

Duck wrestlers ready to rumble in 2000-'01

■ The loss of one senior and the return of Chael Sonnen has the Oregon wrestling team thinking big

By Robbie McCallum
Oregon Daily Emerald

Three returning NCAA qualifiers, seven returning Pacific-10 Conference placers, three blue-chip recruits, a transfer and an Olympian. All of this could add up to a breakthrough season for the Oregon wrestling team.

Third-year head coach Chuck Kearney has assembled one of the most talented group of Duck wrestlers in years. The Oregon lineup is basically the same as last year, plus a few key additions. That is why the Ducks are in good position to improve upon last year's fifth place finish in the Pac-10 and 5-5 conference record.

"This team has the potential to be the best we've ever had," Kearney said. "We have a great front line — the starters in each weight class can be in the top-three of the conference and can make an impact at the national tournament."

The Oregon leader on and off of the mat is senior Doug Lee. The two-time NCAA qualifier and defending Pac-10 champion is geared-up for a stellar season and a possible national championship.

At 184 pounds, Lee is ranked second in the nation after placing fourth at last year's NCAA meet. The All-American was 29-3 last season and is 67-22 in his career.

"His goal is to win a national ti-

tle," Kearney said. "Last year's national champion [Cael Sanderson, Iowa State] returns this season and Doug wants to wrestle that guy for the championship."

Giving the Ducks a major boost this season and further stacking the deck is the return of senior Chael Sonnen. The All-American took the 1999-'00 season off to compete with the U.S. Olympic team. Sonnen placed sixth overall in the 85 kg division, missing a trip to the Olympic games in Sydney by just two matches.

“This team has the potential to be the best we’ve ever had.”

Chuck Kearney
Oregon head coach

"Chael is in a weight class where he's as good as anyone," Kearney said. "He's very technically sound and a great athlete who moves well. He's big enough, strong enough and better now than ever."

Sonnen is ranked fourth in the nation at 187 pounds and was an All-American in 1999.

Junior Eugene Harris, who excited Duck fans last year after transferring from Lassen Junior College, returns at the 157-pound slot. Harris was an NCAA qualifier last season and finished the season with 24-11 overall record.

"Eugene is capable of beating anyone and if he continues to improve he can be a national contender," Kearney said. "He's technically sound and

a phenomenal athlete."

The other returning NCAA qualifier is sophomore Brian Watson, who posted a 16-9 record last season despite a broken hand. Watson will remain in the 133-pound slot for the Ducks, where he placed second at the Pac-10 championships last year.

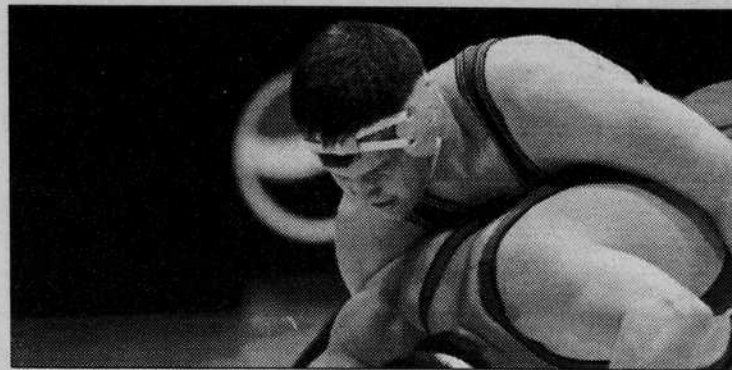
A handful of returning Pac-10 placers and other wrestlers with significant experience are back with high expectations. Heavyweight Eric Webb and 149-pound Tony Overstake were Pac-10 semifinalists last year and want to make the next step toward an NCAA berth this season. Webb, a sophomore, was 22-13 last year and is the only Duck in the heavyweight position.

"Wrestling in the semifinals against a nationally ranked wrestler made Eric realize that he can be a national-level wrestler," Kearney said. "Tony is constantly making improvements and has a great work ethic."

Overstake, who was high school teammates with Doug and Matt Lee, is the top wrestler in Oregon's deepest position. Five wrestlers in all will compete for starting positions at 141 and 149 pounds. Juniors David Watson and Kenny Cox bring in even more experience, backed up by red-shirt freshman Branson Phillips.

"Right now it looks even in terms of who the starter will be," Kearney said. "It's going to come down to who's healthy and who separates themselves in competition, but whoever it is, the starter will be tough to beat and will finish atop the Pac-10."

Two exciting newcomers who expect to make an immediate impact on the starting lineup are freshman Luke Larwin and junior Shaun



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All-American Doug Lee is back to lead the Ducks into the 2000-'01 wrestling season.

Williams. Both were victorious in their debuts in an Oregon singlet against UC-Davis on Friday.

Williams, who transferred from North Idaho College, is a two-time junior college champion. The Bretonia, South Africa native competed on his country's national team in 1996 and placed at the 1995 ES-POIR World Championships. Williams will compete with sophomore Jason Harless for the 125-pound starting position. Harless was 15-18 last season and 8-9 in dual matches.

Larwin is another Duck who can help the Ducks in his first year as a Duck. The Bend, Ore. native placed second in the state 4A championships last year for Mt. View High school before winning the state freestyle championships.

Larwin will compete with veteran junior Leif Williams at 165 or 174 pounds. Williams was 12-18 last year with a 5-11 dual match record.

Redshirt freshman Matt Lee,

younger brother of Doug Lee, may also contend for the starting 174-pound slot.

Oregon's 2000-'01 schedule is full of challenges and exciting possibilities. The Ducks face a major test to start 2001, facing three of the top-four teams in the nation during a four-day span.

On Jan. 2 and 4, the Ducks travel to Oklahoma to face traditional powerhouses Oklahoma and Oklahoma State. Two days later, the Ducks return home to wrestle six-time defending national champion Iowa.

On the other side of the spectrum, Oregon will get a break in late February, when it hosts the Pac-10 championships.

Other key dates include the home opener on Nov. 26 against Pac-10 foe Stanford, Dec. 13 against Oregon State and March 15-17, the NCAA tournament.

The Ducks are in action this weekend at the Southern Oregon Open in Ashland.

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