did a great job, they picked us up at 40 feet and forced us into a place where we just

wanted to get rid of the ball. We just weren't at all prepared to execute against this kind of pressure."

Williams, playing in front of her friend Chamique Holdsclaw, had a game-high 22 points on 7-of-17 shooting, but she had only one assist and six turnovers. As a team, the Ducks finished with nine assists and 27 turnovers.

The Ducks also committed 24 fouls, which may have been somewhat abetted by nit-picky officiating. Regardless, the only time this season that Oregon fouled more was in its 74-61 loss to Santa Barbara in December.

As disappointed as Runge was in Oregon's overall execution, she seemed to be even more disillusioned by her players' demeanor.

"I told them 'I'm not going to get too upset about it,'" Runge said. "If you don't care about it — and I didn't see any tears after the game — then I'm not going to care that much." They have to decide what they want to do: if they're going to come in and get ready to go down [to Arizona] and win some games or if they're gonna be fragile. They have to get a lot tougher."

Or at least ditch this evil twin.

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Men's hoops

continued from page 7

the face. Smith suffered a concussion and watched the rest of the game from the stands behind Oregon's bench.

Eight minutes later, Darius Wright was called for a flagrant foul. The call made Kent livid, and he was issued with a technical foul — a rarity for him.

With Smith gone and a fired-up coach on the sidelines, the Ducks battled the Trojans down-to-the-wire with a weapon that had been missing as of late — their jump shot.

Alex Scales led the charge as he hit 11 of 16, including 4 for 8 from three-point land, to finish with a career-high 30 points. In all, Oregon shot a much-improved 50 percent from the field and 42.9 percent from beyond the arc.

The game was close in large part because the Ducks had no answer for Scalabrino, who had himself a career-high 29 points.

Oregon owned a 50-42 lead with 6:30 to go, but three minutes later, USC's David Bluthenthal scored two of his 24 points. It capped a 9-0 run and put the Trojans in front, 51-50.

With 4:24 left, Oregon found itself down 67-61 after Scalabrino converted a dunk and a three-point play on consecutive possessions.

Kent called a time-out, and as Scales walked back on the floor, his face was one of determination. His eyes were focused. He was not going to lose.

On the first possession, he found Julius Hicks for the bucket and the foul. Then he hit a three-pointer with 3:38 left, cutting the Trojan lead to one.

USC took a 71-69 lead with 2:42 to go, but like a true senior leader, Scales knocked down another three and then rebounded a miss and outran three streaking Trojans to execute the fast-break lay-in.

Oregon led, 74-71. Two minutes remaining.

Game over? Not quite.

USC guard Jeff Trepagnier hit three of four free throws to tie the game.

Wright then knocked down a baseline jumper and hit two free throws with 20 seconds left to give Oregon the 78-74 advantage.

With USC's postseason hopes on the line, Scalabrino muscled home a bucket while getting fouled and cut the margin to one with nine seconds left.

On the ensuing inbounds, Wright passed to Scales, who then passed back to Wright, but the ball went out of bounds. Yet Oregon dodged a bullet when USC's own inbound pass turned disastrous as Scalabrino tripped and fell over his own teammate, and Hicks picked up the loose ball.

Hicks knocked home two free throws, and when USC's Brandon Granville missed his target on a three, the win — and the "life lesson" — belonged to the Ducks.

"It was just an outstanding win," Kent said. "This might be one of the biggest character wins in this program. They have tremendous character, and I'm lucky to be able to coach them."

Like a true warrior, Smith spoke after the game with his eye swollen shut and his cheek making it difficult to speak.

"The boys pulled through tonight," Smith said. "Talk about Alex, Darius and Julius. Those guys are clutch."