



Southern California senior Sam Clancy, who chose not to enter the NBA draft, led the Trojans to the Elite Eight last year.

Emerald

UP IN THE AIR

With Arizona and Stanford losing key players and the addition of the league tournament, this year's Pac-10 title is up for grabs

By Jeff Smith
Oregon Daily Emerald

A new twist has been introduced to this season's Pacific-10 Conference men's basketball schedule.

Rather, it's an old twist that has been brought back after an 11-year absence.

From March 7-9, at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, the top eight teams in the league will square off in a Pac-10 Tournament.

The lone survivor of the tourney will receive an automatic bid into the NCAA Tournament, giving hope to those teams in the middle of the pack to make a late run at being a Cinderella team in the Big Dance.

While some coaches were against it — Stanford's Mike Montgomery and Arizona's Lute Olson — many were for it and agreed that the league tournament adds a new level of excitement to the Pac-10.

The new addition to the schedule has already had a noticeable effect, moving the start of league play to December as opposed to its usual January opening.

After Arizona was embarrassed by Oregon on Dec. 22 at McArthur Court, 105-75, Olson voiced his displeasure over the early start to conference action.

"I'm just not a believer that you should start Pac-10 play in December," Olson said. "I think we would rather have a little more time to get ready for (Oregon)."

But like it or not, Pac-10 hoops began early and now kicks into high gear with key games each week in January and February.

And then, a week before the Big Dance, a smaller dance will take place in L.A. in March that could very well include a few surprises.

Because what would a Pac-10 season be without a few surprises up its sleeve?

1. USC Trojans (12-2 overall, 4-0 Pac-10)

Head Coach: Henry Bibby
Player to watch: Sam Clancy, F/C

Most preseason prognosticators have pegged UCLA as this season's Pac-10 champion. While the Bruins will be a formidable challenge, their cross-town rival could take the crown.

USC's breakthrough season in 2001 that included a school-record 24 wins and a run into the Elite Eight of the NCAA Tournament will pay off dividends. From that starting five, three key seniors return: forward Sam Clancy, point guard Brandon Granville and forward David Bluthenthal.

"The expectations for us will be high and they should be," head coach Henry Bibby said. "We set a level of play where we want to go. My goal is to get back there."

While the loss of departed Brian Scalabrine will be noticeable, the decision of Clancy not to jump early to the NBA was crucial.

2. UCLA Bruins (11-2, 4-0 Pac-10)

Head Coach: Steve Lavin
Player to watch: Jason Kapon, F

It's taken a couple of years for the youth to turn into veterans, but the time has arrived for the Bruins to

finish near the top of the Pac-10.

Earl Watson has left from last season's team, but four other starters have returned, including center Dan Gadzuric, forwards Matt Barnes and Jason Kapon and guard Billy Knight.



"Since becoming head coach, it's the first time we've had real stability," head

coach Steve Lavin said. "We now have balance, stability and continuity in each class."

While the talent is set, and with a bench filled with emerging athletes, the key thing will be to find the right rotation and stick with it. The Bruins have already shown that they can be upset as Pepperdine beat them, 85-78, in November.

3. California Golden Bears (10-2 overall, 1-1 Pac-10)

Head Coach: Ben Braun
Player to watch: Shantay Legans, PG

No Sean Lampley may turn out to be no problem for California.

While the versatile Lampley will be sorely missed, the Bears have shown thus far that they have plenty of players to pick up the load.



On Sunday, Cal ended a 10-game losing streak against its Bay Area rival in a big way. Senior Ryan Forehan-Kelly scored 13 of his 19 points in the final five minutes as Cal beat Stanford, 68-54.

With the veteran leadership of a combined seven seniors and juniors that see significant action, this group could rise to the top of the Pac-10.

"It's important to have a lot of the same familiar faces back," head coach Ben Braun said. "And that's reassuring."

4. Oregon Ducks (10-4 overall, 3-1 Pac-10)

Head Coach: Ernie Kent
Player to watch: Luke Jackson, F

Oregon can score a lot of points. These Ducks have also learned to play some defense thanks in large part to the emergence of assistant coach Fred Litzenberger, who came over from the Oregon women's program.

But what the Ducks are going to have to learn to do is stay composed in the game's final minutes. While the two blowout victories over Arizona are indeed impressive, the close losses to Portland and Arizona State are not.

Look for sophomore Luke Jackson to take some of the pressure off senior guard Freddie Jones and help lead Oregon back to the NCAA tourney after last season's dismal 5-13 Pac-10 season.

"This is a very good basketball team," head coach Ernie Kent said.

5. Stanford Cardinal (8-3 overall, 1-1 Pac-10)

Head Coach: Mike Montgomery
Player to watch: Casey Jacobsen, G

This will be a different Stanford team from the past. Gone are four starters.

Turn to Men's, page 8B

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