

Wild (times 10) West

The Pac-10 has traditionally had the most parity of any conference in the country, and 2002 won't change that

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Apparently, recruits don't mind a little rain — or some nice facilities that protect them from the dreary weather.

With a host of lavish new facilities in the works (or already here), the Northwest schools have taken over the Pacific-10 Conference. Three Northwest teams — Washington, Washington State and Oregon — are ranked in the top 15 in the preseason polls and have their sights set on a party in Tempe at the Fiesta Bowl, the site of this season's national championship. The fourth Northwest school, Oregon State, doesn't seem far from returning to its 2001 glory and could be the biggest sleeper in the Pacific-10 Conference this season.

Don't think the California schools haven't taken notice. USC enters the season ranked in the top 25 while Stanford and UCLA look to surprise the preseason prognosticators.

Without taking up any more precious space, here are a humble reporter's 2002 Pac-10 projections:

1. Washington State (2001 record: 10-2) (6-2 conference)

The 25-foot poster of quarterback Jason Gesser in Dusty, Wash., (pop. 10) was a bit of a joke. But the Cougs showed they were serious about his Heisman campaign when they put another banner along Interstate 5 in downtown

Seattle earlier this week. Those signs may not add up to the 100-foot billboard of Joey Harrington last year, but the preseason pressure may be even greater on Gesser, the 2001 Pac-10 passing leader. In his 14th year in Pullman, head coach Mike Price is seeking his first back-to-back winning seasons and may tout the best defense he's ever had. Even so, the Cougs' offense, which averaged 35 points per game last year, returns seven starters and may not need much defense to win the conference title.

2. Oregon (11-1) (7-1 conference)

Eight home games in the newly expanded Autzen Stadium almost automatically put the Ducks in contention for a third straight conference title.

After splitting time last year with Maurice Morris (now with the Seattle Seahawks), Onterrio Smith is poised for a superb season. Much of Smith's success will depend on the team's ability to find the offensive balance that made the Ducks so successful in 2001. With a strong receiving corps led by senior Keenan Howry, Jason Fife may not have to be perfect to be effective. On defense, the Ducks are deep. Head coach Mike Bellotti says the defensive line may be the best in school history; the Ducks have to make up for the loss of both starting corners from last year.

3. Washington (8-4) (6-2 conference)

Husky head coach Rick Neuheisel wants to make UW the "Florida State of the West" and a consistent nation-



Adam Amato Emerald

Oregon State linebackers Jonathan Pollard (40), Nick Barnett (42) and Noah Happe (91) anchor a Beaver defense that could lead OSU back to the top of the Pac-10.

al-title contender. If the Huskies are going to do that this year, they'll have to show they can play defense. Washington allowed more points last year than it scored and allowed

more than 160 yards per game on the ground. Lighting up the scoreboard will not be a problem for the Dawgs. Quarterback Cody Pickett has some experience now and an NFL-caliber player in receiver Reggie Williams, who set rookie records at UW last year. In all, a Pac-10 title is not out of reach.

4. Oregon State (5-6) (3-5 conference)

With no national championship predictions in sight, the Beavers enter the season somewhat under the radar. Although 2001 was a huge disappointment, it did have some bright spots for the Beavers. Quarterback

Derek Anderson and tailback Steven Jackson gained valuable experience last year, and the OSU defense is always ready to punish. Defensive back Dennis Weathersby has All-American talent, and linebacker Richard Seigler is just tough. After a long offseason, the Beavers may be busy again come January.

5. USC (6-6) (5-3 conference)

Former NFL coach Pete Carroll enters his second year with the Trojans, who desperately need to regain their running tradition. Against Utah in the Las Vegas Bowl last year, USC

rushed for one yard. Ouch. A trio of runners, led by the speedy yet-of-ten-injured Sultan McCullough, could turn things around.

Senior Carson Palmer has been inconsistent in his career (39 touchdowns, 39 interceptions), but his experience combined with a strong defense, led by All-American safety Troy Polamalu, could lead to a double-digit win total for USC this year.

6. Stanford (9-3) (6-2 conference)

With former head coach Tyrone Willingham now at Notre Dame, Buddy Teevens — Steve Spurrier's top offensive assistant at Florida — should be downright offensive in Palo Alto. With Chris Lewis

throwing to the durable Luke Powell and the mammoth Teyo Johnson, and solid tailback-by-committee corp, the Cardinal should score a bowl bid this year.

7. UCLA (7-4) (4-4 conference)

Talk about collapses. The Bruins won their first six games last season, jumped into the national title picture and quickly fell into controversy and out of any bowl game. Running back DeShaun Foster, at one point poised to be-

come the first Pac-10 Heisman Trophy winner in 20 years, was suspended late in the season for allegedly receiving benefits and talking to an agent. Head coach Bob Toledo signed a contract extension in the offseason but is still rumored to be in the hot seat. Add all that on to one of toughest schedules in the country this year, and UCLA has a recipe for a rough 2002 campaign.

8. Arizona State (4-7) (1-7 conference)

If Nebraska's 48-10 crushing of the Sun Devils last Saturday is any indication, ASU is going to have a long year. With a freshman and sopho-

more battling for the starting quarterback spot behind an inexperienced offensive line, Dirk Koetter should not expect much better than the five-game losing streak that ended Arizona State's season last year. But Koetter, in his second year at ASU, believes his team will get better as it matures with redshirt freshman quarterback Chad Christensen. Just don't expect the Devils to go bowling any time soon.

9. Arizona (5-6) (2-6 conference)

The Wildcats have been marred by three consecutive losing seasons after finishing 5-6 last year. Watching his team give up a school-record 34.3 points per game last year, second-year coach John Mackovic has focused his efforts on the defense. Just look at Oregon's 63-38

blowout in Tucson last October, the most points the Wildcats gave up since 1958. On the other side of the ball, Clarence Farmer led the Pac-10

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