

Trojans, Bruins possess ample speed

USC and UCLA enter the Pac-10 Champs loaded with top speed

By Jon Roetman
Sports Reporter

Speed kills.

While not all track and field events are based on speed, the swiftness of each Southern California school will be a major weapon in the battle for the Pacific-10 Conference team title.

PAC 10

Southern California and UCLA have been dominant in sprints and middle distance events this year, holding many of the conference's top times.

While the schools have been successful in other areas, the advantage each holds in the speed events is glaring.

Here's a look at what each team possesses heading into the Pac-10 Conference Championship meet this weekend in Tucson, Ariz.

Arizona

The Wildcats feature one of the nation's best distance runners in sophomore Robert Cheseret.

A native of Kenya, Cheseret owns the Pac-10's top mark in the 5,000 (13 minutes, 22.65 seconds) and second best in the 10,000 (28:25.62). The Wildcats are tied for the No. 17 ranking nationally according the Trackwire.com top 25.

Arizona State

The Sun Devils are deep in the 400 and own top times in the 4x100 (39.21) and 4x400 relays (3:01.51). Defending champion Lewis Banda (first, 45.23), Jason Barton (third, 45.56) and Domenik Peterson (fourth 46.01) should bring home favorable marks in the 400.

California

The Golden Bears have a legitimate shot at four individual event titles. Sophomore Teak Williams owns the conference's top high jump mark (7-5), while senior Ahmad Wright is a contender in the 400 hurdles (third, 51.19).

Oregon

The Ducks are highlighted by event leaders Tommy Skipper (pole vault, 18-8 3/4), Eric Mitchum (110 hurdles, 13.50), Brandon Holliday (400 hurdles, 51.08) and Brett Holts (steeplechase, 8:44.57). Oregon is ranked No. 20.

Stanford

Lead by Donald Sage (first, 3:40.31) the Cardinal's strongest event is the 1,500, where it owns three of the top four times. Stanford's deepest event is the 5,000, where the Cardinal feature eight of the top 12 competitors. Stanford is ranked No. 11.

UCLA

Led by Nick Thornton (first, 1:48.01), the Bruins own three of the top four marks in the 800. Along with Craig Everhart in the 400 (second, 45.39) and Jon Rankin in the 1,500 (third, 3:43.10) the Bruins should score many points in the sprints and middle distances.

USC

When it comes to short bursts, nobody can touch the Trojans.

Garry Jones blazed his way to the Pac-10's top mark in the 100 (10.26) and is joined by three of his teammates to round out the top five. Wes Felix is tied for the second-best mark in the 100 (10.31) and the top mark in the 200 (20.57). Felix is the defending Pac-10 champion in the 200. The Trojans also feature one of the nation's top triple jumpers in Allen Simms (first, 55-4 3/4).

