

Seniors 'set tone' in Oregon's win over USC

In their next-to-last game at home, Brian Helquist and Robert Johnson combine for 18 points and 13 rebounds in the 13-point victory

Men's basketball

Adam Jude
Senior Sports Reporter

As he sat in front of a horde of media members, lights glaring and cameras rolling, Robert Johnson released a big sigh. Then, as if the weight of an entire season had just been lifted off his shoulders, he let out a big grin.

Johnson had reason to smile Thursday, and so did his roommate and fellow senior Brian Helquist after the Oregon men's basketball team's 79-66 victory over USC in front of a sold-out crowd of 9,087 at McArthur Court.

It's been a roller coaster year for Johnson and Helquist, the Ducks' opening-day starting post players who have taken the brunt of criticism this season for the team's inconsistent production in the paint.

When Oregon's post players fail to score at least 22 points, the Ducks (19-7 overall, 9-6 Pacific-10 Conference) are 1-7 this season. When they do amass 22 points or more, Oregon is 18-0 this season, including last night's win, when Johnson (12 points), Helquist (six points) and freshman center Matt Short (six points) combined for 24 points.

In their final weekend series at Mac Court, Johnson (7 rebounds) and Helquist (six rebounds) also helped the Ducks to a 39-38 rebounding edge over the Trojans (10-14, 5-10).

"Robert and Brian are fighters, and they don't want to lose; they don't want to go out not winning at home," said point guard Luke Ridnour, who had a game-high 23 points Thursday. "They're going to fight, and we're going to follow their lead."

Helquist, a 6-foot-9-inch center from Jacksonville, Fla., made his first start since Oregon's last meeting with USC, a 91-76 defeat in Los Angeles on Feb. 2, when he was held scoreless in seven minutes.

"I feel like we played a lot tougher on the inside (Thursday)," said Helquist, who was 3-of-6 from the floor in 21 minutes. "They really beat us up inside last time, and the big guys really had something to prove this game. We weren't going to be pushed around, and we came out and fought hard."

Johnson and Helquist will play their final home game at 1 p.m.

Saturday against UCLA — a game that the Ducks say they need to win to secure a spot in the NCAA Tournament.

"It's coming down to the end of the line for me and Rob, and we're try to do as much as we can to get this done and to get in the NCAA Tournament again," Helquist said.

"This is the biggest weekend at home we've had in a long time," Johnson said. "So there is a large sense of urgency to get this done."

Johnson had just two points in Oregon's first meeting with the Trojans, but scored the Ducks' first basket of

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Luke Ridnour
Oregon point guard

the game Thursday and finished with nine points in the first half.

"I don't think I had any less intensity (in L.A.), it's just that opportunities came (Thursday) and they didn't come as often in the last time we faced USC," Johnson said.

Oregon fought back from a 12-point first-half deficit and trailed by one at halftime. Helquist tipped in a James Davis miss for the first bucket of the second half to give the Ducks a 45-44 lead. He then put the exclamation point on the win with a two-handed dunk with 2:12 left to give Oregon a 78-64 lead, its largest of the game.

"I thought they set the tone for us," Oregon head coach Ernie Kent said of his seniors. "They played hard, and they were so much tougher than they were down in L.A."

