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Women

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Center. "But I'm glad we have a chance to do it again, and hopefully we'll do well this time."

The Ducks and Hawkeyes have never met, but head coach Lisa Bluder, who was named the Big 10 Coach of the Year in her first year at Iowa, is 1-0 against Runge, who is also an Iowa native. Bluder's 1994 Drake team defeated the Ducks 76-67 in Eugene.

The Hawkeyes are led by first-team Big Ten guard Lindsey Meder, who is averaging nearly 17 points per game.

Iowa has won six straight games and 14 of its last 16.

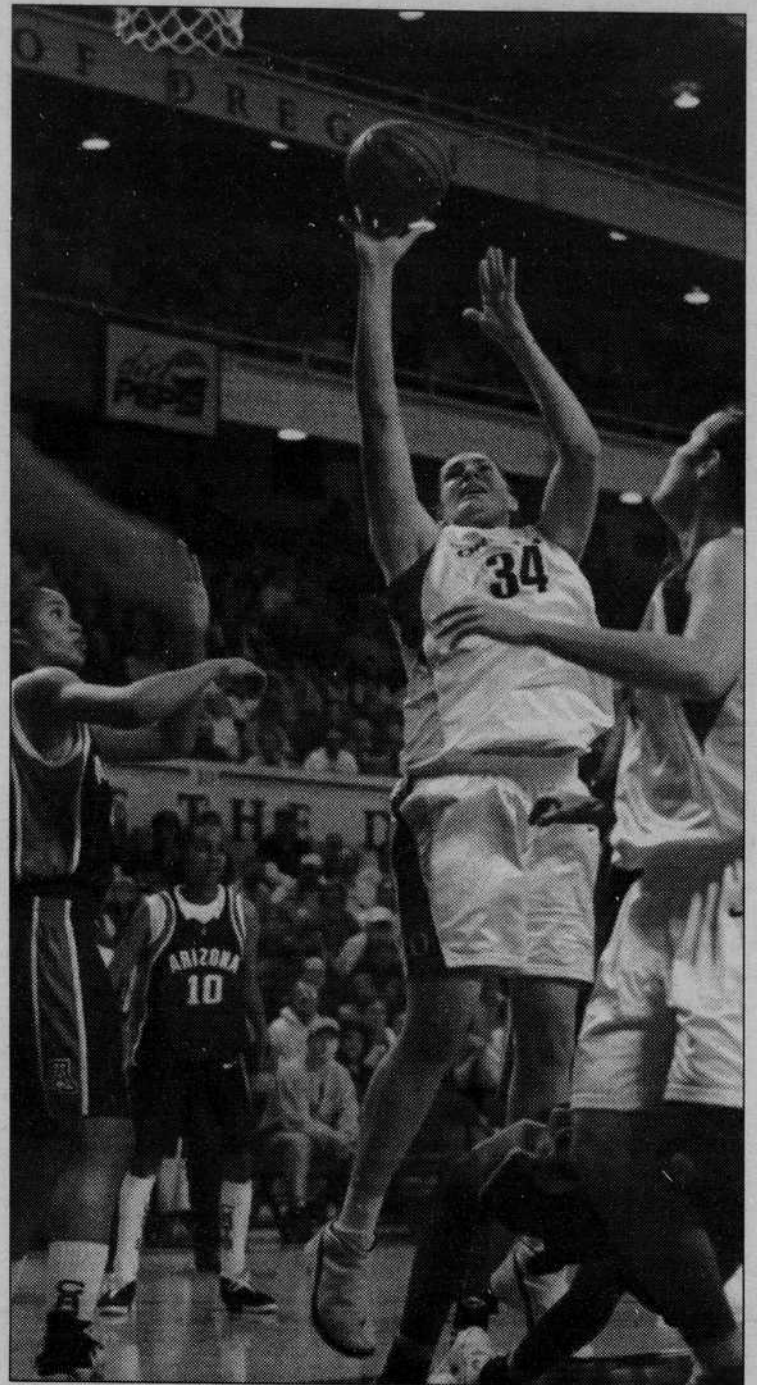
"Their guard play is very strong, they're physical, they work hard and are well coached," Runge said. "They're not that big inside but are playing with great confidence after winning the Big Ten Tournament. They are a very good basketball team."

