

■ In my opinion



JON ROETMAN
ROUGHING THE PASSER

Expectations too lofty for unlucky Willingham

Notre Dame should be ashamed of itself. Three seasons after hiring Tyrone Willingham as head coach of the football program, the powers that be in South Bend, Ind., fired the 28-year coaching veteran Tuesday, one month prior to the Fighting Irish's scheduled matchup with UCLA in the Insight Bowl.

The move comes after Willingham, the first African-American to be named head coach at Notre Dame in any sport, led the Irish to a 6-5 record this season and a 21-15 overall mark during his three-year tenure. Willingham had two years remaining on his five-year deal, making him the first Notre Dame head coach who wasn't allowed to fulfill his first contract.

While athletic director Kevin White said the decision to part ways with Willingham was based on a lack of on-field success, the truth is Notre Dame wanted nothing to do with Willingham in the first place.

After Bob Davie was fired as head coach of the Irish at the end of the 2001 season, Notre Dame had a chance to come right out and name Willingham head coach. He was the most qualified candidate for the job. After seven seasons and four bowl appearances as the head coach of Stanford, he had proved himself worthy of leading one of the most storied programs in college football history. As an added bonus, Notre Dame had a chance to knock down racial barriers and hire the first African-American coach in school history.

Instead, Notre Dame approached and hired former Georgia Tech head coach George O'Leary. While the two-time Atlantic Coast Conference Coach of the Year had impressive credentials of his own, Willingham seemed like the better, more sensible hire.

Notre Dame paid for its decision, however, as it forced O'Leary to resign just five days after hiring him when it was found that he lied on his application. He claimed to have earned a master's degree from New York University and to have lettered three times in football while attending New Hampshire. Neither proved to be true.

Only after this extreme embarrassment did the Irish offer Willingham a contract. While it ended up with the right coach, Notre Dame's hiring of Willingham was a feeble attempt to save face after lacking the courage to take a chance on hiring its first black head coach.

After accepting the job, Willingham immediately faced expectations that bordered on unrealistic. While Notre Dame has a proud history, it is no longer capable of landing the caliber of athletes needed to compete for a national championship. It plays one of the toughest schedules in the country every season and hasn't won a bowl game since 1993. Despite this, Willingham was expected to step right in and return the Irish to their glorious past, where they captured more Associated Press national championships (8) than

ROETMAN, page 14

■ Pac-10

Ducks among Pac-10's unbeatens

Oregon grabs two votes in this week's AP Top 25 poll behind the consistent play of Aaron Brooks

BY CLAYTON JONES
SPORTS EDITOR

A couple of weeks into the season, the Pacific-10 Conference still has three undefeated teams — Oregon, UCLA and No. 14 Washington — remaining.

Despite being undefeated, Oregon received only two votes in this week's Associated Press Top 25 poll. New Mexico, whom the Ducks defeated last week, received four votes, and UCLA didn't get a vote.

Washington made the nation's biggest jump in the AP poll, moving up from No. 22 to No. 14. Arizona dropped three spots to No. 21 after losing to No. 1 Wake Forest Friday by three points.

In key matchups this week, Washington travels to Gonzaga to face the Bulldogs on Tuesday. Gonzaga dropped from the AP Top 25 after falling to No. 5 Illinois 89-72 in a game where the Bulldogs were trailing by 31 points at halftime.

The Wooden Classic also takes place this weekend with Arizona taking on No. 15 Mississippi State and UCLA playing Boston College.

Washington's Robinson named week's top player

Washington guard Nate Robinson was named Pac-10 Player of the Week after he was named the Great Alaska Shootout's Most Valuable Player for averaging 21.3 points, 5.0 assists, 3.7 rebounds and 1.7 steals in wins over Utah, Oklahoma and then-No. 19 Alabama.

The 5-foot-9 junior from Seattle hit 59 percent of his shots from the field, including 8 of 14 from behind the arc.

It's the second time Robinson has been recognized with the weekly honor and is Washington's 22nd all-time honoree.

After four games, Robinson is in the top five in the conference in scoring (2nd), assists (4th), steals (4th), free-throw percentage (5th), assist-to-turnover ratio (3rd) and

minutes played (2nd).

Robinson has helped Washington become the top-scoring team in the conference this season at 85.5 points per game.

The Huskies have started the season 4-0 for the first time since 1999.

"We do things as a team," Washington coach Lorenzo Romar said. "Our guys have bought into the team, and we talk about (how) it is amazing what can be accomplished when no one gets the credit. Our guys have done a good job of that."

Brooks continues shining for Ducks

Oregon's Aaron Brooks keeps making a name for himself around the conference with his stellar play. New Mexico head coach Ritchie McKay said there was no other guard like him in the Pac-10.

Brooks leads the conference in assists, averaging 7.67 per game. The Seattle native also has limited his turnovers as he is the conference leader in assist-to-turnover ratio at 3.83 assists per every turnover (23 assists to six turnovers this season).

The sophomore point guard also leads the Ducks in scoring, averaging 17 points per game.

