

ERNIE

through the ages

■ Ernie Kent was in uniform for the Ducks during the craziness of the 1970s; now he's led them to the NCAA Tournament

By Jeff Smith
Oregon Daily Emerald

The exact moment that Darius Wright's desperate buzzer-beating three-pointer swished through the net, the coach was no longer coaching.

When Wright's rainbow-like heave capped an unbelievable six points in five seconds giving Oregon the 76-74 victory over Arizona State on March 2, the coach transformed back into a player.

For the briefest of moments, as the McArthur Court crazies rushed the court in exhilaration, Oregon head coach Ernie Kent couldn't hide his emotion. He jumped around with glee before realizing who he was, composing himself and going over to shake Sun Devil coach Rob Evans' hand.

But really, who could blame Kent for wanting to go crazy?

The win gave Oregon its first 20-win regular season since 1945 and ensured the Ducks of only their second NCAA Tournament appearance since 1961. It also was the result of Kent and his diligent coaching staff that turned the Oregon program around in only their third year on the job.

Kent knew exactly how his players were feeling at that precise moment. He knew what it was like to be a player at Mac Court and to hear the deafening roar of its faithful contingent.

This 1999-00 Duck team has rejuvenated memories of Kent's days as a member of Oregon's "Kamikaze Kids" of the mid-1970s. That Dick Harter-coached team was an astonishing bunch who won games with its outra-

geous aggressiveness and deep-hearted passion.

Often after home wins this season, Kent has referred to the boisterous crowd as the "Mac Court of old."

"When I say that, it's certainly what we experienced here as players," Kent said, "where that roar you may see after an Alex Scales dunk was there the entire game. It gave you such an energy boost. And as of late, we've got that back."

"When you see it like that, you know that's why you wanted to come back."

Kent graduated from Oregon in 1977 and came back to his alma mater as head coach 20 years later. He guided the Ducks to a 13-14 season in 1997-98, and then took a 19-13 team to the NIT Final Four a year ago. Kent led the Ducks to more wins in his first two seasons than any other basketball coach in more than six decades.

His commitment to the program was rewarded in October with a four-year contract that could pay him in excess of \$420,000 annually.

"I've been impressed with Ernie Kent since I've hired him," Oregon athletic director Bill Moos said. "To say we're making steady progress is an understatement. We have one of the premier basketball programs in the conference right now."

And although Kent has restored the unbridled enthusiasm synonymous with Duck hoops in the 70s, he never will forget the road he traveled to get back to Eugene.

After two years as an Oregon assistant in 1977 and '79, Kent boldly decided to move to Saudi Arabia with his wife to test his fate as a head coach.

"My plan was to go over there for two years, and hopefully some doors would open for me in the states," Kent said. "Little did I know that two years would turn into seven. But it was a very re-

warding time to be over there."

Rewarding? Yes.
Difficult? You betcha.
He lived in a Muslim village for two years. Three quarters of his al-Khaleej Club team didn't even speak English. Kent says, "A normal two-hour practice would take four hours because we used translators."

His team played in front of 10,000 fans — all male, except for his wife Dianna. The games were always scheduled so halftime would fall at prayer time. Fans and players would leave the arena to pray, leaving the Kents waiting for their return.

Such a lifestyle that Kent endured from 1980 to 1987 has obviously left a tremendous influence.

"Those years taught me how to have patience," said Kent, whose three kids were all born in Saudi Arabia. "Little did I know at the time how much that situation would strengthen me as a coach. It taught you to teach, teach and reteach."

Kent was given his break to get back to America as an assistant at Colorado State in 1989. He then latched on under Mike Montgomery at Stanford in 1990-91, before taking over as head coach at Saint Mary's from 1991 to 1997.

He was there when Colorado State went to the NIT and then the NCAA Tournament. He helped guide the Cardinal to back-to-back NIT appearances. And in 1997, he gave St. Mary's its first Big Dance appearance since 1989.

So when Kent became the first African-American coach in Oregon athletic history, he knew expectations would be high. Patience may have been something he learned in Saudi Arabia, but he wasn't about to wait for good things to happen.

"For us to get to post-season play, we felt we had to bridge the talent gap in the conference right away," Kent said. "With our recruiting class, I felt we were headed in the right direction."

Of course, that class

included junior college transfers Wright and Scales, and high school standout Freddie Jones. A year later, he went out and acquired four more JC players, including forwards Bryan Bracey and Julius Hicks.

There was a reason so many talented players chose Oregon. That reason for many was Kent and the family atmosphere he provides.

"He really cares for everyone on this team as more of a person than a player," Wright said. "And everyone cares about him more as a person than as a coach."

Senior forward A.D. Smith is the lone Duck who was here in the Jerry Green era. He has experienced the transition of coaches and knows that the future of Oregon basketball is in great hands.

"He's brought in guys that are not just good players but great people," Smith said. "He seems like he's going to be here for a while, and I have no doubt he'll do well in the future."

Yes, the future

is very important to Kent. But he does not forget the past — as his black-and-white "Dr. J" poster on his office wall clearly indicates.

"A lot of what we do in our program is derived from what we learned as players," Kent said. "We were a close-knit group, we saw the power of closeness and what we were able to accomplish with it."

Not only has Kent developed team unity within his program, but he also has struck a tremendous chord with the community.

"I think it's great that people here are so involved with March Madness," said Kent, while gripping a basketball in his Mac Court office. "It's really a great reward for players who have worked hard and for a community that's hung in there with you."

And also for a coach. A coach who every now and then deserves to cut loose and revel in his program's success



Ernie Kent has used positivity to direct his players to Oregon's first 20-win season since 1945.

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