The Ducks, though, may also be peaking at the right time. After a five-game mid-season slump, injuries, and the infamous players meeting questioning Runge's coaching techniques, Oregon hasn't been healthier.

"The team has been able to put things aside and still play, which says a lot about our character," freshman Cathrine Kraayeveld said. "We're playing really well right now. We're starting to show that we are still a good team and that we deserve to be there."

A coach who is searching for answers and a newfound respect from her team, Runge is still remaining optimistic about her team's chances this weekend.

"We're healthy, this is the best we've played and the best we've practiced all year," said Runge, who became the third coach in Pac-10 history to reach the 100-win plateau in conference play. "Hopefully we'll put it together in a more successful manner this time around."



Laura Smit Emerald
Oregon senior center Jenny Mowe (34) welcomes another chance to play at Utah.

Pez

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know that eight players met with Athletic Director Bill Moos and asked that Runge be fired.

That's the problem that faces the Oregon women's basketball team: That you — and you excludes the 5,000-or-so loyal fans who watched more than one home game this season — only care about the Runge situation.

And there's a certain segment of the "you" population that I'm talking to right now.

The problem is present at every home game, when you give the crowd a quick once-over and begin to pay attention to who the fans are.

You can also hear the problem. McArthur Court gets loud during women's basketball games. Even last season's first-round NCAA Tournament game between Mississippi State and St. Peter's was loud. The Ducks weren't even playing.

When the Ducks do play, The Pit rocks — but after awhile, you notice it's all the same people who are making the noise. Sometimes it's the guy sitting in the front row, southwest corner, kicking the metal bleacher; sometimes it's the woman near the top of the floor-level seating, amplifying her voice through a cone and clapping a pair of yellow flippers together.

You look around through the crowd, and there are hardly any students to be seen. There's no "Pit Crew," although judging by the noise, you'd think there would be. So if you're reading this column,

you probably don't know what I'm talking about, do you?

Because chances are, if you're a student, you've never been to an Oregon women's basketball game — just like most other people in the state.

I feel sorry for anyone who never saw Oregon's senior players in action. I feel even more sorry for anyone who never saw them play, but could have, if only they would have taken their student ID cards to Mac Court on a Thursday or Saturday night.

Seriously, you missed out. Reading about Dion getting injured is one thing. Seeing her cringe in agony as she tries to keep up with healthy opponents, despite a severe ankle sprain, is flat-out inspiring.

Watching sophomore point guard Alissa Edwards break a full-court press is remarkable, considering that she only played scattered minutes last season behind Shaquala Williams, Karen Piers and Kourtney Shreve.

There's Meharry's undying energy and Wolvert's volatile attitude, which is evident every time Runge sends her to the bench.

But you like sports with storylines, don't you? And after such a disappointing season, why follow this team?

Try this on for size: A team that seems bound for the Big Dance — perhaps even the Final Four — loses its star player before the season. The women regroup, though, and early into the Pac-10 season seem poised for a third straight title. But then the team suffers key injuries, and all seems to spin out of con-

trol. But right when games become do-or-die scenarios, Oregon starts winning again — and goes to the tournament.

The story's not over yet. Of all the Pac-10 teams, the Ducks have the best chance of advancing to the Sweet 16 because of their draw in the bracket. With the way they've been playing lately, such a feat shouldn't seem surprising.

But you probably didn't know that. You think this is a team in turmoil, ripping at the seams because of Runge's situation. You may be half right — there's no way Oregon can benefit from what's going on right now.

However, in yet another incredible season for Oregon women's basketball, it's unfortunate that only about 5,000 mostly non-student fans can really understand the scope of this season.

Not to say that the Runge thing isn't intriguing, because it is. Drama is an important part of sports, but it's only a part of it.

Sports also has winners and losers, heartbreak and celebration. Sports can help people find meaning in life. Sports brings people together behind a common purpose. Sports can provide children with excellent role models. Like a storybook, sports often has heroes and villains. Sometimes, sports teams have storybook endings.

The Ducks have all but the latter, and a third-round game would serve that purpose.

It's unfortunate you haven't been watching.

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