

Pac-10 men chase Cats for 2003 conference title

The Ducks and Golden Bears should be in the mix, but the Wildcats were preseason No. 1 for a reason — they're good

Mindi Rice

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This year's Pacific-10 Conference has the usual suspects.

An Arizona team that will run over, and jump above, everyone else. An Oregon team and two California squads who will be a few of the larger speed bumps in Arizona's travels. And a Washington team destined for the bottom of the Pac.

1. Arizona Wildcats

Head coach: Lute Olson

Player to watch: Luke Walton, F

Arizona is a no-brainer for the top of the conference and will have little difficulty staying in the top five nationally. The Wildcats must make sure they keep everyone healthy, though, because they lack extensive depth.

Winning in McArthur Court against the Ducks, with Walton not playing because of injury, shows that Arizona is a basketball team dependent on everyone, not just one or two members. This is how the Wildcats will make it to the Final Four.

Oh, and they can score and rebound too.

2. Oregon Ducks

Head coach: Ernie Kent

Player to watch: Luke Ridnour, G

After a few stumbles in the early season, the Ducks have to learn rebounding technique if they want to compete with the teams they know they can. Losses to Cincinnati, Stanford and California were unexpected, and the Ducks have lessons to learn.

Ridnour and junior Luke Jackson are the bread and butter of the Oregon offense. Shut one, or both, down — as the above teams have — and teams could run right over the Ducks. But beware, redshirt freshman Ian Crosswhite can hit the three-point shot right when players turns their backs.

3. California Golden Bears

Head coach: Ben Braun

Player to watch: Joe Shipp, F

The Golden Bears have been successful early, with a blowout win over the Ducks and a win over Stanford in their Pac-10 opener.

Shipp was named the Pac-10 Player of the Week and has three 30-point games so far this season. Add in sophomore Amit Tamir and senior Brian Wethers, and you have, on average, 51.7 of the 76 points California scores each game.

4. Arizona State Sun Devils

Head coach: Rob Evans

Player to watch: Ike Diogu, F

The Sun Devils can make a name for themselves this season, returning three starters and seven players who averaged at least 13 minutes per game last season. Arizona State played host to the Washington schools already this season, taking both games by an average of 36.5 points.

Diogu leads his team with 18.2 points and 6.9 rebounds per game, while averaging 29.9 minutes. He also is shooting 73.4 percent from the free-throw line.

5. Stanford Cardinal

Head coach: Mike Montgomery

Player to watch: Matt Lottich, G

Stanford went to the NCAA Tournament for the eighth straight time last season, but the Cardinal have a difficult road ahead of them if they want a ninth trip.

Lottich leads his team in 3-pointers and has hit at least one 3-point shot in 13 of 15 games.

6. USC Trojans

Head coach: Henry Bibby

Player to watch: Errick Craven, G

USC is on its way downhill after back-to-back NCAA Tournament appearances and 20-win seasons. The Trojans return nine of last year's lettermen.

Sophomore Craven led the returners in scoring and rebounding last season, and he led the Pac-10 in steals.

7. Washington Huskies

Head coach: Lorenzo Romar

Player to watch: Nate Robinson, G

First year head coach Romar had his work handed to him on a platter when he took this job. A young team that has talent and needs to learn to work together is just what Romar was hoping for.

Freshman Robinson finished out the football season on the field before joining his teammates on the court. He has led his team in points four times already this season.

8. UCLA Bruins

Head coach: Steve Lavin

Player to watch: Jason Kapono, G

If the Bruins want to finish the season winning even half of their games, they need Lavin to buck up and pull them together. Knowing he won't be there next season, Lavin has no reason to worry about angering those who can fire him and only needs to anger his team into winning.

Kapono is on the preseason lists for the Wooden and Naismith awards, which are given annually to the nation's top player.

9. Oregon State Beavers

Head coach: Jay John

Player to watch: Brian Jackson, F

The Beavers have their third head coach in four years, and the shaky start shows the inconsistency of leadership. Jackson, and fellow seniors Mike Cokley and Jimmie Haywood all return as the most consistent aspect of the team — making it through the three coaching changes.

Jackson has 1,032 career points as a Beaver, and has scored in double figures in the first six games of the season.


10. Washington State Cougars

Head coach: Paul Graham

Player to watch: Marcus Moore, G

While the Cougars flounder in the bottom of the Pac-10, Moore is at the top. Averaging 20.6 points per game, Moore leads the Pac-10. He also has two double-doubles thus far into the season and 1,011 career points as a Cougar.

Mindi Rice is a freelance writer for the Emerald.




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