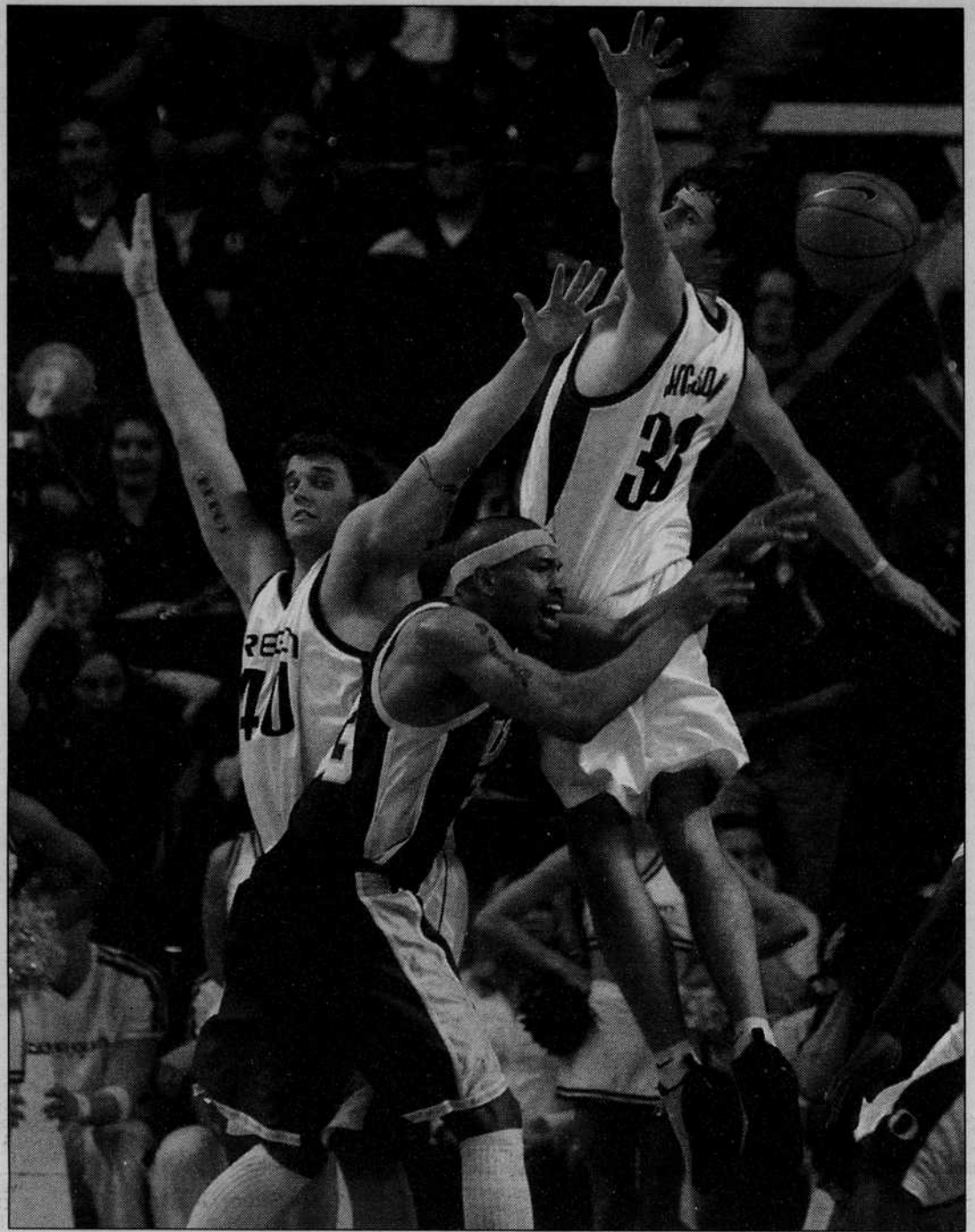
Helquist will start again Saturday, and Johnson will make his 62nd consecutive start as a Duck.

Saturday's game could also be Ridnour's final game at Mac Court, if he chooses to enter the NBA draft this year. As Ridnour took control of the game in the second half, scoring eight points in a 12-0 run, The Pit Crew chanted, "One more year."

Ridnour said he is not preparing for Saturday's game to be his last at Mac Court.

"Our goal is to get those two seniors out with a win," Ridnour said. "It's all about those two, and we have to play hard to get it done for them."

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Adam Amato Emerald

Brian Helquist (40) and Luke Jackson defend USC's Desmon Farmer, who had four three-pointers to start the game.

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State, which lost at Stanford on Thursday night. Neither team can mathematically catch Stanford for third, while Oregon State and USC are too far behind. So the Ducks and Sun Devils will finish fourth and fifth in the conference,

meaning they will face each other in the Pac-10 Tournament. They will also square off in Tempe, Ariz., on Thursday.

Kent and the Ducks hope they don't need to win that game to get to 20 wins on the season. They want No. 20 against UCLA on Saturday.

"Saturday's game becomes a

lot of thing, to get to 20 wins, to get these seniors out with a win, to get one more win in this great old building," Kent said. "So much is at stake."

The Ducks and Bruins will tip off at 1 p.m. on Saturday. The game will be televised on CBS.

Contact the sports editor at peterhockaday@dailymerald.com.

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