

Ridnour

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billboard. He still doesn't like the idea of competing with skyscrapers. "I wasn't real big on it," Ridnour said. "I think it'd be a lot cooler if the whole team was up there."

But McBride could care less about the billboard right now. He just wants to see Ridnour in action, but commercials are still filling the TV screen.

Finally, after what seems like an entire pack of Marlboros, the game finally gets under way. McBride quiets.

Soon after tipoff, Randy Kirk enters through the back door at Pastime. A coach at a nearby Boys and Girls' Club, Kirk has stopped in to find out his weekly score from the bar's NFL fantasy league. He's quickly reminded that Ridnour's playing on ESPN, and, as one of Ridnour's youth coaches, Kirk can't help but reminisce.

"In fifth grade, he was asking questions that most high school kids wouldn't even ask," Kirk said. "It blew me away."

On the tube, Ridnour and the Ducks are looking like they'd get eaten up by the Borderites' girl's basketball team, much less a Division I men's team like Cincinnati.

A precursor for a blowout, the Bearcats have jumped out to a 17-4 lead over the Ducks. The gossip at Pastime turns to Ridnour's social life, which, oddly enough, seems to

always involve basketball.

"Since he was 1 year old, he's slept with his basketball," Ziegler says. "I've never seen him without a basketball."

Ziegler even reveals, hesitantly, that she heard that Ridnour's mom

"In fifth grade he was asking questions most high schoolers wouldn't ask."

Randy Kirk
former Ridnour coach

built him a separate bed for the basketball. (As fun as it would be, Ridnour denies such allegations, though he does admit he likes to have a basketball with him whenever he can.)

Hoping for better luck with the Ducks, Tim McBride and his wife, Linda, pay their tab at Pastime and head to the Wheelhouse, just a half-block down on Peace Portal Drive. The only place in town with satellite cable, the Wheelhouse has a few more customers than Pastime, but the mood is fittingly somber with the Ducks trailing by a large margin at halftime.

"Everyone's bound to have a bad day here or there," Wheelhouse bartender Rick Freeman said.

A cross between "Cheers" and

"Hoosiers," Blaine, on the surface, is the typical small town: everybody knows your name — especially if it's Ridnour — and everybody loves basketball.

"It's pretty cool like that," Ridnour said of Blaine's bond with Hickory, Ind., the fictional town in "Hoosiers." "The community is so into basketball. They love it. The whole county packs the gym."

The only difference here is that Canada is just a block away, and U.S. Customs' cameras, looking for borderhoppers and smugglers, scour every street corner.

Other than that, Blaine's a quiet and peaceful place.

"Growing up in a small town, you get to know everyone," Ridnour said. "It's always about Blaine, it's never just about one person. I've always been a team guy, and not let the awards and stuff get to you because it's not really yours, it's the people around you."

"It's something you only get in a small town."

And even though his parents, Rob (his high school coach) and Muriel, travel to most Oregon games, Ridnour still misses his home. And as much as it can't miss him, Blaine hasn't forgotten it's claim to fame — who could, very soon, become even more famous.

Cincinnati is dominating. All eyes, once fixed on the television in hopes of catching a sweet Ridnour pass, have now lowered. There are

Luke Ridnour file

Junior guard
Blaine, Wash.
High School: Blaine

Oregon: Became the 24th Duck member of the 1,000-point club last Saturday at Stanford...ranks third all-time in Oregon assists, fourth in steals and fifth in three-pointers made, despite only playing two plus years in Eugene...only Duck to ever win Pac-10 Freshman of the Year award...first team All-Pac-10 in 2002 and honorable mention AP All-American selection.



Ridnour

more drinks to gulp, pizzas to consume, Ridnour's future to consider.

"It's a hard decision, but I think he'll go," John Surowiecki said of the lure of the NBA. "I wouldn't chance any injury (in school)."

Freeman doesn't agree. "I'm sure his parents want him to get a degree," he said. "Money's one thing, but I think it's good to stick with an education."

"Everybody in this town is proud of his achievements — we watch him every chance we can. And we'll support him with whatever decision he makes."

Of course, it's all just speculation at this point. Ridnour said he doesn't even know what he going to do after this season.

