

Oregon wrestlers prepare for Pac-10 tourney

The Ducks hope to make some noise at the Pac-10 championships that start Sunday in Tempe, Ariz.

By Scott Archer
Freelance Reporter

The season comes down to the upcoming Pacific-10 Conference Tournament for Oregon's top wrestlers. However, the tournament, held Sunday and Monday, provides a few Ducks a chance to prolong their season by earning a berth to the 2004 NCAA Championship.

DUCK WRESTLING

In all, 10 Oregon wrestlers will compete beginning Sunday with a conference crown and a trip to St. Louis on the line.

The Pac-10 Tournament sends 41 wrestlers to compete in the NCAA Tournament. The Pac-10 champion in a respective weight class will also be joined at NAAs by three or four runners-up in the same class. The Pac-10 also hands out 11 wildcards to wrestlers to represent the Pac-10 in the NCAA Tournament but who did not finish high enough to earn an automatic berth.

But for the Ducks, it's more about putting the season behind them and focusing on upcoming matches that will determine if the young wrestlers have learned from their mistakes.

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Although Kearney wouldn't say

specifically how many Ducks he wants to qualify for the NCAA tournament to make it a successful trip, he believes that anywhere from three to seven Ducks will be selected for it.

Not quite veterans

Sometimes it's easy to forget just how young Oregon is.

The Ducks have three freshmen starters: Joey Lucas, Cody Parker and Cyle Hartzell. Junior Dustin Fisher is in his first year as a starter, along with sophomore Joey Bracamonte.

"We have some young guys who are just starting out their college careers," sophomore Chet McBee said. "You are looking at six to seven guys that are making their first Pac-10 tourney, and they don't have a whole lot

of experience in that area."

For a third of Oregon's starters this is the first tournament atmosphere since high school. It's impossible to overstate the changes and challenges that come with competing against the Pac-10's best compared to where some of the freshmen were just a year ago.

"High school tournaments are nothing compared to this," McBee said. "It's a joke. In a tournament like this there is immediate consequences. If you lose, you're done. Season's over. For some their careers are over, and if you do win you get three more weeks (of preparation for the NCAA tournament) and it's something everyone strives for."

Scott Archer is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

DEFENSIVE

continued from page 13

Gunderson was used to scoring. The former KingCo Conference Most Valuable Player averaged at least 14 points per game in each of her last two seasons at Bellevue and figured she would eventually play a significant role in the Oregon offense.

After witnessing the offensive skills possessed by players around the Pac-10, however, Gunderson knew something would have to change.

Realizing that she was outgunned when it came to pure offensive talent, the feisty Gunderson chose to switch her focus to defense. The 6-foot forward worked relentlessly to become a better defender, knowing it was her best chance to see playing time as a freshman.

