

Improvement away from Mac Court key for Ducks

Oregon needs solid defense to escape a repeat of last year's 2-7 away record

BY BRIAN SMITH
SPORTS REPORTER

The Ducks are a road trip and a homestand into the Pacific-10 Conference season, and one thing has become clear.

Home is where the victories are.

The road is a whole different story.

In order for the Ducks to finish in the upper half of the Pac-10, they will have to improve on last year's 2-7 mark in conference games away from McArthur Court.

Under the current tenure of head coach Bev Smith, the Ducks have gone 9-18 and have never won more than four conference games in each of the last three years on the road.

So far in the 2004-05 season, only three teams in the Pac-10 have records at .500 or above on the road. Conference front-runner UCLA (9-3 overall, 3-0 Pac-10), second-place Stanford (11-2, 3-1) and Arizona, (10-3, 2-1) which is tied for third. All three teams are expected to contend for this year's title.

"We have to win on the road," Oregon senior Andrea Bills said. "We have to be more aggressive offensively."

Some of the Ducks' biggest road tests are still to come. Oregon routinely has trouble playing both Arizona schools and still has to face Stanford and California in the final two games of the year.

One of the biggest keys to stealing a few games on the road and continuing to win at home will be the Ducks' defensive play for the rest of the season.

The self-proclaimed hallmark of the team by players and coaches alike, solid defense will keep an inconsistent



As of late, Oregon's Andrea Bills has been quiet in terms of scoring. In Tuesday's loss to UCLA, she recorded only four points even though she averages 10.8 points per game.

ERIK R. BISHOP | PHOTOGRAPHER

Duck offense in the game.

The Ducks rank sixth in the Pac-10 in scoring offense, averaging 68.2 points per game. They also rank last in the conference in offensive rebounds, which means Oregon relies on many one-and-done opportunities to score points.

Only two Ducks, senior Cathrine Kraayeveld and Bills, are averaging double-figures in points for the season, with 16.1 and 10.8 per game respectively.

"(At times) we are going to struggle," Kraayeveld said of the team's offense. "We just gotta bring it out of ourselves. It's a matter of pride."

For much of the beginning of the year, the Ducks showed pride both

on defense and on offense. Oregon held George Washington to 40 points at the annual Papé Jam in December, the lowest point total by a Duck opponent since Boise State scored 29 in the 2000-01 season.

In the second conference game of the year against Pac-10 powerhouse Stanford, the Ducks held the Cardinal to 52 points in their upset of the No. 5 team in the country.

However, during its current three-game road trip, the Duck defense hasn't been up to par, as Oregon has given up 151 points against Southern California and UCLA combined.

"We didn't play defense," Oregon junior guard Chelsea Wagner said

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Men: Crosswhite, Platt must remain strong

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include freshman forward Maarty Leunen, guard Chamberlain Oguchi and sophomore transfer guard Kenny Love.

"The intensity is a lot higher," Leunen said. "Guys are giving it their all because that's how you make it to the NCAAs."

To balance their strong perimeter play, the Ducks will need to continue improving their play down low. Junior center Ian Crosswhite and sophomore forward Mitch Platt have

shown flashes of dominance lately and can help the Ducks' offense.

"The biggest thing for us right now is getting our rhythm back, getting a little bit of our swagger back," head coach Ernie Kent said. "I have to continue to remind myself that this is a young team. I sit down and have a conversation with Malik, and it reminds me that I'm talking with someone who is just 17 years of age."

On paper, Oregon is far too young to compete for one of the top spots in the conference and a berth in the NCAA

Tournament. On the court, Oregon can look like a young, confused team that has no business playing with the big boys. But there are times when Oregon looks like it can run or shoot any team in the country out of the gym.

Will Oregon compete for the conference title?

Will the Ducks earn a spot in the NCAA Tournament?

Depends on which team shows up.

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