

OUTFIELDER JANIE TAKEDA

DIVERGENT DUCKS

The 2015 season proves again that the Oregon Ducks Softball team is top in the nation



PHOTO COURTESY ERIC EVANS

The Oregon Ducks softball team has earned the right to call its squad the best in the nation, even if that title ebbs and flows ever so slightly.

While UO secured the top spot in the joint ESPN.com/USA Softball poll as well as the *USA Today*/NFC coaches' poll on March 31, they slipped to number two when the weekly polls were released again on April 7.

But rankings are not how the team defines its identity. According to utility player Koral Costa, who plays several positions on the field, the Ducks find a unique word to describe themselves before each season begins. The previous two seasons, the team called itself "relentless."

Their efforts proved worthy. Last season the Ducks were named the best NCAA softball team in the nation for the first time in the history of the school's softball program. UO would eventually earn a spot in the Women's College World Series (WCWS) semifinal round, which is coveted by all 295 NCAA Softball Division-I programs. While the finish was the best for the program since Howe Field was converted to host softball in 1987, the Ducks fell short of their ultimate goal of winning the NCAA championship.

Costa says UO has a new approach this season. "This year's team is trying to be 'divergent,'" she says. "We all want the same goal and the same mission. Every team wants this: Get to the World Series, and win it. But we have to take different approaches to win and be the smartest on the field."

Costa calls last year's team "version five" and this team "version six," explaining that version five was more about cheering and version six is more about saying "what needs to be said."

"Version six is getting better at having that composure," says Janie Takeda, a senior selected by the Dallas Charge with the 26th overall pick in the 2015 National Pro Fastpitch Draft on April 1. "We're a goofy team, and we like to joke around a lot. We play hacky before the games. We feel loose. We dance. We also have a sports psychologist that meets with our team, which really helps with chemistry."

This mental tenacity has helped UO maintain its winning ways again this season, which began early February and extends until early May. Much credit goes to star pitcher Cheridan Hawkins, who represented the U.S. for the Junior and Senior National Team during summer 2013. Hawkins, also named Pac-12 Pitcher of the Year in 2014, has become an integral player for the UO softball program as a junior this season.

"We lost some people, and got some new freshmen and transfers in," Hawkins says. "I just feel like maybe this year's team is a little more aggressive. We definitely have some really good hitters this year."

UO proved its offensive prowess when conference rival Oregon State came to town March 13. The Ducks outscored the Beavers by 42-12 in the three-game series, a margin unheard of even for one of the best teams in the country.

"We were just excited to play at home and on our own turf and knowing that it was the last time we played OSU at this stadium," Takeda says.

The series marked the last for the Ducks vs. OSU at Howe Field, the home of Oregon Ducks softball, which will be converted to Jane Sanders Stadium for the 2016 season. The new stadium has a projected capacity of 1,500.

UO Athletic Director Rob Mullens announced the change at the Women in Flight dinner in June 2014, adding it was possible thanks to a lead gift of \$10 million from UO graduate Robert Sanders. The new facility is named for his late wife, Jane, who passed away in 2013. Jane Sanders (class of 1950) played softball, and Robert Sanders (class of 1949) played football.

The project budget will pay for Portland-based firm SRG as the lead architect, with Portland contractor William S. Wright acting as project manager. SRG designed the UO Lillis Business Complex and the University of Washington Husky Ballpark, while Wright recently managed the construction on the UO Student Recreation Center and, more notably, the Major League Baseball stadium in San Diego: Petco Park.

Meanwhile, Takeda describes the energy in Eugene as "intangible" this season. Much of that energy emerged because Howe Field added two bleachers in the outfield, which increases capacity of the 79-year-old stadium from 1,400 to around 1,700.

"We try to include the crowd in our cheers," says Takeda, who has played for two UO teams that earned trips to the WCWS in Oklahoma City. "Last year, during postseason, they did the wave. Or, bottom of the seventh with two outs, they were chanting 'O-K-C' for us."

Such passion in the crowd helped Hawkins when she threw the first "perfect game" of her UO career on March 27, retiring every batter she faced. During that same memorable week, the Ducks broke the school record for home runs in a game with eight on March 29, including three from Geri Ann Glasco, who tied the school record.

Hawkins won Pac-12 Pitcher of the Week, and Glasco won Pac-12 Player of the Week.

UO carried that momentum April 5 to face the number 10-ranked UCLA Bruins in Los Angeles. UO dropped the first game, but a late-game rally earned them a win in the second. The Ducks beat the Bruins 10-0 to end the series, in a game highlighted by two grand slams by both Costa and Janie Lindvall in back-to-back innings for UO.

Back at home vs. number 19-ranked Arizona State over the April 10-12 weekend, UO kept stellar play alive with another grand slam by Lindvall, and yet another home run from Costa in the next at-bat. On Sunday, April 12, the Ducks earned their first series sweep of all three games over ASU since 1989.

Oregon travels to Stanford on April 18, and then hosts a series at home against Louisiana Lafayette Ragin' Cajuns on April 24. The final series begins May 5 at Howe Field against the California Bears. UO will end the 2015 regular season with a series on the road against the No. 16 Arizona Wildcats.

"We are pretty confident right now, and we're deep," Coach Mike White says. "We can kind of have that ebb and flow, which often happens in softball." ■



SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN INDIAN CUISINE

EW'S BEST INDIAN CUISINE 2014-2015

LUNCH BUFFET

7 Days a Week 11:30am - 2:30pm • Dinner 5-9:30pm

EAT & PARK

FREE PARKING FOR EVENTS AT MATT KNIGHT ARENA
WHEN YOU DINE WITH US

* 1525 Franklin Blvd. Eugene, OR

541-343-7944

* 136 SW Third • Corvallis, OR *

541-754-7944

evergreenindianrestaurant.com

CRANKSHAFT

IPA

BREWED WITH CITRA HOPS

540 E 8TH AVE



OPEN DAILY