"It's my dream to play at the next level," Ridnour said, "but when that happens is in God's hands. Whatever happens, happens. But it's about the team right now and this team winning. That's all that matters right now."

If he were to forgo his senior season, NBADraft.net, an unofficial mock draft Web site, projects Ridnour as a lottery pick this year.

"No matter how famous he gets, he'll never change," Ziegler said. Which is probably true. Millions of dollars and NBA fame couldn't taint Ridnour's modesty — a product of his small-town roots.

"I love being in a small town," Ridnour said. "There's nowhere else I'll ever want to live. Growing up with the same people for so long, you get so close. And that's what I want my kids to experience."

Ridnour brought his most prized possession with him to Oregon — the one he keeps cradled with him every night — but he did forget something important in Blaine. His heart.

And someday, though not quite soon enough, he'll be back to get it.

Contact the senior sports reporter at adamjude@dailyemerald.com.

Pac-10

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improve over last year's seventh-place finish in the conference. Arizona is outscoring its opponents, on average, by 12.5 points per game this season.

Wheeler, the 2002 Pac-10 Freshman of the Year, will start as point guard again this season. She is her team's top returning scorer.

4. UCLA Bruins (10-4, 5-0)

Head coach: Kathy Olivier

Player to watch: Natalie Nakase, G

The Bruins are outscoring opponents by an average of 13.5 points so far this season. UCLA is the surprise team after finishing last year at eighth place.

Nakase controls the point guard position for the third-straight season. She had 148 assists last year, and has leading scorer Michelle Greco back in the lineup for more assists from Nakase.

5. Arizona State Sun Devils (10-4, 2-3)

Head coach: Charli Turner Thorne
Player to watch: Betsy Boardman, G/F

The Sun Devils won the McArthur Court-hosted Pac-10 Tournament last year and finished second in the conference. Arizona State returns six letterwinners but lost its three top scorers.

Boardman is her team's top returning scorer, averaging nine points per game last season. She is one of two juniors on a squad with no seniors.

6. Oregon Ducks

Head coach: Bev Smith

Player to watch: Carolyn Ganes, C

Losing the 2000 Pac-10 Player of the Year and the team's top returning scorer early in the season doesn't help a team win games. Neither does losing the second top returning scorer less than a month later to injury. Yet the Ducks are making progress — as they proved by almost upsetting Stanford on Saturday, 75-74.

Ganes is averaging 10.3 points per game, and 15.7 in conference games, in her freshman season. She is second in the Pac-10 at free

throws, shooting 84 percent.

7. Oregon State Beavers

Head coach: Judy Spoelstra

Player to watch: Leilani Estavan, G

Three starters return to the Beaver squad this season, while a Pac-10-leading nine newcomers meet them on the court. The loss of Felicia Ragland, who averaged 19.9 points per game for Oregon State, will hurt.

Estavan has been running the Beaver squad for two years at point guard and is her squad's top returning steal-maker.

8. California Golden Bears

Head coach: Caren Horstmeyer

Player to watch: Kristin Iwanaga, G

With 11 returning letterwinners, the Golden Bears are building a program for the future. Nine of those 11 were newcomers last season, and with another handful this season, things look bright for Horstmeyer in the next few years.

Iwanaga led last year's squad with 23 three-point baskets. She is joined by top returning scorer LaTasha O'Keith, and together, the two will lead California.

9. USC Trojans

Head coach: Chris Gobrecht

Player to watch: Ebony Hoffman, F

The Trojans finished fourth in the Pac-10 last year but are faced with the lack of a quality point guard. Aisha Hollans will help out Hoffman as a team leader.

Hoffman was a first-team All Pac-10 member last year, and she leads her team in both points and rebounds. Hoffman has seven double-doubles this season, while Hollans has three this season.

10. Washington State Cougars

Head coach: Sherri Murrell

Player to watch: Jessica Perry, G

Between a new head coach and six newcomers to the program, the Cougars are pulling all the stops to change their ways. With an 0-18 Pac-10 record last season, Washington State wants to win.

Perry is one of eight letterwinners who return under their new coach, and she is the Cougars' top returning scorer.

Mindi Rice is a freelance writer for the Emerald.

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