

■ In my opinion



JON ROETMAN
ROUGHING THE PASSER

Lowly Ducks should take NIT invite, despite year

I have to admit, when the idea of the Oregon men's basketball team accepting a bid to the National Invitation Tournament first came about, I didn't think too highly of it.

A spot in any postseason tournament is something you're supposed to earn, and the Ducks didn't earn anything.

Oregon blew several opportunities to qualify for the Pacific-10 Conference Tournament — road losses to California and Oregon State and home losses to Washington and Stanford stand out — and finished with a disappointing 6-12 conference record.

But the more I thought about it, the fact that Oregon even had a chance to win those games is impressive.

The Ducks lacked leadership. They had five freshmen, six sophomores, three juniors and no seniors on their roster to start the season and lost one of those juniors when Ian Crosswhite was dismissed for an unspecified violation of Athletics Department policy.

Of the five freshmen on the squad, head coach Ernie Kent relied on three of them — Malik Hairston, Bryce Taylor and Maarty Leunen — for big minutes during most of the season, and all five — including Chamberlain Oguchi and Ray Schafer — were major contributors by season's end. When the youngsters struggled, there were no veterans to pick them up.

Sophomore Aaron Brooks, who missed 10 games during his freshman campaign with a broken bone in his right wrist, experienced many things for the first time. Crosswhite struggled before his dismissal and was actually a liability at times on the floor.

This left a talented but inexperienced group of players on the court to try and figure things out for themselves. When that's the case, heartbreak and frustration are imminent.

For those reasons, Oregon should accept an invite to the NIT if one is offered after Selection Sunday.

Give the freshmen a chance to get some postseason experience. Give Brooks an opportunity to continue improving his leadership skills. And most importantly, give a young team with loads of potential one more chance to put together the kind of run it was always so close to starting during the season.

This team will be much better next season, especially if Kent can recruit a player with an inside presence to take the place of Crosswhite. This team will be a legitimate NCAA contender in two years barring injury or an early NBA departure by Hairston.

The NIT wouldn't be the most glorious ending to a season that started with so much hype.

But it would certainly be a building block for the future.

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■ Women's lacrosse

A PACKAGED DEAL

When recruited, best friends Jana Bradley, Kate Fleming and Anna Poponyak were inseparable. Now, as freshmen, the trio is more than capable

BY BEALI EASTES
DAILY EMERALD FREELANCE REPORTER

Jana Bradley, Kate Fleming and Anna Poponyak get by with a little help from their friends. The three female lacrosse players all hail from La Costa Canyon High School, a coastal community school of about 3,000 students approximately halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Bradley and Fleming, best friends since kindergarten, met Poponyak their freshman year in high school. The three have rarely been apart since.

"We knew from almost the very beginning (of recruiting) it was a packaged deal," head coach Jen Larsen said.

The beginning started in December of the girls' senior year. Lacrosse had always been "a fun season" for the three, as field hockey and soccer were the more serious sports in their beach community.

But prior to their final lacrosse season, La Costa Canyon hired Kristy Gallagher and Katie Dolan, former Richmond lacrosse players, to coach its lacrosse team. The two All-Atlantic-10 athletes completely overhauled the program and gave their seniors the confidence they needed to look at

playing beyond high school.

"They got us to realize we were good enough to play on the college level," Poponyak said.

The girls, who had only picked up the sport as ninth graders, sent out highlight tapes to schools all along the West Coast. Larsen, who had already signed 17 athletes when she received the trio's highlight reel, began calling to gauge interest. She soon realized she was recruiting not just one or two athletes, but all three.

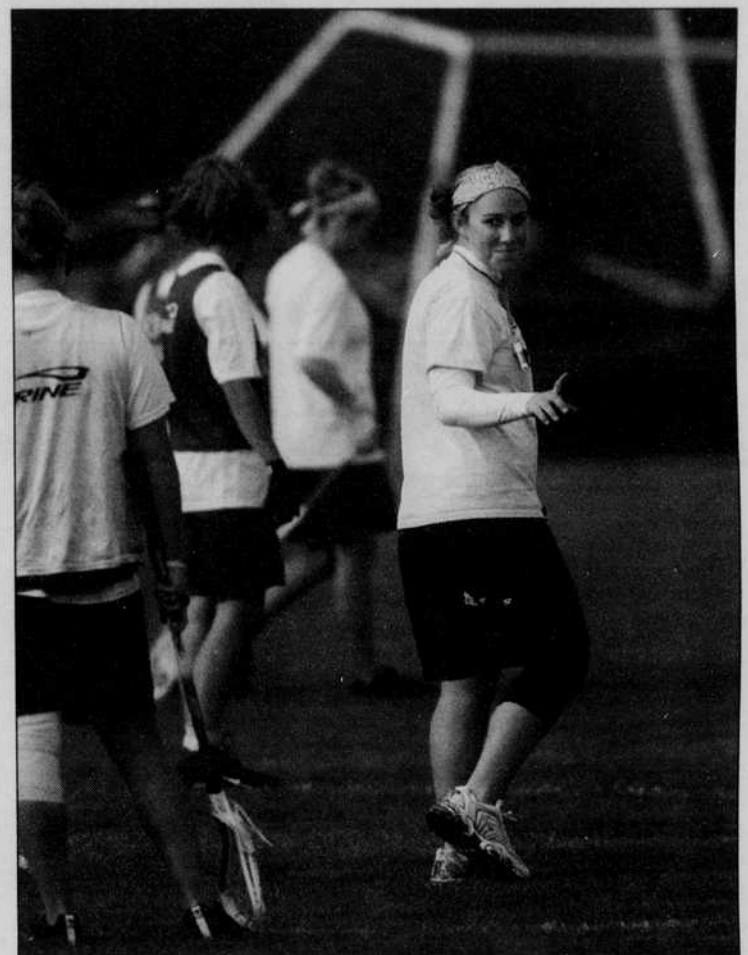
"I would make one call and all three would get on the phone," Larsen said with a smile.