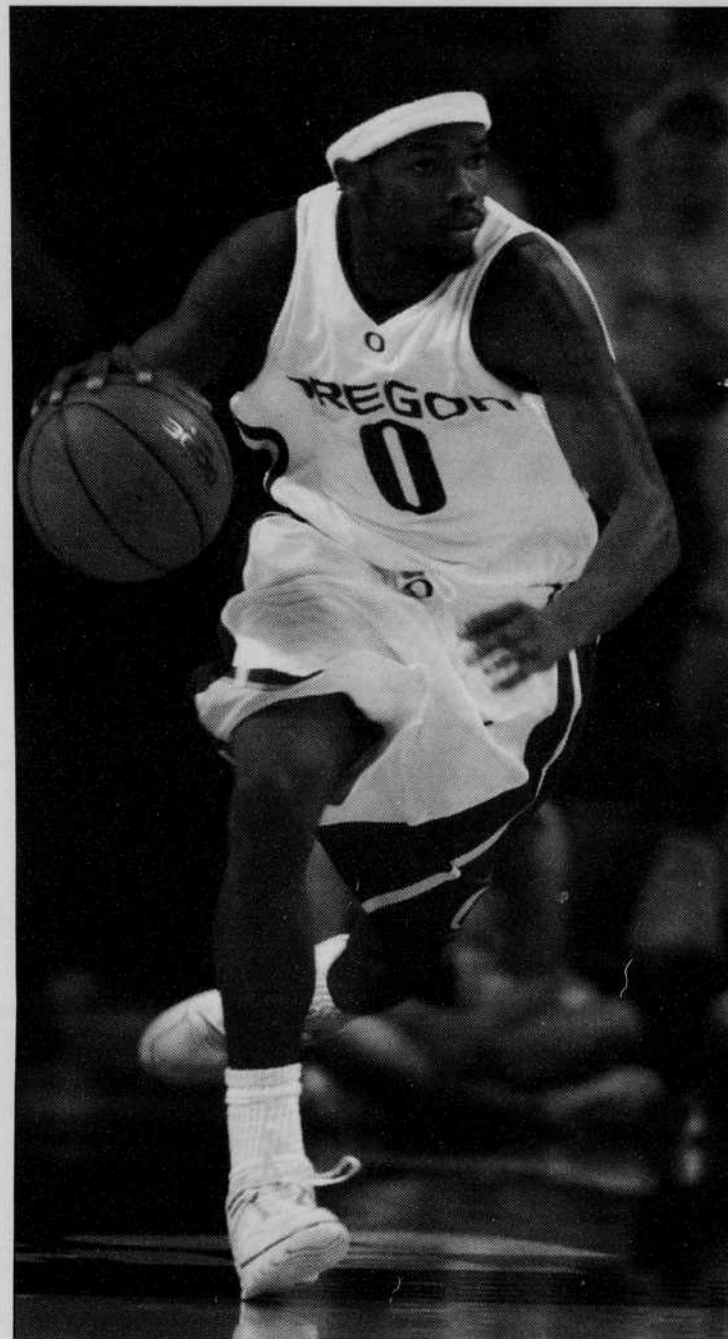
As well as the Ducks have been shooting this season, shooting over 50 percent, their defense has also played very well. They have yet to allow an opponent to shoot over 40 percent and are outscoring opponents by a conference-high 16.7 points per game.

Stanford struggles in Maui, drops three

Last season's Pac-10 champion took its lumps last week, going 1-3.

The Cardinal fell to Tennessee 69-57, No. 17 Louisville 82-67 and a Santa Clara team that upset No. 9 North Carolina earlier in the year. They beat BYU in the consolation game of the Maui Invitational.

The one bright spot for Stanford has been junior forward Dan



ERIK R. BISHOFF | PHOTOGRAPHER

Oregon's Aaron Brooks, seen here against New Mexico, leads the Pac-10 in assists with 7.67 per game. He also leads the Ducks in scoring, averaging 17.0 points per game.

Grunfeld. He scored a career-high 26 points against Santa Clara and is averaging 19.4 points (third in the conference) and 6.8 rebounds per game (ninth in the conference).

The tough span sets the Cardinal back to a 2-3 record.

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■ Club Sports

Running Club to compete at nationals

The coed club team wraps up its season Saturday when it goes up against ex-collegiate and Olympic athletes at Portland Meadows

BY BEAU EASTES
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The Oregon Running Club concludes its cross country season this Saturday at the USATF club nationals at Portland Meadows. Oregon will be the only university club team at the meet, as the field will predominantly be made up of ex-collegiate and even Olympic athletes on elite-level club teams.

Running Club coach Tom Heinonen eagerly awaits the chance for his harriers to run against some of the nation's best.

"I am thrilled," Heinonen said. "It's a big challenge but a big opportunity."

Heinonen, in his second season leading the Running Club after coaching the Oregon women's cross country and track and field teams for the previous 28 years, realizes his young squad might be a bit overwhelmed by the

sheer mass of the meet, but believes the benefits of running in such a meet are valuable.

"I want them to get the experience of running in a meet of this magnitude," Heinonen said.

The women's 6K will have 24 teams and more than 220 athletes while the men's 10K expects more than 40 teams and approximately 340 athletes.

"One, I want us to participate," Heinonen said. "Two, I want us to do as well as we can. We're trying to keep things low-key and have fun with it."

The layout of the course also has Heinonen looking forward to Saturday's meet.

"It's pretty exciting," said the two-time NCAA Cross Country Coach of the Year. "It's a truly unique experience."

The national meet will be run on the nine-hole golf course inside Portland Meadows race track. Both the men and women will run two

laps on the European-style trail. Spectators will be able to see the race unfold from the grandstands, along with the help of two 23-foot Jumbotron television screens.

According to Heinonen, this is the first time this style of race has been run in the U.S.

"It's really thrilling," Heinonen said.

Leading the Club women are Sopagna Eap and Tiffany Beechy. The men are headed by Carlos Trujillo, Mike Long and Brandon Michael.

Eap won the Pre's Trail Cross Country Open hosted by the Running Club in November and has consistently posted the best times of any female runners.

Trujillo and Long have alternated throughout the season as the lead male harrier, with Michael usually a close third.

"We want to have a really good race and finish the season," said Meriel Hartling, Running Club coordinator. "We're really proud to be the only club team. It's the process we're aiming at."

"We're going to go out and run and enjoy the setting."