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Stanford leads Pac of 'dogs

■ The perpetual underdogs of the Pac-10 will tussle once more this season, and only Stanford and Arizona should be assured of their spots

By Peter Hockaday
Oregon Daily Emerald

The Pacific-10 Conference is filled with underdogs and teams that love to play the hunter, not the hunted.

Arizona won the NCAA Tournament in 1997 as a No. 4 seed. Stanford made the Final Four in 1998 as a No. 3 seed.

At the same time, the conference is top heavy, and teams have dominated the Pac-10 for years at a time. Now is the era of Stanford and Arizona, who were both ranked in the country's top spot at different times this season.

This year, the race will be between the underdogs of the Pac-10. As Oregon, UCLA, California, and Southern California fight for the third and fourth conference bids in the NCAA Tournament, Stanford and Arizona will look on from the top, wary of those teams' upset potential at all times.

So, are you ready for some Pac-10 basketball?

1. Stanford

Last year: 29-4 (NCAA 2nd round) Head coach: Mike Montgomery (13th season) Player to watch: Casey Jacobsen, G

Tiger Woods saw Stanford come from behind to beat Duke. Jerry West saw that game. So did Oscar Robertson. Did you see the Cardinal beat the Blue Devils? Stanford is No. 1 in the country, and are undefeated with impressive wins over Duke and Arizona. With the Wildcats faltering, the Cardinal seem a sure thing to take their third Pac-10 title in as many years.

2. Arizona

Last year: 27-7 (NCAA 2nd round) Head coach: Lute Olson (18th season) Player to watch: Loren Woods, C

Don't count out the Wildcats just yet. Yes, Arizona was ranked first in every preseason poll, and yes, it has an 8-5 record with losses to Mississippi State and Purdue. But Arizona has too much talent up and down the roster to throw the season away. When head coach Lute Olson returns from mourning the death of his wife, Bobbie, the Wildcats will be contenders once more.

3. Oregon

Last year: 22-8 (NCAA 1st round) Head coach: Ernie Kent (4th season) Player to watch: Luke Ridnour, G

In a race for the Pac-10's third NCAA bid, the Ducks may just have the heart — and the home court advantage — to make it back to the Big Dance. If Oregon can beat USC, California and UCLA at McArthur Court, and take one or two from those teams on the road, the Ducks could find themselves holding on to third place in the Pac-10 for the second year in a row.

4. USC

Last year: 16-14 Head Coach: Henry Bibby (5th season) Player to watch: Brian Scalabrine, F

One carrot-topped forward — Brian Scalabrine — and a guard from Compton — Jeff Trepagnier — should lead the Trojans back to a place they haven't been since 1997: The NCAA Tournament.

Scalabrine was the Pac-10's second-leading scorer last season and an all-Pac-10 selection. Trepagnier finished in the top-10 in five different statistical categories last season. The two, with a strong supporting cast, will lead the Trojans back to the Big Dance.

5. UCLA

Last year: 20-12 (NCAA round of 16) Head coach: Steve Lavin (5th season) Player to watch: Earl Watson, G

Jason Kapono won't take UCLA's steady decline lying down. His signature headband recalls an era long past, when the Bruins dominated the game and won title after title. That era was the early 1990's. UCLA will return to dominance someday, but this year, they'll settle for the middle of the Pac-10.

6. California

Last year: 18-15 (NIT 3rd round) Head coach: Ben Braun (5th season) Player to watch: Sean Lampley, F

The Golden Bears return all five starters from last year's team that went to the National Invitation Tournament. California is a perfect 8-0 at home this year, but a 1-4 road

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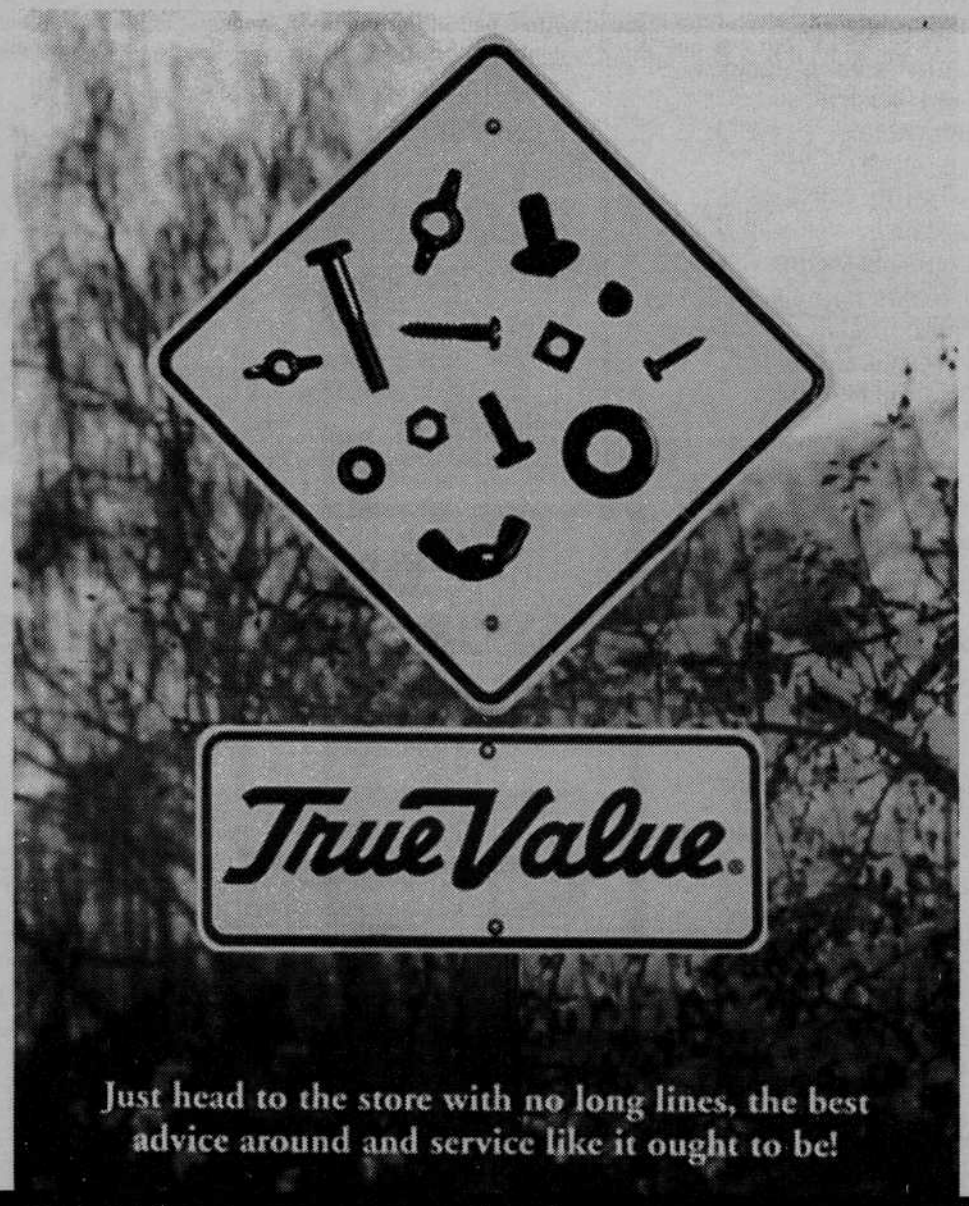

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