But the future Ducks still weren't convinced they were Division I material. They traveled to Eugene in February for a lacrosse clinic, but still didn't know what the future had in store for them. Then Larsen visited.

The girls who used lacrosse as a fun interlude between other seasons now had a big-time head coach travel almost 1,000 miles to see them in person.

"It was crazy," Fleming said.

The move paid off. Bradley signed immediately and Fleming eventually chose the Ducks over California, in part because of Larsen's trip south. Poponyak then gave a verbal



ERIK R. BISHOFF | PHOTOGRAPHER

Freshmen Anna Poponyak, above, Jana Bradley and Kate Fleming all hail from La Costa Canyon High School in Encinitas, Calif. The three friends all play crucial roles in Oregon's inaugural lacrosse season.

commitment, and the pals from "So Cal" were set.

"We never thought we'd all go to college together," Poponyak said.

Three 'sisters' with three different talents

Although the Ducks describe themselves as "more like sisters than friends," they are far from identical. Bradley, the team's leading scorer

with eight goals, is as quiet and modest off the field as she is aggressive and determined on it.

"She brings a lot of speed," Larsen said. "She's the leader of our (transition)."

When pressed about her five-goal break-out game against Denver, Bradley shrugs it off as a fluke. Of the three friends, she is the quietest,

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■ Duck softball

Ducks use 6th-inning run to edge PSU

Lovena Chaput's run scored on Suzie Barnes' single helps Oregon slip past Portland State, 2-1

BY CLAYTON JONES
SPORTS EDITOR

Oregon's 21st-ranked softball team had plenty of chances to put away Portland State, but it came down to Suzie Barnes' fisted single up the middle in the bottom of the sixth inning to put the pesky Vikings away 2-1 Wednesday at Howe Field.

The Ducks put runners on base every inning, but only mustered two runs and left 10 people on base during the game.

But for Oregon (11-8), getting the win was all that mattered.

"It wasn't pretty, but it goes down as a win in the score book, and that's all we care about right now," said Oregon pitcher Amy Harris, who picked up the win in relief. "Hopefully in the near future, we will be able to shut teams down by a bigger margin."

Oregon head coach Kathy Arendsen said all the team cares about at this point is getting the victory.

"It doesn't make a difference

how many runs you win by as long as you have one more than your opponent," Arendsen said. "Nobody goes back and says, 'You beat them by seven,' or 'You beat them by one.' Who cares? You beat them."

But Portland State didn't make it easy for the Ducks.

Oregon held a 1-0 lead going into the top of the sixth inning, but the Vikings tied the score on an array of Duck mistakes. Portland State's Kimi Daniel reached first on an error by second baseman Kristi Jorgensen, who was trying to field a ground ball. Daniel advanced to second and then third on consecutive wild pitches by Oregon starter Alicia Cook. After a conference on the mound, the Vikings' Lacey Gorman laced a ball to left field for a hit, scoring Daniel and tying the score at one.

Arendsen said Cook pitched well — she gave up three hits and struck out four in five innings of work — but just got a little out of sync.



DANIELLE HICKEY | PHOTO EDITOR

Oregon's TJ Eadus attempts to bunt during the Ducks' 2-1 victory against Portland State on Wednesday at Howe Field. The freshman hit a double and extended her hitting streak to seven games.

"It was just kind of bizarre when she hit the sixth inning," Arendsen said. "I have no idea what happened with those (wild) pitches, but she knows. It happens."

Harris took the mound after Gorman's hit and retired the next three hitters to get the Ducks out of the inning.

In the bottom half of the inning, freshman Lovena Chaput drove a single to right field and stole second

base, all with two outs. Barnes stepped up and was jammed by an inside fastball but got enough of it to have it float into center field for the game-winning hit.

"It wasn't a solid hit," Barnes said. "But it got the job done."

Harris struck out the side in the seventh to pick up her fifth win of the season.

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