

Duck fans flock to Buffalo

Merilyn Haliski, a woman in her 50s, proudly stood up out of her third-row seat and waved her yellow pom-pom frantically.

Rob Deihl, clad in Oregon colors, showed no signs of jet-lag and clapped enthusiastically for the Ducks in their all-too-short NCAA Tournament appearance.

I may have been seated on press row at the HSBC Arena in Buffalo, N.Y., of all places, but there were times when I could have sworn I was in McArthur Court.

Especially when Oregon sophomore guard Anthony Norwood nailed a three with about four minutes remaining in regulation to cut the Seton Hall lead to one.

The Duck contingent — mostly located in the section directly behind Oregon's bench — immediately jumped up and went nuts. Seton Hall head coach Tommy Amaker called a timeout, and the "Mini-Pit" went even more crazy. The Oregon band belted out the fight song and the crowd started chanting, "Let's Go Ducks!"

The pitch of their screams didn't surprise me in the least, as I have heard such adoration so many times before. But it was during this timeout break that I did a double-take and realized that we were all on the other side of the country.

In a city that few Eugene residents have ever visited, and still, they were all there to be a part of Oregon's Big Dance experience. And boy, did they make their presence felt.

"I thought our fans were outstanding," Oregon coach Ernie Kent said. "There were a lot more fans than I expected to see."

Five minutes before tip-off, the Duck faithful were gearing up for the big game and found it hard to contain themselves.

Deihl is a Eugene resident who flew into town the night before the game with his buddy. He said the moment he found out about where the Ducks would be playing, he "got on Priceline.com and got the best deal and now I'm

pumped to be here."

Not all fans decked out in the yellow and green flew in from Oregon. Haliski was one of many Duck fans in attendance who now live on the East Coast.

"I drove five hours in a snow-storm to be here, and this is great," said Haliski, who lives in Bethany, N.Y. "Ten minutes after



Jeff Smith

the selection, I called my brother, who lives in Eugene, and said, 'get me a ticket!'

Deihl was quick to point out who was sitting one section over from him.

"Look! You got Mike Bellotti here, and there's Phil Knight," he said.

Indeed they were, as the football coach and Nike CEO were located on side-to-side aisle seats in the fourth row.

Knight, who usually sits court-side at the Pit in front of the student section, appeared tired but ready to cheer.

Bellotti, who was sporting an Oregon sweatshirt, noted that because it was St. Patrick's Day, the luck of the Irish may be with the green team.

"Everybody asked me this morning if we were wearing green to celebrate St. Patty's day," he said, "and I said, 'No, we're celebrating the Ducks!'"

"This is pretty awesome," Bellotti said. "Usually when I go somewhere like this I have to coach. So now I can take the boosters route and cheer the team on."

And cheer they did. All the way down to the bitter end, in which Seton Hall eliminated the Ducks 72-71 in overtime.

Jerry Allen, who completed his 13th season as "Voice of the Ducks", spoke glowingly about the Oregon representation.

"You know, it's amazing," Allen said. "A lot of folks came here, and a number of them were from the east. Some of the airline tickets had to be just huge in such short notice, but we had one of the best followings of anybody here."

Allen took full notice of Bellotti, Knight and athletic director Bill Moos.

"The football coach is out here to support the program, and they're all going to try and fly back right now to arrive in Eugene in time for the women's game," Allen said.

(Sure enough, as I watched the women's first-round defeat on ESPN2 in the wee hours of the morning, a jet-lagged Knight was shown many times with that same green hat.)

Allen has been around sports long enough to give advice to fellow Duck fans on how to deal with devastating play-off defeats.

"Through the years, I've learned to look back right away at some of the high moments," he said. "It's kind of a mixture of sadness and elation at the same time. It breaks your heart because I know how much those players wanted this game."

"But at the same time, Ernie's got this program at a level where you can realistically say that we're going to come back soon enough."

But it was tough for people like Mrs. Haliski and Mr. Deihl to think much about the future immediately following the game. Both stared at the celebrating Seton Hall players, and promptly sank depressingly in their respective seats.

Marsha Graham, wife of Oregon assistant Greg Graham, summed it up best amid the dejected — but still faithful — fans around her.

"It was worth it," she said with a smile. "You're not a die-hard Ducks fan if you don't think it's worth it."

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