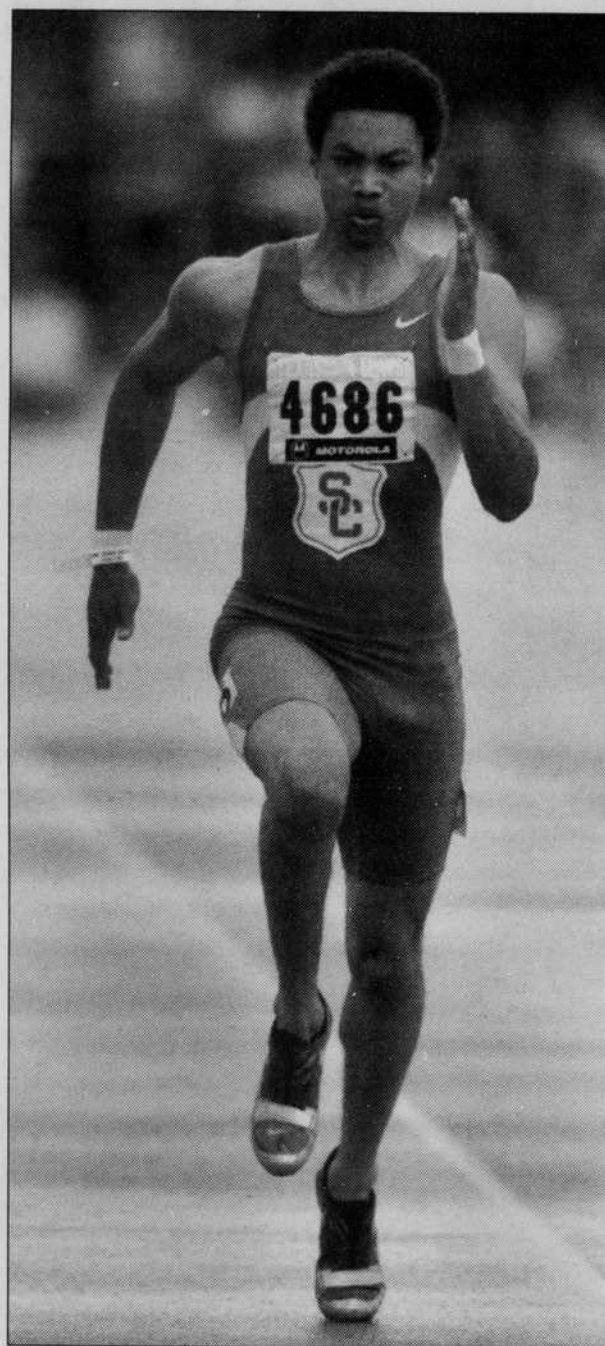
Washington

The Huskies' chances at a Pac-10 title look bleak. With few athletes near the top of the standings, the javelin has been a bright spot with Brian Harris (second, 221-0) and Rigel Wise (third, 220-6) sitting in the top three.

Washington State

The Cougars' hopes for high marks fall on the shoulders of Anthony Buchanan and Matt Mason. Buchanan is the defending Pac-10 champion in the 100 (fourth, 10.33), and Mason owns the top mark in the long jump (26-6 1/4).

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USC Media Services

Wes Felix owns high marks in the 100 and 200.

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dropping Oregon to .267 for the season.

The thing is, the .223 figure actually improved Oregon's conference hitting. The Ducks are batting .218 in 18 Pac-10 games.

These numbers, of course, suggest the Ducks should be in the basement of the Pac-10.

However, further figures say Oregon belongs in the upper echelon of the Pac-10, where it is now.

Duck hurlers are holding opposing Pac-10 batters to a .221 clip this season.

That's not a huge discrepancy when compared to the offense. But buyer beware: Defensive numbers that outweigh an offense's could come back to bite the Ducks in the tailfeathers. Especially if the 0-3 streak slips to 0-6, or even 1-5, against the Cardinal and Golden Bears.

Well, why should all of this matter? After all, the Ducks are most assured of going to a regional. It's a foregone conclusion. They've dominated opponents — at least up until last weekend — and have been the best team at Howe Field in more than a decade.

All of that's true, without a doubt. But in a conference where seven teams are ranked, and the one team that isn't — Arizona State — shuts you out twice in a row, it could be a concern.

Check that — it should be a concern.

Softball is much like its counterpart, baseball, and most other collegiate sports. It's really not how a team starts the season, it's how it finishes.

Momentum is everything, and finishing on a losing streak — Oregon is 2-1 combined against Stanford and Cal this season but 3-6 in its past nine Pac-10 games — could doom what has turned into a Duck dream season so far.

Ask most athletes and it's harder to turn on the "on" switch when it's off. Toggling it back and forth is harder; there's less consistency.

If Oregon can hold its own this weekend, it could do something that no Duck team will have been able to do since 1994: Finish the conference season with a record of .500 or better. And the Ducks haven't had a winning record since 1989.

With 21 games in the conference season, Oregon is assured of having a record above or below .500; an even record is not possible this season. So with at least two wins this upcoming weekend, the Ducks can make amends for 10 seasons of equal or sub-.500 seasons — and maybe even make up for 15 years of less-than-stellar play.

Beat Stanford on Friday, Oregon, and don't let California turn the lights off Saturday. It's not the only way to head into the postseason, just the best way.

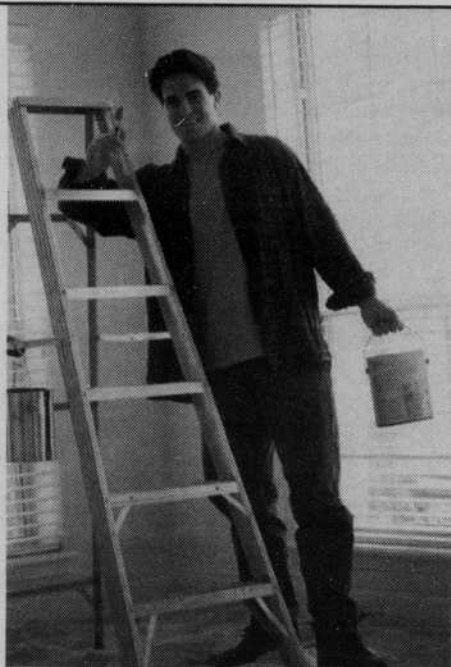
The numbers are there. The Ducks have proven them right all season, especially in their last three games.

Let's see if they can prove those numbers wrong.

My bet is numbers never lie.

Contact the sports editor at hankhager@dailyemerald.com.

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