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Pennant race keeps Ems in fierce battle

■ Having spent the last two seasons at the bottom of the Northwest League, the Ems play hardball

By Jeff Smith
Oregon Daily Emerald

The sight is a pretty one for the Eugene Emeralds.

They can look down in the Southern Division standings of the Northwest League and see the rest of the teams looking up at them.

The Ems keep battling through the day-to-day grind of the minor-league season and still find themselves in first place. In fact, today marks the 24th consecutive day that Eugene has been atop the division.

Even after Monday night's 14-1 loss to the Vancouver Canadians up in Vancouver, B.C., the Ems still find themselves 1 1/2 games ahead of the second-place Canadians.

Tonight marks the last of six straight games between the two teams, who played against each other at Civic Stadium last week from Thursday through Saturday. Eugene then heads home for a three-game tilt against the Salem-Keizer Volcanoes from August 9-11.

The Ems actually opened its homestand last week against the then-second place Portland Rockies, who got swept right out of Eugene, and out of second-place.

Many of the Ems credit their play to the fact that they are involved in a pennant race, where every game gains importance as the season winds down.

"I think that the kids are competitive on both teams and it only makes them that much more so when there's a pennant race going on," said Eugene hitting instructor Tom Beyers of his team and Vancouver. "You come out here every

day and it's nice to be in it. When you gotta play 76 games in a year and you're in last place, it's no fun. "But this, this is fun."

Indeed, the fans that continue to pour into Civic Stadium night after night are seeing the type of baseball that makes them feel like they are getting their money's worth.

"Oh man, this crowd has been awesome all year," centerfielder Mike Mallory said. "They help us out more than they know."

Beyers has been around the minor-league game a long time and has been amazed at the type of support he's seen in his first year in town.

"You have to enjoy playing in front of these crowds," Beyers said. "They draw well every night and that has to motivate you right there. This league definitely outdraws many of the higher ranked minor league teams. Crowd-wise, you can't beat it."

With only 29 more games remaining in the regular season, the crowds will continue to play a vital role down the home stretch as the Ems try to erase memories of its last-place finishes in the past two years and grab a Northwest League title.

The Ems close out the season with three home games against the Portland Rockies on Sept. 4-6, with the Northwest League Championship Series taking place the following week between the Northern and Southern division winners.

"We're getting a good team concept together and are developing a great team," second baseman Blake Blasi said. "Hopefully we can keep it up and win this league."

Basketball

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back-burner during that time of the year and with Fox Sports helping out, it could be great. Also, it would enable the Pac-10 to possibly get more berths in the NCAA Tournament."

Oregon women's head coach Jody Runge, however, is less than thrilled with such a proposal. She admits that she's probably in the minority on the issue, but that she likes it just the way it is.

"I think there are a lot of unanswered questions," Runge said. "Conceptually, yeah, it's easy to jump on the bandwagon and say 'Let's go for it.' But the logistics still need to be worked out."

The main thing Runge wants to keep is the double-round robin schedule with all ten teams playing each other twice.

"I wouldn't want to give up a non-conference game in December because those games help our RPI (Ratings Percentage Index)," Runge said. "But as long as we keep the round robin, I guess I could live with it."

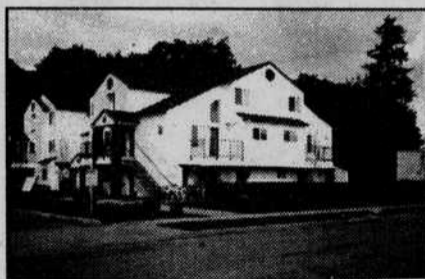
The two schools that voted against a Pac-10 tournament were Arizona and Stanford.

"Those schools are always in contention so they don't want to have to prove themselves over and over," Moos said. "But it offers excitement to the teams that have been struggling and gives them something to play for toward the end of the season."


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