

UO, Colorado meet in NIT

The Ducks and Buffaloes meet Wednesday in the first round of the NIT Wednesday

By Hank Hager
Sports Editor

Oregon knew long ago it would need to win the Pacific-10 Conference

MEN'S BASKETBALL

Tournament to secure a bid into the NCAA version.

The Ducks didn't, bowing out to Stanford on Friday.

Oregon's consolation? A berth into the National Invitational Tournament against Colorado at McArthur Court on Wednesday at 9 p.m., which was announced Sunday after the Big Dance claimed its teams.

The game will be televised nationally on ESPN2.

"I don't know if there was any doubt," Oregon forward Mitch Platt said after the Ducks met late Sunday night. "It's another day, which is a good thing for this program and this school."

The NIT is a chance for the Ducks to start anew, get a grasp on a season that seemingly tortured them.

The NIT is chance for Oregon to make amends for a 3-5 finish to the season. It's a chance for seniors Luke Jackson, James Davis, Jay Anderson and Andre Joseph to get another crack at a win in an Oregon uniform.

As much of a disappointment as the NIT can be for a program that has seen NCAA success in the past few years, it is very much a chance to show the rest of the country the season hasn't been a total loss.

"We're just going to play as hard we can and try to get a win," Jackson said. "I'm excited about the NIT and we'll be in it to win it."

As one of just four Pac-10 teams to end with a winning record this season, Oregon is the only conference program to appear in the NIT. Stanford, Washington and Arizona all earned bids to the NCAA Tournament earlier on Sunday.

"If we weren't in the NIT, it would have been extremely hard to watch it today, especially with the success this program has had the last couple years," Oregon head coach Ernie Kent said of watching the selection for the NCAA Tournament. "This is an opportunity for us to continue to play and grow."

The biggest opportunity, said the Ducks (15-12 overall), is that the game will allow Oregon's younger players — such as Platt, Aaron Brooks, and, to an extent, Ian Crosswhite — a chance to get more playing time. That's especially the case for Platt and Brooks,

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Going back to NIT isn't true benefit to improved UO

Ernie Kent will talk about Oregon's NIT berth as a sign that the Ducks are headed in the right direction.

The head coach will say that three straight postseason berths put Oregon up there in the grand scheme of things. The NIT, after all, gets Oregon noticed by recruits, prognosticators and fans across the nation.

Hey, if the Ducks win this thing, they could be the 66th-best team in the nation, behind the likes of Coppin State, Mississippi Valley State and Eastern Washington. Now that's something for the media guide next season.

All kidding aside — and yeah, Oregon could beat a few NCAA Tournament-bound teams — the NIT should be a disappointment for a Pacific-10 Conference program that can boast having serious talent over the last three years.

Freddie Jones was just the first step, Luke Ridnour the second and Luke Jackson will become the third. Jackson could prove to be the best of the three in the NBA. He has arguably the best all-around talent of the group and, not surprisingly, the least flash.

For Jackson to miss the NCAA Tournament his senior season is a shame. He knows it, Kent knows it and so do the rest of the Ducks. A team that looked to be in the upper echelon of the Pac-10 entering the season, Oregon proved otherwise when all was said and done.

It did finish in the upper echelon, but only because of the ineptitude of the rest of the conference. A 6-8 record in the last 14 games of the season — the Pac-10 Tournament included — is more symbolic of the season than the Ducks' 9-4 start.

Little depth beyond the starters, even less composure in the post play and mind-boggling bad decisions at times are more indicative of the season than Jackson's 22 points and seven rebounds per game.

Oh no, the Ducks won't call the NIT a desirable result after a down season. But at the same time, they most assuredly will claim the NIT as

something better than nothing.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for our program," Kent said Sunday. "I really realize the growth you get out of postseason play. Just to have an opportunity to be one of four teams in the Pac-10 Conference with a winning record, to be back to postseason three years in a row and now four out of the last five years, this is huge for our program."

Momentum, the Ducks will argue, can be carried through the off-season after a decent showing in the NIT. Momentum will carry to workouts, recruiting and fan interest.

