

Oregon prepared for close Pac-10 title battle

Who will win the Pac-10 is anyone's guess as the action heats up this weekend

By Scott Pesznecker
Oregon Daily Emerald

Last season, the race for the Pacific-10 Conference championship seemed to be a three-way race between Oregon, UCLA and Stanford.

Arizona ended up in the mix too, and as Pac-10 teams continued to knock each other off, the question of who would be champion became more and more muddled. Oregon didn't win the title outright until beating Oregon State in the last game of the season.

But already, the makeup of this season's race is different.

Stanford lost key players such as Milena Flores, who graduated, and Jamie Carey, who quit the team at

the start of the season for medical reasons. Now, point guard Susan King is out for the season with a torn anterior cruciate ligament.



UCLA also lost important starters, including forward Maylana Martin, who now plays in the WNBA. Arizona, also in the Pac-10 title race last season, lost its emotional spark with guard Felecity Willis.

Finally, there is Oregon's loss of point guard Shaquala Williams, last season's Pac-10 Player of the Year.

So is there a clear-cut favorite to win the Pac-10 title this season? Oregon head coach Jody Runge wouldn't bet on it.

"People ask me all the time about

the conference and I think it's wide open," Runge said. "I think there are a lot of very scrappy good teams in this conference, and I think every night we've got the bullseye on our back. That's just the way it's going to be, and it's the way it was last year."

One of those scrappy teams Runge refers to is Southern California. Last season, USC was the only team that swept Oregon. The Trojans were able to out-run and out-hustle the Ducks with their more

athletic players.

The women of USC are 0-2 in the conference so far, after losing to the Washington schools on the road. The first setback was a one-point loss to the Cougars, and the second was a triple-overtime battle against Washington.

Bottom line, many teams in the Pac-10 are dangerous. Oregon witnessed this firsthand last Friday against Oregon State in a game that went down to the final minute.

"Everyone's going to put their

best basketball game together against you," Runge said. "And you've got to be mentally prepared for that."

Stanford was picked to win the Pac-10 title at the start of the season, followed by Oregon.

However, the current ESPN/USA Today coaches poll ranked the Ducks at No. 20, followed by No. 24 Arizona and No. 25 Stanford. The Associated Press poll wasn't released by press time.

Pitino leaves Celtics, assistant takes over

By Jimmy Golen
The Associated Press

BOSTON — In college and the pros, from Hawaii to the Big East, Rick Pitino always won.

Until he came to Boston.

The master motivator with the magic touch resigned as coach and president of the Boston Celtics on Monday, 3 1/2 seasons after he was brought in to revive a franchise that once had been the NBA's proudest. He forfeited some \$20 million left in his contract.

Pitino's legacy: a 102-146 record and a history of roster churning that left the team strapped under the salary cap and unable to find its groove.

"It has been a great privilege to coach the greatest basketball tradition in sports," Pitino said in a statement released by the team. "I wish we could have accomplished more between the lines, but I am proud with the efforts of my staff and players."

It was the second NBA coaching change this season. Nate McMillan replaced Paul Westphal in Seattle on Nov. 27.

Jim O'Brien, Pitino's longtime assistant, was appointed interim coach, starting with Monday night's game that ended in a 98-90 loss to the Portland Trail Blazers, the top team in the Western Conference. He was given a generous ovation when he was introduced before the game.

O'Brien was coach at Wheeling Jesuit College from 1982-87 and at Dayton from 1989-94, leading the Flyers to a 22-10 record and an NCAA berth in his first season. He had been Pitino's assistant at Kentucky and with the New York Knicks.

"He's a guy I have been with a long time," O'Brien said after Monday's shootaround. "It did not end the way we had come into the franchise hoping it would."

"There's nobody more disappointed with Rick leaving than I am. That being said, you don't have too much time in the NBA to get too up or too down. We have to get on with life. Rick wants us to get on with life."

Pitino had hinted since the end of last season that he would leave if the team did not improve in his fourth season. But the tone of his comments became more immediate as the Celtics stumbled to a 12-22 record, losing 11 of their last 14 games.

On Saturday night, it became clear he had decided to leave. He hugged Paul Pierce as he came out of the game, and spoke afterward as if his mind were made up.

Pitino skipped practice Sunday and asked his wife to join him in Mia-

mi to discuss his next move. Although he has been quoted as saying he would like to stay in the NBA, he already has been rumored for college jobs from UNLV to UCLA.

"He looked at it more personally. He's not getting the job done as a coach and he wanted to move on," said Celtics forward Antoine Walker, who also played for Pitino at Kentucky. "He's made a decision that's best for him and now he's got to move on."

In an interview from Florida, Pitino told WBZ-TV that he had a "major difference" philosophically: "The fundamentals of basketball weren't necessarily getting through to the team."

"I love the guys on this basketball team outside the line," Pitino said. "Between the lines we had differences."

Pitino played at Massachusetts, served as assistant at Hawaii and Syracuse and coached at Boston University and Providence, two programs he took from mediocrity to the NCAA tournament. He spent two seasons with the Knicks, taking them to the playoffs in 1987-88 for the first time in four years and winning the division in 1988-89.

Then he took over a Kentucky team that had been on probation, leading it to the Final Four three times in eight seasons and winning the NCAA title in 1996. Before joining the Celtics, he had just two losing seasons in 17 years.

The year before he arrived, the Celtics went 15-67, earning the most chances in the draft lottery for Wake Forest star Tim Duncan. Pitino promised fans he would have Boston back in the playoffs in three years.

But San Antonio got Duncan and won the NBA title in 1999. Instead of Duncan and Keith Van Horn, who was also coveted by Pitino, the Celtics got Chauncey Billups and Ron Mercer; both have since been traded.

Pitino has since said he never would have taken the job if he'd known how the lottery would turn out. By leaving now, he gave up more than \$20 million that remained on the 10-year, \$50 million contract he signed in 1997.

O'Brien said he would retain the swarming defense that seemed to be Pitino's undoing. But where Pitino was constantly shouting instructions to the players, O'Brien said he expects the players to take more responsibility for making the system work.

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