

SPORTS

Best bet
NCAA men's basketball:
Arizona at California
7:30 p.m., Fox Sports

Thursday, February 27, 2003

Closing time

His time at Oregon has flown by, but senior Robert Johnson has left his mark on the Ducks

Men's basketball

Adam Jude

Senior Sports Reporter

It's only just begun, yet it's already over.

For Robert Johnson, today's men's basketball game against USC marks the beginning of the end of his brief — yet successful — Oregon career.

"It's gone by so fast," said Johnson, a senior forward. "It feels just like yesterday that I was here on my recruiting trip. It sneaks up on you."

"You have to cherish the moments while you're here."

A junior college transfer from San Francisco, Johnson has started every game — 60 in all — since donning an Oregon uniform last year. And Johnson's arrival sparked one of the best two-year runs in school history, including a trip to the Elite Eight last season.

If the Ducks win their final two games at McArthur Court this weekend, Johnson — and fellow senior post Brian Helquist — will depart with a 30-2 record at home.

"Robert being a starter for two years really says something," Oregon head coach Ernie Kent said. "He was extremely steady last year. He hasn't been as consistent this year, but still, when you look at the possibility of being 30-2, he has a lot to do with that."

"For our program to take a junior college player, and for him to have the impact he's had on our program, really says a lot about Robert Johnson."

Even more revealing is Johnson's team-first attitude. While he doesn't dish out the assists like Ridnour, Johnson is the ultimate selfless basketball player.

"He's a great defensive player, he's an unselfish player and he's a leader," said Helquist, Johnson's roommate. "He's not the kind of guy that's going to holler and yell out there, but he leads by example."

Voted the team's best defensive player last season, the 6-foot-8-inch, 250-pound Johnson is usually assigned to the opponents' top post player. He leads the team in rebounding this season (6.4 per game), and is among the Pacific-10 Conference leaders in field-goal percentage (.598).

"He's humble and he has sacrificed his game for the team in terms of only wanting to be a rebounder and defender," Kent said.

His statistics won't earn him national recognition, but Johnson's main concern in Oregon's four remaining conference games is helping his team get back to the NCAA Tournament.

"You can find about a 1,000 guys who can score the ball, but there's not that many guys who do the little things — and that's what I try to do," Johnson said. "I just try to find a different style."

His game style isn't the only difference, though. While some of his teammates are known for their shaggy hairdos, Johnson's noggin is shinier than the Mac Court hardwood.

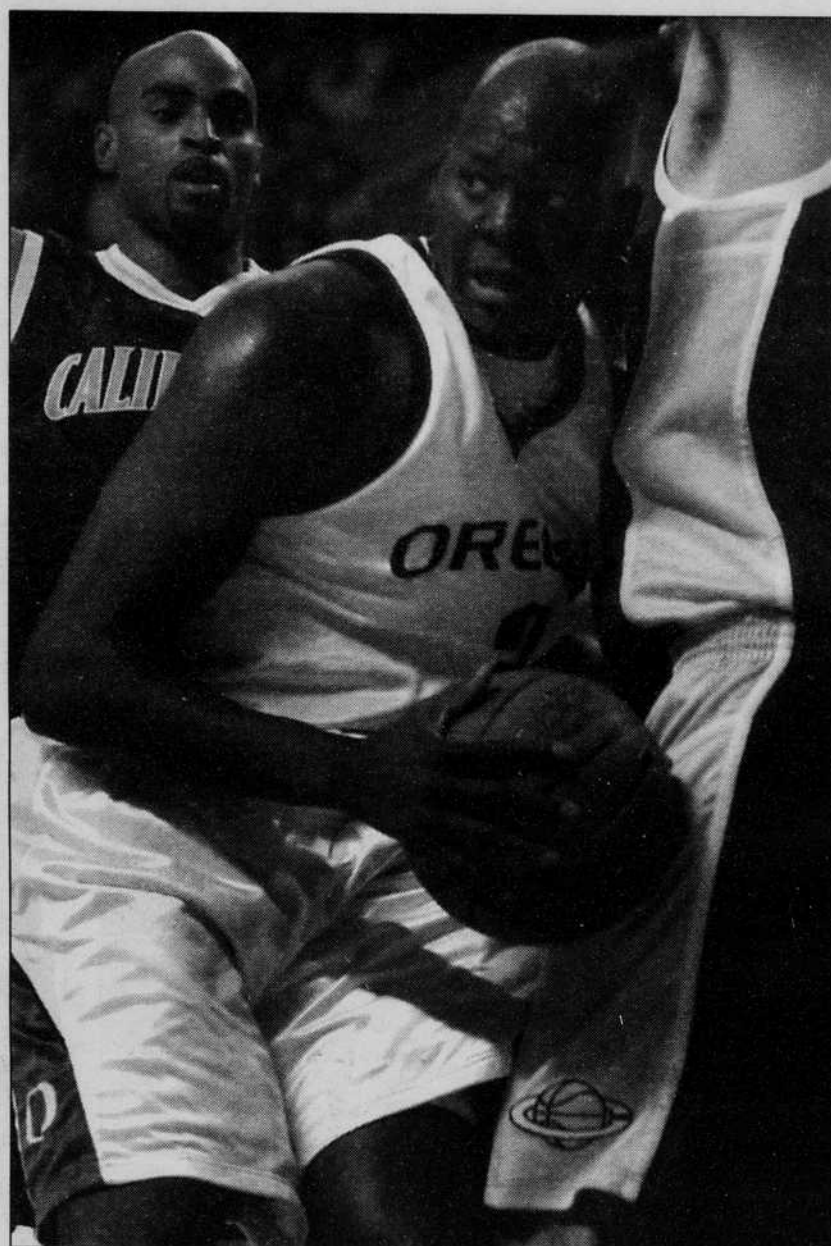
Since high school, he's shaved his head about twice a month. And even though the team trend was for more hair and he wanted to fit in, Johnson said, "I didn't see a need to change when I came here."

