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Trail Blazers fire head coach during team's recent slump

BY ANNE M. PETERSON
 THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PORTLAND — After falling quickly out of playoff contention for the second straight year, the Portland Trail Blazers fired coach Maurice Cheeks on Wednesday.

Kevin Pritchard, the team's director of player personnel, was named interim head coach, the Trail Blazers announced at a news conference. "It's a sad day. Maurice Cheeks is a very, very good coach; he's an equally good person," Trail Blazers general manager John Nash said.

Nash said when he had met with Cheeks earlier Wednesday, Cheeks "was very professional, but also seemed very disappointed, as anyone would be in this type of situation."

Cheeks was near the end of a four-year contract worth an estimated \$12 million.

He was popular among the players

and fans alike. But when the losses mounted this season, speculation swirled that Cheeks was on the way out.

The Trail Blazers have lost seven out of their last nine games, including a 103-93 loss to the defending NBA champion Detroit Pistons on Tuesday night.

The Trail Blazers (22-33) are in 12th place in the Western Conference, six games back of the Los Angeles Lakers for the eighth and final playoff spot. They went 41-41 last season, missing the playoffs for the first time in 22 years.

Cheeks leaves the Trail Blazers with a 162-139 career record.

Cheeks, who played in the NBA for 15 seasons, was hired by Portland in 2001 to replace Mike Dunleavy. He was the Trail Blazers' 10th head coach.

Over the course of his tenure,

Cheeks has had his share of trouble with players both on and off the court.

Several players were cited for marijuana possession, and an incident earlier this season involved forward Qyntel Woods and allegations of dog fighting.

Cheeks butted heads with former Trail Blazers guard Bonzi Wells and also got into a shouting match with forward Darius Miles during a film session earlier this year. Both players served suspensions for their actions.

Team President Steve Patterson, who also met with Cheeks early Wednesday, said the Trail Blazers would focus on their young talent, although he didn't come right out and say the team had given up on the playoffs.

"I'm not going to mislead anybody. It's a long uphill battle to get to the playoffs from where we're at — 11 games under .500," Patterson said.

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Taylor: Ducks' defense continues to improve

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or (Salim) Stoudamire, I'm going to give them a run for their money."

Defense continues to excel

While Oregon's offense has been inconsistent and streaky, its defense has proved to be a pleasant surprise.

The Ducks have held teams to 43.1 percent shooting this season, good for fourth in the Pacific-10 Conference. They rank in the middle of the conference in points allowed with 70.4 points per game.

"Our defense has been pretty good for a young team," Oregon guard Aaron Brooks said. "We've been grasping the other team's offense and trying to control the game."

But Oregon's offense is also averaging 70.4 points per game, giving it the fourth worst scoring margin in the Pac-10.

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NICOLE BARKER | PHOTOGRAPHER

Freshman Bryce Taylor returns home for the first time in a Duck uniform when Oregon travels to California to face USC tonight. Taylor is third on the team in scoring, averaging 11.2 points.

Women: Oregon confident in inside presence

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Every team has suffered some wear and tear over 27 games, but Oregon head coach Bev Smith said her team is prepared for the final stretch.

"Everybody is healthy — knock on wood — and ready to go," Smith said.

With the exception of the loss of its primary shooting guard, Chelsea Wagner, Oregon is at full strength, especially in the paint.

"Our greatest strength is inside," Smith said. "In the second half of the Pac-10 season, teams did a great job trying to limit that. Once teams fight to stop that, then our outside game opens up and we have a tremendous outside game."

The Ducks have succeeded with clutch outside shooting from Kraayeveld and guard Brandi Davis, with occasional contributions from

sophomore Kaela Chapdelaine and freshmen Gabrielle Richards and Kristen Forristall.

In addition, Mizusawa leads the Pac-10 and ranks No. 2 in the nation in assists with just over seven per game.

"We have older players," Bills said. "Just the abilities and skills that everybody brings is a complete package."

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Men: USC's trio of young shooters a threat to Ducks

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three teams finish with the same record, Oregon would be assured of no less than a No. 8 seed in the Pac-10 Tournament.

The Ducks will have another chance to qualify on Saturday at UCLA if everything doesn't go their way tonight, but they know their chances improve greatly with a win against USC.

"(Losing is) really not an option for us," Oregon swingman Malik Hairston said. "We've been through a lot this season, and we've got a game to win coming up on Thursday, and that's the only thing on our mind."

Like Oregon, USC is a young team that shoots a lot of perimeter jumpers. The Trojans have attempted 590 three-pointers — 113 more than

their opponents — knocking them down at a 37 percent clip.

The Trojans' best perimeter players are sophomore guard Lodrick Stewart, freshman guard Gabriel Pruitt and freshman swingman Nick Young. The trio combines to average more than 36 points per game and is always looking for open shots.

Oregon head coach Ernie Kent stressed the importance of defending the perimeter after one out of every three shot attempts he saw the Trojans put up on film was a three-pointer.

"They shoot the ball better (than earlier in the season), and they're shooting it a lot more from (three-point range)," Kent said. "We have to defend those shooters. We've been a pretty good defensive team for the majority of our games."

On the offensive end, Aaron

Brooks will likely play a big role for Oregon. The sophomore point guard has had several big games in his young career against the Trojans, including a 34-point performance in the Ducks' win over USC earlier this season at Mac Court.

Brooks and the rest of the Ducks have been in an offensive funk of late, failing to reach the 70-point mark in their last five games.

"Our defense has been pretty good for a young team, but we have to pick it up on offense and score some points," Brooks said. "You can't win if you don't score points."

"Our Pac-10 Tournament starts (tonight) against USC, and we need to win that game to break us out of the pack."

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