

A TOWERING PRESENCE on AND off the court

The storm surrounding Oregon women's head basketball coach Jody Runge took an interesting turn Sunday, when the Ducks learned they had earned a spot in the NCAA Tournament, their eighth-straight trip to the Big Dance. The postseason development came, of course, just one week after eight players went to Athletic Director Bill Moos asking that Runge's fiery career at Oregon be extinguished.

Whatever action the University is considering taking against Runge will now have to wait until after the Ducks are finished with the 64-team tourney. The relatively calm environment gives the Emerald editorial board an opportunity to complement opinions put forth in Monday's newspaper relating to Runge's contentious relationship with players.

While Runge's behavior on the court — yelling at players, yelling at referees, yelling just to yell sometimes, it seemed — has routinely drawn criticism throughout her eight years at Oregon, Moos and others in the University community need to consider the work she's done behind the scenes before rushing to a final judgment. We don't condone what has been called "abusive treatment" against players, but remember that most of these charges were brought under the cover of anonymity. Until all the facts are truly in, well, let's consider all the facts.

The opinion that Runge has established Oregon women's basketball as a national power will get no disagreement, whether the conversation is taking place in the Casanova Center or over the office copy machine. There is little doubt that Oregon made it into the 2001 NCAA tourney based on its national image, not necessarily its lukewarm success on the court this year.

She made a positive national image goal the day she was hired in April 1993: build this team into a Pac-10 terror and a national powerhouse. One hundred and sixty wins later, to go along with a 69 percent success mark overall, Runge has fulfilled her promise.

Fans at the University and in the Eugene community have regularly turned out by the thousands to jump on the bandwagon, and Runge is largely responsible for the increased interest. Before she began coaching the Ducks, attendance at the women's games hovered around 670 fans a game. Since she was hired, however, there's been a 600 percent increase in attendance, to an average of 5,852 fans at each

game in McArthur Court this year, according to the University's Web site.

Putting more fans in the seats means increased revenue, and it brings Runge a lot closer to her admirable goal of making the program self-supporting.

Some readers might be shaking their heads about now, grumbling about all of this focus on winning. Isn't basketball just a game, one that should be more about the experience and not so much about the outcome? In simple terms, yes. But Oregon is a big-time university, competing with hundreds of other Division I schools all aiming to fill their coffers with advertising and merchandising revenue to stay afloat.

Runge and the Ducks aren't just competing against other women's basketball programs for their slice, either. The men's basketball tournament, which begins Thursday, consistently overshadows the women's festivities, and this is the arena where Runge's most important — and most controversial — accomplishments and fights have emerged.

Runge has long been a champion of gender equality in Oregon athletics, which likely hasn't earned her many fans within the Athletic Department. In 1995, she threatened a lawsuit based on parts of her original contract that Runge and her lawyer said violated Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, the federal legislation that prohibits sexual discrimination at institutions receiving federal money.

Her salary increased that year almost two-fold to \$80,000, and then Runge signed a four-year contract extension in April 1999 worth about \$200,000, which put her in the same financial neighborhood as Oregon men's basketball coach Ernie Kent. Can someone please tell us why this scenario should be anything but welcomed? Equal pay for equal work; this isn't rocket science. Chromosomes shouldn't play a role in how much a person is compensated for his or her job, and Runge was bold enough to demand an even playing field.

Yet, apparently the University still has a foot in the Stone Age, since earlier this season Runge was refused compensation for doing her weekly TV show, even though Kent is paid for the same duty.

You might yell a bit, too, if you were constantly facing those circumstances.

In addition to pushing her players to per-

form on the court — through whatever means necessary at times — Runge has pressed them to perform their best in the classroom. As a result, the Ducks regularly dominate the Pac-10 Conference All-Academic team; Runge's 1996-97 squad had the fourth-highest GPA mark in the nation among women's basketball teams.

The recent sensationalism of Runge's interactions with her players should make us all stop and think about the role sports plays in our society. But before any decision is made about Runge's future at Oregon, those

who have the final say need to consider all that she has done for the program.

While we disagree with the common perception that this is her last season at the University, it should be remembered that Runge has taken the program to heights it hasn't seen before. It'd be a shame if her career at the University ends on such a sour note, when she's done so much to sweeten the pot for women's athletics across the nation.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.



Giovanni Salimena Emerald

Higher education should start using higher principles

GUEST COMMENTARY

George Beres

It was just half a year ago that the Oregon State Board of Higher Education got burned for playing footsie with the University of Oregon on a public matter. You'd think it would learn, or at least get its higher principles in order. But its effort to derail the role of the Worker Rights Consortium at the University suggests otherwise.

First time around, it approved an appeal by University President Dave Frohnmayer to allow the University to keep the names of major donors anonymous. Collusion between the Board and the University would have been successful had it not been

reviewed by the mass media. Objections were raised statewide. The issue was the public's right to know. Also at stake was the dangerous side effect of anonymity, allowing the possibility of significant donors influencing University policy in scheming privacy.

Now the Board claims it was not trying to stifle campus efforts to improve factory working conditions at companies that supply Oregon universities when it approved a new policy barring membership in labor-monitoring organizations. The policy stipulates that schools can't have rules or procedures "which have the effect of eliminating the ability to compete."

In effect, that is what the University might do as a result of the Licensing Code of Conduct it adopted. The code sets standards for

companies producing merchandise that carries the University's logo or name. On behalf of big business, the Board insists on narrow criteria for barring companies from campus contracts: evidence of illegal activity, inability to do the job or any condition not allowed by state rule or law.

Consider some of the standards that apparently don't fit the Board's criteria:

- Having safe and humane work places
 - Banning child and forced labor
 - Paying a fair wage
 - Allowing collective bargaining
- I'm tempted to say, "give us a break!" But it's obvious the State Board is interested in giving breaks only to corporations who donate big money.

The University proposed mem-

bership in another supposed watchdog group, the Fair Labor Association. Student activists objected because the FLA gives industry representatives a seat on its board and a say in the monitoring process.

The University of Illinois, one of 67 college members of the WRC, also joined the FLA. Illinois publicly stated that "both groups have a role to play." Both reacted to allegations that workers in the Kukdong International factory in Mexico had been attacked by company police and then lost their jobs. Nike is one of the companies buying sweatshirts made at Kukdong. Oregon, as well as Illinois, is among schools whose logos are used. In this case, collaboration between the WRC and the FLA has gotten results, as Nike, under pressure, pressured factory managers to reinstate

all workers.

Some WRC members complain that having industry representatives on the FLA board is like having the fox guard the chicken coop. Still, the Kukdong experience suggests the two boards may be able to work in tandem, if the State Board would give them a chance. But there will be no chance if valid human rights standards can't be used by universities.

Unless the Oregon University System changes its subservient posture to corporate influence, the state will be left with a dictatorial image it can ill afford, and would fully deserve.

George Beres is the former editor of the University of Oregon faculty newsletter and former manager of the University Speakers Bureau.