But he did help Oregon transform from a 14-14 team in 2000-01 to the Pac-10 champions last year. He averaged 7.5 points and 7.5 rebounds per game last season, after transferring from Santa Rosa Junior College, where he led all California junior college players with 14 rebounds per game in addition to 12 points per game.

"I had no idea the team would do this well," Johnson said. "It's a credit to how good this town and how good this gym is."

A sociology major, Johnson is on pace to graduate this year. Though the time Johnson and Helquist have spent in Eugene has flown by, they said it will be hard for them to say goodbye.

"It's going to be bittersweet," Helquist said, echoing Johnson's sentiments about their final games

Turn to **Johnson**, page 12A

Adam Amato Emerald

Robert Johnson will play his last home games as a Duck this weekend against USC and UCLA.

Men, minus Joseph, face grudge match with USC

The Ducks, close to must-win territory, will play the Trojans without their scrappy guard

Men's basketball

Peter Hockaday

Sports Editor

Can an 18-wheeler still cruise along a highway without one of its wheels? Can a dining-room table survive without a leg?

Can a family stay together without

one of its members?

The Oregon men's basketball team will find out the answer to those questions tonight. And there can be only one answer: Win, or lose.

The Ducks will face a gritty USC team tonight at McArthur Court (tipoff is set for 5:30) without their sixth man — guard Andre Joseph. The junior transfer was suspended for the game after a heated argument with coaches in the second half of Saturday's loss at

Washington. The decision was reached Monday by the coaches and team members.

"Obviously we're missing a key component," Oregon head coach Ernie Kent said. "It's something we're going to have to adjust to. Brandon Lincoln's going to have to step in and play some major minutes."

Lincoln and the other Oregon players will have to make up for Joseph's 11.8 points per game in Pacific-10 Conference play. Lincoln, a

freshman, will play in Joseph's first-guard-off-the-bench role, but he is still recovering from a sprained ankle he suffered in a game against Oregon State.

"He's not back at 100 percent, but hopefully with a couple days rest he'll be fine," Kent said after practice Tuesday.

The most important thing for the Ducks may be keeping their focus on the Trojans, who beat Oregon by 15 points less than a month ago. With the media's attention on Joseph's

suspension, the fact that Thursday's game is close to must-win for the Ducks has almost been overlooked.

"It's going to be a very big basketball game for us," Kent said. "We didn't play well down there. It's a good chance to come back and give them our 'A' game."

The players agree with Kent. "Our focus is just on SC right now," Jackson said. "We definitely want these games."

And Oregon needs them, if the

Turn to **Men's**, page 12A

Jeremy Forrest Emerald

Brandi Davis and the Ducks hope to hold onto sixth in the conference.

Women prepare for 'game of wills'

It's crunch time for Oregon, which faces games against USC and UCLA in Southern California

Women's basketball

Hank Hager

Sports Reporter

It's the time of the year when lockers get used for the last time, when the gym socks get thrown in their last wash cycle, and when crowds get the chance to say goodbye to seniors.

It's the end of the year for Pacific-10 Conference women's basketball. And yes, there's still a conference tournament, and a select few teams will go beyond that to the NCAA Tournament.

Oregon is hoping — beyond all else — that it is one of those select few.

"Right now, I think we need to forget about winning, forget about where our standings are, and right now, our biggest goal is play like how we want to play," sophomore Kedzie Gunderson said. "We need to focus on our game plan, run through stuff, play hard, play defense, and do all those little things because right now, it doesn't matter if we win or lose, but can you play how your team is meant to play?"

The Ducks are tied for sixth in the conference with USC, which, coincidentally, is Oregon's opponent tonight in Los Angeles. The game — set to begin at 7 p.m. at the Los Angeles Sports Arena — pits two teams that are far different now than when they met earlier in the season. Oregon won that game, 79-73, at McArthur Court.

"(USC is) a team that has found some balance in scoring, and they play well at home," Oregon head coach Bev Smith said. "They

are going to be tough in this game because there is a lot on the line for both teams. Certainly, it's going to be a game of wills."

As Smith alluded, the game is big for both teams because of the Pac-10 Tournament next week in San Jose, Calif. The sixth-place team does not have to play until March 8, a Saturday. The seventh-place squad has to play an additional game March 7.

Oregon State sits one game ahead of the Trojans and Ducks, and has to play in Los Angeles this weekend as well. Because of that, though, the Beavers ultimately control their own destiny.

So do the Ducks, but they will have to prove it against USC.

"Who wants to play a day when they really don't have to?" sophomore Brandi Davis said. "We're just looking forward to going out there and playing the best we can. If we have

Turn to **Women's**, page 10A