

A scene that sets March's stage

Slowly, the bus made its way down Interstate-5. Drained from a historic weekend, the Oregon men's basketball players simply wanted to get back to Eugene and rest in their beds.

The euphoria from their grinding 65-62 victory at UCLA and outright Pac-10 title had subsided a tad by the time darkness arrived on Saturday night.

Their celebration had come earlier that day, on the Pauley Pavilion court where they donned white Pac-10 championship hats, and inside their locker room afterward where they reflected on what they had accomplished.

But then came the flight from Los Angeles to Portland. And then came the seemingly endless bus ride from Portland to Eugene that nobody was looking forward to.

"We wanted to stay an extra day in L.A. so we could fly into the Eugene airport and not have to take the bus," senior Anthony Lever said.

Instead, they hopped aboard and relaxed, waiting eagerly to reach home. Finally, at 10:45 p.m., the bus veered off the freeway and headed into town. It made its way to Centennial Boulevard and took a left turn into the Casanova Center.

"We were on the bus getting ready to go home and go to sleep and then we were like, 'Huh? What is going on over there?'" Lever said.

"We were like, 'Are those really people?'" Luke Ridnour said.

Yes, those were people. Lots of people. Lots of happy people.

Suddenly, the bus full of tired basketball players had been recharged. The players all jumped out of their seats to see if this was for real. The Duck mascot signaled the bus toward the cluster of fans.

Cheers erupted outside. A tape of the fight song blasted through somebody's car stereo. The bus came to a halt.

One by one, the coaches and players walked out and high-fived the masses, realizing that they were in the middle of a late-night rally in honor of them.

There were students. There were elderly people. There were families with little kids in tow. By the way, it was also quite chilly.

"It's pretty exciting, and it shows how much the community supports us and how much it means to everybody," Ridnour said. "We didn't think there were would be people out this late in the cold."

"We had no idea."
What the Saturday night greeting did was reinforce for these Ducks how special a season they are a part of.

They can hear all they want about being the pro-

gram's first Pac-10 champions in 57 years. About winning at UCLA for the first time since 1984. And about being considered the best Oregon team since the legendary 1938-39 NCAA championship team.

But those are just numbers. Actually seeing the reaction of their fans and talking with them and signing autographs for children — and grown men — is what lets the significance of their road trip begin to set in.

"Before, it really didn't hit us," senior Freddie Jones said. "Now, to see all these people, man, it really helps out a lot."

The weekend began with Jones hitting the clutch game-winner to lift the Ducks to the 67-65 victory at USC on Thursday. That win clinched at least a share of the conference championship and allowed the team to relax a little bit and revel in their success.

"I can't even begin to explain the attitude we had in that locker room after the game when Freddie hit that shot," senior Kristian Christensen said. "It was mayhem. We were all crazy. It was insane. We were dancing. We had coach (Ernie) Kent dancing. We had people screaming."

"And to top it off with today's win at UCLA, it's just amazing. Amazing."

Of course, the work isn't done in March. The Ducks head right back to Los Angeles on Tuesday to get ready for the March 7-9 Pac-10 Tournament at the Staples Center. A week later, they'll be playing somewhere in the first round of the NCAA Tournament, and it's looking like that may take place just further down I-5 in Sacramento.

So while Saturday's mingling between players and fans was indeed a celebration of things already accomplished, there also was the strong sense of optimism for things yet to come.

"We still have a lot of basketball to play, and we're looking at the bigger picture," Jones said. "We're trying to be in Atlanta on the first weekend in April."

One can only imagine the size of the rally that would greet the team home from that trip since, after all, Atlanta's the site of this year's Final Four.

The team bus would probably be replaced by a trio of limousines that day.

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Jeff Smith
Hakuna Matata

Sports brief

Oregon softball goes 3-2 in Utah

In a five-game tournament hosted by the Utah, the Oregon softball team came away with three wins and two losses to improve its overall record to 11-7.

The Ducks split their two games on Friday, defeating Utah State, 4-1, and then losing to the host Utah, 7-2. In the Utah loss, Anissa Meashintubby picked up her first loss of the season to drop her record to 4-1. Senior Connie McMurren picked up the win for the Ducks against Utah State.

The first game on Saturday for Oregon pitted them against Brigham Young, a team whose starting shortstop played for the Ducks last year. Kate Walker, who played under her maiden name of Peterson at Oregon, was 2-for-3 in the

game against her former teammates.

The Ducks jumped out to a 7-0 lead, but the Cougars were able to then score eight unanswered runs capped by two home runs by All-American Oli Keohohou for the victory. Brigham Young (11-8) was 4-0 over the weekend and have now won six straight.

Against Southern Utah, McMurren (3-3) earned her second win of the tournament in a commanding 9-1 victory.

"Connie pitched her best game of the year," head coach Brent Rincon said. "She had complete command of her pitches. She really dominated the hitters."

In Sunday's contest, Oregon defeated Eastern Kentucky, 7-2, behind quality defense and a strong pitching performance by freshman Lindsey Kontra.

— Chris Cabot

Wrestling

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championship round against UC Davis' Jeremiah Jarvis. In his semi-final round match, Overstake faced No. 3 seed Levi Weikel-Magden from Stanford and cruised to a 13-4 victory.

Williams, a senior at 125 pounds, was seeded No. 3 in the tournament and had to come up with two victories over tough opponents in order to win the title. Williams cruised through his first two matches winning 10-2 and 18-5, which placed him in the semi-final match against Arizona State's Mike Simpson. Simpson was seeded No. 2 and ranked No. 13 in the country, but Williams won by a score of 15-4, placing him in the finals against No. 1 seed and defending Pac-10 champion Ben VomBaur.

In a previous meeting this season, VomBaur defeated Williams 9-2, but in Sunday's matchup, Williams made the most of his final conference match with an 8-4 victory.

Brian Watson (141) also advanced to the championship match but lost an 11-1 decision to Eric Larkin of Arizona State, who was seeded No. 1 and ranked No. 6. In his first round match,

Watson defeated Cal Poly's Cedric Haymon, the No. 2 seed.

In his first Pac-10 Tournament, red-shirt freshman Shane Webster (174) finished in third place. After losing his first match to Cal Poly's Steve Strange, who would finish in second place, Webster won three consecutive matches, including a 13-4 victory over No. 3 seed Pat Owens from Boise State in the third place match.

Also placing in the top-four for Oregon in the tournament were 149-pounder Eric Webb (third) and Casey Hunt (fourth). Jason Harless finished fifth for Oregon in the 133-pound class but was selected as one of the four wild-card invitations to the national tournament.

The only Oregon wrestler not to win a match in the conference tournament was freshman Elias Soto (184). Soto first lost in a 16-6 decision to Portland State's Charles Sandlin, who was seeded No. 3. Soto then lost to Arizona State's Will Carr in the wrestleback quarterfinals, 5-1.

Placing third in the tournament behind the Ducks was Arizona State, who was a favorite to win, with 103.5 points.

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