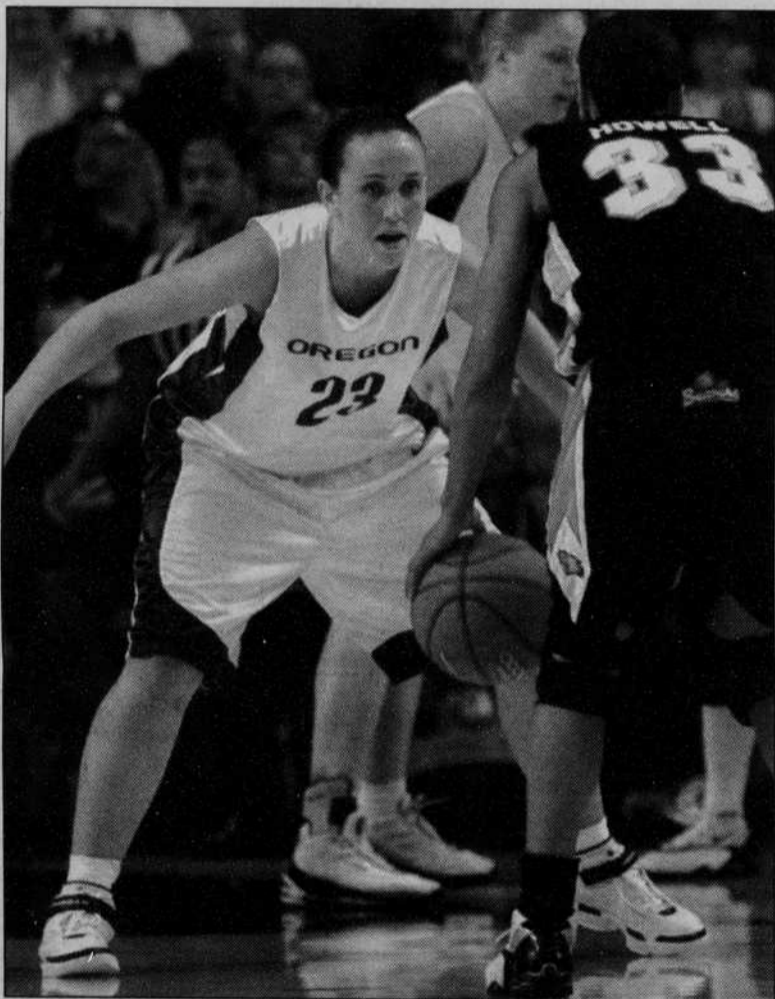
Now a junior on the Oregon women's basketball team, Gunderson's hard work and determination has helped her become the Ducks' best defensive player.

Getting to this position, however, wasn't easy for her.

"When I came here, it was funny, because I was like, 'I'm not a defensive player, I've always been a scorer in high school,'" Gunderson said. "Coming in here and seeing how much talent there is in the league, and even on this team, I knew my role was going to be different.

"I made a tremendous effort to say, 'You know what, my effort is going towards defense,' because nobody was really stepping up, no one was really saying, 'Hey, I want to do that.'"

Gunderson's quest to become a better defensive player wasn't without obstacles. A lack of playing time during her freshman year left her frustrated and yearning to contribute. Despite her dissatisfaction, Gunderson continued working and listening to the advice of coaches and teammates.



Tim Kupsick Freelance Photographer

Kedzie Gunderson is third in rebounding for Oregon with 3.2 rebounds per game.

"When you come in as a freshman, it's really frustrating," Gunderson said. "You're working so hard and trying to learn everything. If I was to give advice to any freshman coming in, it would be to understand that your freshman year is going to be a learning time for you.

"Don't get frustrated with it, don't criticize it and really try to absorb everything... If you don't, it's almost like you wasted a year."

As time passed, Gunderson's

defense improved and she started seeing more playing time. The coaching staff liked her competitive fire, her never-ending hustle and willingness to do the dirty work.

Now in her third season, Gunderson is trusted with shutting down an opponent's most prolific scorer. Whether it's Stanford's Nicole Powell, Washington's Giuliana Mendiola or Arizona State's Betsy Boardman, Gunderson works her butt off to make sure the opposition's star

doesn't score an easy basket.

"I really take pride in stepping up to the challenge," Gunderson said. "I love the fact that my challenge is (the opposition's) best player. I like to get them frustrated and get in their head."

Smith said she and the rest of the coaching staff knew immediately that Gunderson would make a quality defensive player.

"We saw the potential with Kedzie," Smith said. "We saw the determination and we saw the smartness. Kedzie's not the most powerful player, she's not the most aggressive player in terms of explosiveness and quickness. She'd admit to that.

"But she's a very smart player and she knows how she can play defense with her mind more than her body."

Along with her defensive improvement, Gunderson eventually discovered how she could contribute

to the offensive end. Rather than trying to create off the dribble, she has looked to score more in the post, on mid-range jump shots and finishing on fast breaks. Gunderson matched a career-high with 13 points against Washington State two weeks ago.

Though her offensive contributions are welcomed, it's Gunderson's defense that helps set the tone for Oregon's aggressive style of play. The Ducks have been at their best this season when they play strong defense, and Gunderson's teammates appreciate her hustle.

"She never gives up," guard Kayla Steen said. "She's extremely hard-working. She knows what her role is and knows we definitely need her on

the defensive end."

