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Men's basketball



ERIK R. BISHOFF | PHOTOGRAPHER

Superstar recruit Malik Hairston averaged 13.1 points and 5.0 rebounds per game in his debut season in Eugene. The freshman from Detroit, Mich., earned a spot on the Pac-10 All-Freshman Team.

Inexperience drives Ducks to season of underachievement

Oregon started the season with high aspirations, but couldn't meet expectations

BY JON ROETMAN
SENIOR SPORTS REPORTER

Hype. With it comes the potential for glory. Consequently, the possibility of disappointment lurks in the background. The 2004-05 version of the Oregon men's basketball team received ample attention before it ever stepped foot on McArthur Court. The Ducks were ready to unveil their best recruiting class in school history. Aaron Brooks was supposed to make a Luke Ridnour-esque transition from his freshman year to his sophomore campaign as the team's point guard, and Ian Crosswhite was going to be the glue holding everything together as a dominant low-post scorer.

After Oregon defeated Southern California in its Pacific-10 Conference opener Dec. 31, the hype seemed justified as the Ducks started the season with a 9-1 record. The next two months proved otherwise, however, as competition stiffened and Oregon (14-13 overall, 6-12 Pac-10) dropped 12 of its last 17 games.

Each member of the four-man, all-star recruiting class hit the wall at some point. Brooks never quite matured the way head coach Ernie Kent had hoped, and Crosswhite was dismissed from the team for an unspecified violation of Athletics Department policy, after 19 games worth of underachievement.

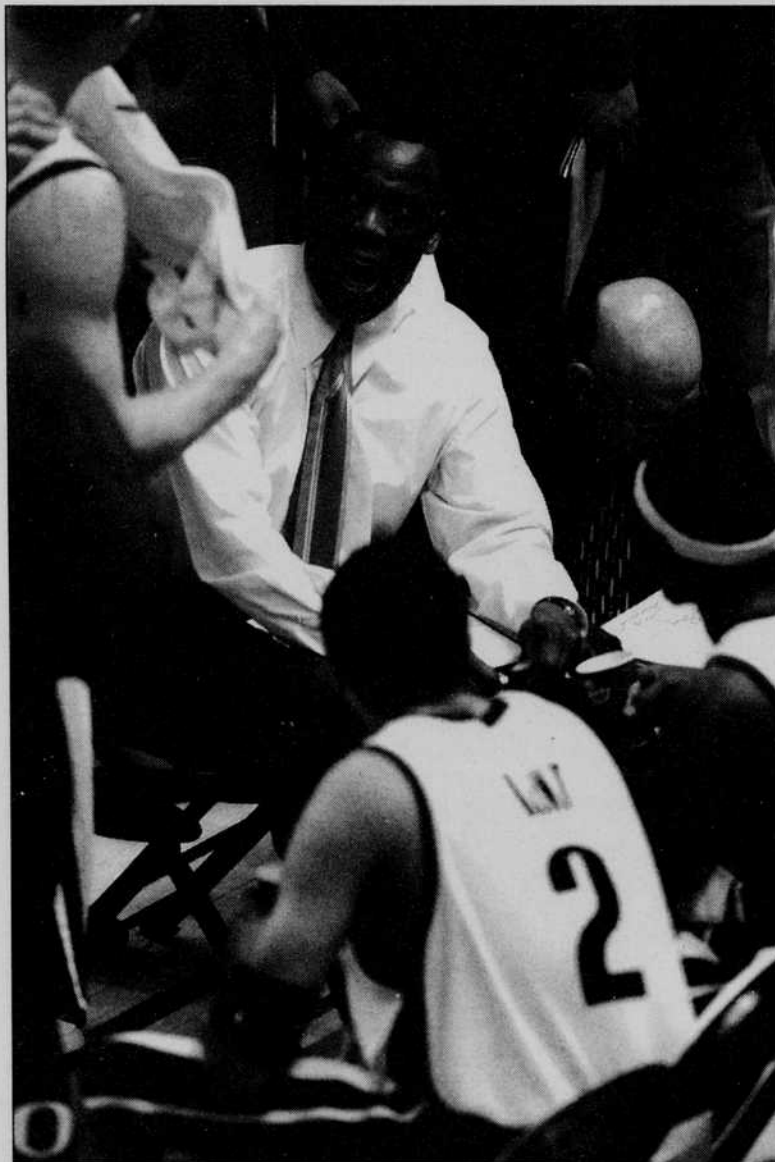
Things got so bad down the stretch for Oregon that it failed to qualify for the Pac-10 Tournament. The Ducks finished in a tie for the eighth and final spot with California, but lost in a tiebreaker with the Golden Bears.

Road losses to Cal and Oregon State and home losses to Washington and Stanford were particularly painful as Oregon let victory slip away in a cloud of inexperience.

Oregon's season can be viewed as a disappointment or a building block for a bright future.

Impressive young talent

It's easy to see why so many expected so much from a team with five freshmen, six sophomores, three



DANIELLE HICKEY | PHOTO EDITOR

Oregon head coach Ernie Kent led an inexperienced Duck team this season and suffered his first losing season in Pac-10 play in four seasons.

juniors and no seniors on its preseason roster. The recruiting class of swingman Malik Hairston, guards Bryce Taylor and Chamberlain Oguchi and forward Maarty Leunen was a talented group expected to play like seasoned veterans.

Most of the Ducks' preseason hype was a direct result of landing Hairston. Rated the No. 7 prep recruit in the country by Rivals, the 6-foot-6 Detroit, Mich., native was considered the school's biggest recruit since the days

of Ron Lee and Greg Ballard. Hairston didn't wait long to solidify himself as a legitimate offensive threat, scoring 30 points in just 19 minutes of play during Oregon's exhibition opener against Trinity Western on Nov. 7. That would be his biggest performance of the year, however, as Hairston struggled to find his place in the offense at times.

Hairston ended the season as the