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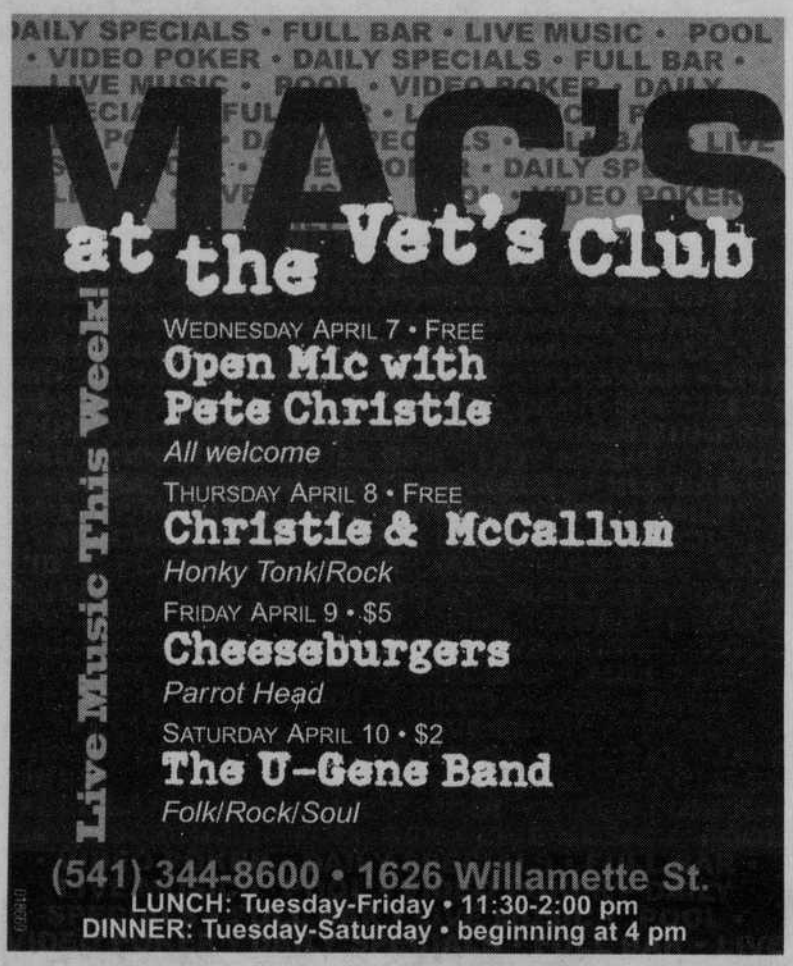

Oregon players are excited about chance at Oklahoma

The Ducks announced the addition of Oklahoma to the schedule last week

By Hank Hager
Sports Editor

The excitement is there.

The problem is, the game is still more than five months away.

Oregon players can look forward to Sept. 18, when they travel to Norman to take on national powerhouse Oklahoma. That became reality last week when the teams agreed to meet on Oklahoma's turf next season, then again as late as the 2008 season in Eugene.

"What an awesome experience," quarterback Kellen Clemens said. "We are excited. Having another opponent like that on the schedule this year definitely helps the enthusiasm and excitement out here for spring ball."

DUCK FOOTBALL

The game became possible when the Ducks pulled out of their contest with Nevada. The Wolf Pack are now set to play Buffalo in Las Vegas. The Sooners were originally scheduled to play Florida A&M, which is now set to play Temple in Philadelphia.

All of that paved the way for Oregon to play the Sooners, who lost to Louisiana State in the national championship game last season.

"Everyone loves a big game," cornerback Justin Phinisee said. "You don't want to shy away from that. It's a chance for us to get on our feet early and get some good competition out there. Hopefully we can feed off of it."

The last time the Ducks played a national power outside of the Pacific-10 Conference? That came recently. Oregon stunned Michigan, 31-27, in the fourth game of the 2003 season.

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> **Justin Phinisee**
> Oregon cornerback

"We learned from that that it is just a man versus another man," linebacker Jerry Matson said. "It doesn't matter about the uniform. It doesn't matter about the tradition. It's about where the program is that day."

The Ducks promptly lost to Washington State, 55-16, after the upset of then-No. 3 Michigan.

The 2004 season could provide the same kind of pitfall, albeit against a lesser-quality opponent.