Chelsea Wagner, another defensive standout for the Ducks, said that playing tough defense is just as important as having a big scoring night.

"We both kind of feed off each other in that aspect," Wagner said. "We just try and get some steals and try to get the team going. That's how we can contribute our scoring with the team. Even though we don't get the two points, we're giving us an extra possession to get some points."

Entering tonight's game against No. 10 Stanford, Gunderson is averaging 5.1 points and 3.2 rebounds

per contest. Even though she doesn't sport All-American numbers, her contributions to the team are endless.

She has emerged as one of Oregon's on-court leaders. Gunderson uses hustle — during games and practice — to motivate her teammates rather than yelling and

screaming at them.

"She's the one that's always grinding it out and the one who's always giving that second and third effort on possessions," Smith said. "She's not a very loud leader. She doesn't speak a lot but her actions speak for her. That's how she feels she wants to be represented. Those are the kind of people who walk the walk and not just talk the talk."

Gunderson has finally arrived, as she is now trusted to slow the opposition's best player and is emerging as a team leader.

Sounds like she made the right decisions.

Contact the sports reporter at jonroetman@dailyemerald.com.

AIMS

continued from page 13

almost five points more per game at home during Pac-10 play.

"(Brooks) is quicker and gives you another, quicker defender on the ball," Kent said. "Defense is a priority to him. He loves to play it, he loves to pick up the ball. He loves to stick people and lock them up. So just his mentality will help us somewhat."

Most important, however, will be Oregon's play in the post. Ike Diogu walked all over Oregon's defenders in Arizona State's win on Saturday. The Golden Bears present a different kind of challenge than Diogu, who is primarily an inside player.

Tamir is like Jackson. He can post up or shoot from the perimeter. He

is sixth all-time at California with 126 three-pointers.

That's not bad for a 6-foot-10 forward.

He was, however, held in check by the Ducks earlier this season. He scored two points after connecting on two free throws. He was 0 for 8 from the field.

"Of course he's going to be fired up," Crosswhite said. "He's going to want to have a good game, especially since he's had good games against us before. It's his last year. He's got five more guaranteed games and he's going to be playing his hardest."

Powe represents the newest breed of Pac-10 freshmen and is a potential future all-conference player. He already leads the conference in rebounding with 9.2 per game and averages 14.6 points.

That number, though, is a bit skewed — he has not scored more

than 10 points in California's past three games. Coincidentally, the Golden Bears have lost their past three.

"He's tough," Platt said. "He's a man under there, he's not your average freshman. He bangs and he's decent from 15 (feet) on in and can shoot it out there. We just need to play solid and we'll probably get the trap on him and try to force it out of his hands."

After the Ducks play California, they visit Stanford. Much like Haas, the Ducks have had very little success at Maples Pavilion. Oregon hasn't won in Palo Alto since 1986.

Oregon has four games left this season. It will be interesting to see if the Ducks can find a way to beat those guys.

Contact the sports editor at hankhager@dailyemerald.com.

ON-COURT

continued from page 13

dual-match singles.

"We've had some benefit of playing a couple of other guys up higher," Russell said. "They've got some confidence playing against better players. That's been good to see."

However, the true test lies ahead for the men when they confront two top 20 teams at home — No. 8 Rice and the Ducks' Pacific-10 Conference opener against No. 18 Washington.

Women jump in polls

Even though the Oregon women had their nine-match winning streak snapped last weekend against fourth-ranked Washington, they still felt that they played well enough to win.

"It was a close, hard-fought match

we played up there," Oregon women's head coach Nils Schyllander said. "We felt like we were in position to win."

Nevertheless, their 9-1 start to the dual match season is becoming recognized nationally. The Ducks improved significantly in the polls this week by jumping 18 spots from No. 42 to No. 24.

So far this season, the women have dominated their opponents in doubles as they have assembled a 26-4 doubles record. However, Schyllander said singles is an area in which he would like to see his team improve.

"I think doubles right now is phenomenal," Schyllander said. "We just need to make sure that we get more productive throughout the lineup in singles."

Alex Tam is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.