

VOLLEYBALL

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The Ducks are coming off an 11-21 season, including a 1-17 conference record. The low point of 2002 came after the season ended and six players either transferred or left for personal reasons. With only five players returning, the importance of recruiting has magnified.

The coaching staff didn't have to look far, as six of the nine incoming freshmen are from in-state. Heading the group is fab-50 setter Heather Madison, who led Gresham High School to two consecutive state titles and was named first team All-American and Oregon player of the year as a senior.

Madison will have the benefit of learning from fab-50 sophomore setter Jodi Bell, who was Oregon's Newcomer of the Year last season.

"Being a setter with Heather is an amazing experience," Bell said. "She's a scrappy player. She gets to balls that you shouldn't be able to get to."

Other freshmen include defensive specialists Stephanie Alleman, Kandice Feola and Allyson Leavitt and middle blockers Kristen Bitter and Kim McNally.

Hawaii native Sarah Mason, outside hitter Erin Little of Victoria, B.C., and setter Callan Janowicz, who was named the 2002 Alaska Gatorade player of the year, complete the talented group of freshmen.

Along with Bell, several players form a solid nucleus of returning athletes, including junior outside hitter Lauren Westendorf, junior libero Katie O'Neil, sophomore middle blocker Kelly Russell and sophomore offensive hitter Jaclyn Jones.

Ferreira said it's up to the coaching staff and returning players to assume a leadership role on the young team.

Westendorf, who has been one of the Ducks' strongest athletes, said she has improved each season through a tireless work ethic and is looking to better her 1.9 kills per game last season.

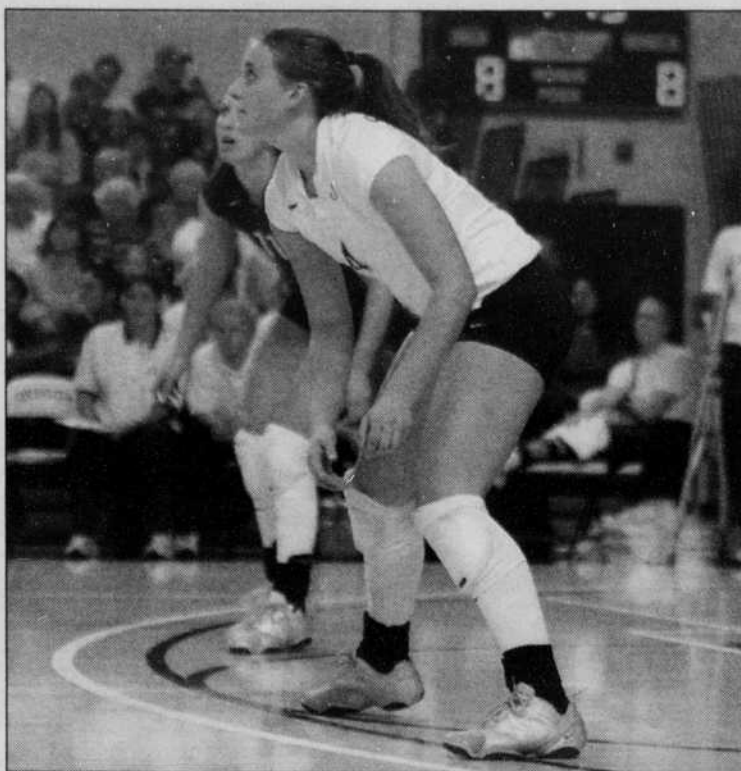
"Lauren's progress has been exceptional," Ferreira said. "We expect another big jump."

O'Neil, who was also a fab-50 player at Gresham, has been an "anchor on the whole situation," Ferreira said. Playing the libero position, O'Neil isn't noticed statistically, but her leadership on and off the court has helped the Ducks immensely.

Though the future looks bright, the Ducks are looking to the present and trying to improve on a 3-51 Pac-10 record over the past three seasons.

"We are focusing on the here and now," Westendorf said. "We're taking what we have now and running with it."

Contact the sports reporter at jonroetman@dailyemerald.com.



Emerald

Junior libero Katie O'Neil, who improved her career-high to 19 digs in a game last season and is now a seasoned veteran, will lead Oregon on defense.

HAGER

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Ducks have been competitive in football and basketball.

Even other programs have begun to show signs of life, making a believer of even the most pessimistic of fans.

The hard part now comes with complacency. When all is said and done, Oregon will have two first-class facilities: Autzen and the new Mac.

How the players and coaches treat the situation will be of utmost importance. Will the memories of McArthur Court and the pre-remodeled Stadium be deep in their minds?

And even now, with the new arena on the horizon, can the two programs keep the excitement coming. Can Oregon football shed off last year's middling 7-6 season like a bad cold, or will it fall prey to Nebraska syndrome?

Can Duck basketball forgive and forget Luke Ridnour, take its run-and-gun offense all the way to the Pacific-10 Conference Tournament, then the NCAA version?

Chances are both teams will prove that last year was more a fluke than anything else, but with Oregon's greatest symbol of success close to

fruition, keeping the sense of pride to which the University has grown accustomed will be vital.

It is important to keep rolling like the past five years so that the new arena will have a fan base comparable to the number of its seats. If there are 15,000 seats at the new Mac, then there should be 15,000 people at the game.

If there's less than that, it will cheapen the value of the team's success. There's nothing worse than building a state-of-the-art facility that fails to be sold out.

Autzen's expansion went well despite the season of discontent. The blueprints are in place for attracting fans in droves.

But regardless of what the Oregon programs do in the Casanova Center, winning is the thing that will keep the success and the fans coming out like never before.

If that doesn't keep happening, the symbol of success goes down the hill.

It would be hard to see what \$130 million would look like then.

Contact the sports editor at hankhager@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

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