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No "Shock & No "Surprise"

About six minutes into the recent Civil War game at Mac Court I told the out-of-town reporter who was covering the Beavers that there is a player on the Oregon bench who is more talented than any of the players on both teams. I'm sure he wondered what hallucinant I had been using since Oregon State boasts two of the best backcourt players in the league in Leilani Estavan and Shannon Howell. He said either, he'd never heard of Brandi Davis or something like: "who's she?" That was not too surprising since after starting the first 7 games of the season (22 minutes average playing time) she had become a reserve. In the last two games (USC and UCLA) which were at Mac Court and winnable, Davis had played only 12 minutes in each. With 13:57 left in the first half Oregon had only scored three points and trailed OSU 9-3. Brandi was sent and a very noticeable ovation from the Duck faithful accompanied her entrance. She didn't disappoint. A rebound, some nifty dribbling and ball handling, an impressive basket and two free throws. and the score was now Ducks 12, Beavers 16. After only 5 minutes she was taken out. The reporter next to me commented on Davis being sat down with a wry comment something to the effect of: "that sure makes sense." It had only taken 5 minutes of action for that "Beaver believer" to become a "Brandi believer." He hadn't seen anything yet.

With 10 minutes left in the game the favored Beavers, who weren't playing well at all, still had control of the game 45-37. Davis had not played a second in the second half. Coach Bev Smith then called her name and as she went to the scorer's table, again a noticeable applause was heard throughout Mac Court. By the way, I haven't heard that kind of crowd participation for any other player going into a game. All Davis did was take control of the last quarter of the game. With a great vertical and quick release she canned a three to make it 45-42 OSU with 8:53 to play. Another 3 that even the other Davis sharpshooter (James on the men's team) would have been proud of gave the Ducks the lead 48-47 with 6:14 to go. Forty-five seconds later it was a baseline fadeaway and it was Oregon by 3, 50-47. The Beavers countered with 5 straight but with 4:23 left, Brandi tied it at 52 with a 15-foot banker. Both teams exchanged baskets and it remained 54 all from 3:31 until 6 seconds left in the game when Davis hit



Brian Schapper, BODOGSPORTS.COM

The talented Brandi Davis has spent more time on the bench this year than on the floor.

a 19-footer at the top of the key to win the game. The reporter next to me said that he was "shocked". I refrained from saying "I told you so".

After the 5th game of the season the Ducks lost their All-American candidate, Cathrine Kraayeveld who had led the Ducks to a 5-0 record with her defense, rebounding and her 17 point scoring average. Davis started those 5 games, but her 22 minutes per game were the least of all the starters. You would think that Davis' playing time would have increased after the loss of Kraayeveld since the Ducks needed to make up some of that scoring. Just the opposite transpired as in the next nine games — Brandi played an average of 15 minutes per game. With those facts in mind and having watched Davis closely to see if she was a big defensive liability (in my opinion she wasn't, although she made mistakes like the rest of the team), I felt compelled to talk with head coach Bev Smith. Friday afternoon — the day before the Civil War game — and on short notice, Bev Smith graciously fielded some of my questions concerning Brandi Davis and what to me has been a strange utilization of her talents so far this year.

JT: "After the Kraayeveld injury I thought Brandi's minutes would go up yet they have gone down. Any reason?"

Smith: "Well, you know this is not about Brandi Davis, it's about the University of Oregon women's basketball team."

JT: "It's perplexing." (her lack of playing time)

Smith: "Why is it perplexing? Do you come to practice every day? Do you see what is going on?"

JT: "I see all the games."

Smith: "What I am saying is this is not about Brandi. Brandi is working her way the way we would like her to work. Brandi is a very talented and athletic basketball player and she knows what she has to contribute at both ends of the court. And some times she

does that very well and some times, as others are doing right now, she's not very consistent at it. So, that's a decision that I must make. And I agree that everyone who watches the game and you with your journalistic outlook has the right to ask that question and I will let you ask it, but it doesn't mean that I agree with what you are implying or what the public is implying."

JT: "Do you think she is too much of a defensive liability?"

Smith: "That's something that's between Brandi and our team and myself, you know."

JT: "People including myself and some I know who have coached are wondering, so that's why I'm asking."

Smith: "Well, they're going to wonder about everything."

JT: "That's good because it shows they are concerned."

Smith: "Well, absolutely and I wouldn't want it to be any other way. I have no reserves whatsoever that people would question that or would want to know, but they can't know. Because you know what, this is a team and this is what we are doing and if it was just all about Brandi Davis then it would be other things that we would have to focus on."

JT: "It's my personal opinion and you probably disagree, but I see her as a Freddie Jones type of player who could be for your team like he was for the men's team."

Smith: "And when did Freddie start playing really well for the men's team?"

JT: "His senior year."

Smith: "Thank you."

JT: "What do you see as her upside, her role on the team, and your vision for her?"

Smith: "She's definitely a scorer for us. She is someone who needs to come off the bench and get us pumped up offensively and I think her upside is that athletic talent and her speed and her quickness. Now it's a matter of taking advantage of that. We've wanted her to get to the free throw line and she's done better at that and now it's incremental progress. On the defensive end we just need her to be consistent as we

do everyone else and to improve in that area."

I am very appreciative of coach Smith's willingness to respond to a question about the playing time of one of her players. Many coaches would have said "no comment". Personally, I still believe that for the good of the team and the future of the program a player of Davis' talent, and there are less than a handful in the Pac-10, needs to be playing at least 32 minutes per game. She is an unselfish player who even overpasses and the strength of her game should be driving to the hoop and/or stopping and popping. Three point shots should be "gravy". I just don't believe her normal five minute entrances and exits will ever help her and the team develop. She needs extended minutes to not only develop her offense, but also her defense which at times is also impressive.

Will Davis' performance against OSU change her role on the team? I'm not sure. She isn't going to go out every game and score 16 points in 16 minutes of play, but the point is, she really is the only player who is capable of that because she has an inside and outside game. Scorers need lots of playing time and need to know that if they hit a 0 for 6 spell as most do, they will still be in the game. It looks like people like me (and I know there are many) will have to be patient.

The odds are very great that the team will not go to postseason. It was certainly no surprise to me nor was I "shocked" (coach Smith's comment after the UCLA loss) when the Ducks lost their first 4 games Pac-10 games. Because of the loss of Kraayeveld and what I judged as the misuse of Davis, I predicted before Christmas that Oregon would be battling WSU for last place. I picked them 8th just to not to be too pessimistic. On a more positive note, I think coach Smith and her staff have done a good job of keeping the players positive and working together. I see some hope. Ideally I'd like to see a starting lineup of: Andrea Bills, Eleanor Haring, Corrie Mizusawa, Chelsea Wagner, and Brandi Davis with the following players subbing: Carolyn Ganes and Jessica Shettters for Bills, Yadili Okwuwabua for Haring, Kayla Steen for Mizusawa, Kedzie Gunderson for Wagner, and Ashley Allen for Davis. I think it would be an exciting group that would have a good balance of offense and defense.

As Bev Smith pointed out to me, it's easy for the fans and I to sit back and have strong opinions about these things without any real commitment. It is not our profession, we don't know the players, and our jobs are not on the line. When you are following a team and rooting for it however, it's very difficult to observe mindlessly. Some things appear to be so obvious that it does cause frustration. In the final analysis you can voice your opinion and then do your best to remain positive and support your team, whether you agree or disagree with the coaches. **O**