It's time to cry foul.

As much confidence as the NIT could potentially give Oregon, it could work entirely in reverse.

Say Colorado comes into McArthur Court and takes a bite out of Oregon's offense. What if the same team embarrasses Oregon's defense, much like Pac-10 teams did all season?

Granted, the Ducks should be playing in the NIT. That's a given. Any time a team has a chance to extend its season, it should take it.

Just don't call it momentum, a benefit to the program or a step to bigger things. Don't compare the NCAA Tournament to the NIT in any way, shape or form.

Call it a basketball tournament for the next best 40 teams.

Teams like Oregon. Teams like Colorado that thought they were close, but had the rug pulled out from below. Or teams that never really had a chance to get to the Big Dance and where a .500 record or better is something to celebrate.

That isn't Oregon. Don't mistake the Ducks for that. After the past two seasons, the NCAA Tournament is the only acceptable answer.

Any argument to the contrary is an insult to Kent, Jackson and the program itself.

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

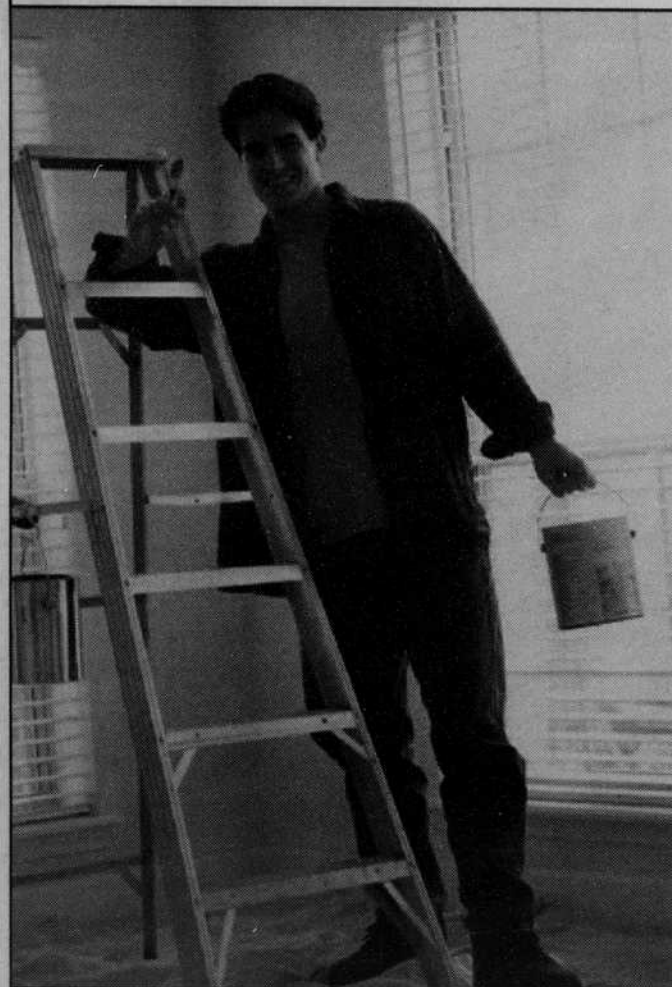


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Huskies, Sun Devils kept from tourney without good reason

Three Pacific-10 Conference teams found their way into the Women's 2004 NCAA Tournament, as did at least four teams with just 17 wins and at least 12 losses from other leagues.

So why were Arizona State and Washington — Pac-10 programs with 17-11 and 17-12 records, respectively — left out of the March Madness masquerade?

Very few reasons lend themselves to Washington and Arizona State being left out. The Huskies and Sun Devils have Ratings Percentage Indexes (RPI)

within the top 55, which should have garnered them more support from the selection committee considering their Pac-10 membership.

In contrast, UCLA — the third Pac-10 team to get a berth — has an RPI of 51. Washington's is 52 and Arizona State's is 46.

On the other side, schools with higher RPIs — Colgate (159), Marist (104) and Pennsylvania (128) — all earned berths to the NCAA Tournament.



Mindi Rice
The girl and the game

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