Oregon opens up the season against Indiana at Autzen Stadium Sept. 11, followed by the visit to Oklahoma. After that, the Ducks return home for a game against Idaho on Sept. 25, which is then followed by the Pac-10 opener against Arizona State on Oct. 2.

"You want to still take it one step at a time," Clemens said. "Should we go to Oklahoma and come away with a win, then we've got to come back and we've got to play whoever's next on our schedule; I believe it's Idaho. You've got to not get too high and you've got to not get too low. That's one of the things that hurt us last year."

What, in reality, does the game mean for the Oregon program? While it is just another game on the schedule, it is the right step for a program that has been on the way up the national ladder.

The Sooners are expected to win every season. They held the No. 1 spot in the nation for most of last season.

However, most forget the Ducks were close to that just three seasons ago. Oregon is not very far removed from the 2001 season that saw the Ducks finish No. 2 in the nation.

"It gives a little bit of a shout to the people of the past, the Oregon Ducks that have really put in a lot of work and the coaching staff that has really turned this place around," Matson said. "Now we're on a national level where we can get games with Oklahoma. It's a good step for the program. Years ago we probably would've not been able to get a game probably."

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personnel readied confetti rockets with 20 seconds left, and then, with one second to play, Calhoun finally pumped his fists, finally smiled at his bench.

"We did have a big lead at halftime and I wanted to make sure we were going to stand on the podium after the game," Calhoun said. "With about six minutes to play, Georgia Tech started making a lot of threes — more than I can count. That made us a little nervous."

The game had not been in doubt since midway through the first half, but Calhoun's Huskies, the ones carrying heavy expectations all season, weren't leaving anything to chance.

They played a nearly flawless game, holding Georgia Tech to 38 percent shooting and limiting 7-foot-1 Luke Schenscher to a pedestrian 9 points and 11 rebounds. Okafor had the 15 boards and five other Huskies had six boards apiece as Connecticut dominated on the glass. Gordon added 21 points and Rashad Anderson had 18 on a night when the Huskies took very few bad shots and crisply executed their offense.

The game was won long before halftime, as the Huskies upped their lead to 12 when Taliek Brown's layup made it 28-16 with 8:56 to go in the first half.

Before the game, the Huskies' coaches admitted they feared Georgia Tech's physicality along the perimeter. The Yellow Jackets' strong guards if not manhandled, had at least handled the Huskies' guards in the team's first meeting, a 77-61 win by Tech in the preseason NIT. But UConn used its speed and finesse early this time, repeatedly driving by the slower Jackets.

And the Jackets, who had shown such poise in making a remarkable tournament run, apparently were so besieged by nerves, they couldn't hit their free throws.

Semifinal hero Will Bynum made an enormously tough layup, driving past three Oklahoma State players Saturday to put Georgia Tech in the finals. But Monday, he missed the front ends of consecutive one-and-ones, and then, given a chance to redeem himself, he missed again. With five seconds to go before the break, Bynum drew a second foul on Okafor, and went to the line, Georgia Tech down, 39-26.

With a relative yelling from the stands, "Yes you can, Will," Bynum clanked first, and then the second free throw. Okafor pulled down the miss and the 6-foot-10 All-American rocketed it out to a streaking Rashad Anderson. Pulling up, Anderson hit a long jumper, swinging Georgia Tech's halftime deficit from what could have been a manageable 11 — had Bynum, an 80 percent free throw shooter, made the free throws - to a much more frightening 15 at 41-26.

The Yellow Jackets shot badly from everywhere through the first half, hitting just 2-of-10 from long range, 4-of-11 from the charity stripe and just 29.4 percent from anywhere on the floor. The Huskies, meanwhile, worked frenetically everywhere, scoring off every one of Georgia Tech's six turnovers, and camping under the glass, maniacally tipping out misses and hustling for loose balls.

Georgia Tech took a brief lead at 12-11 after a 5-0 run, but the preseason favorite Huskies stopped toying with the in-season surprise. They scored 10 unanswered points in a run that featured a real smile from the notoriously grim game-faced Calhoun and a fake-pass three from Gordon that even faked out the alleged recipient in Anderson.

After Okafor laid in — backwards — a bounce pass from freshman Josh Boone 13:15 into the game, UConn only got one more first half-field goal. But with the Jackets missing free throws (6) and the Huskies making theirs' (7), UConn added one point to its lead.

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