

Pac-12 Football

USC picked to win conference title

By GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

2015 Preseason Media Poll

First place votes in parentheses

NORTH	Pts	SOUTH	PTS
1, Oregon (37)	262	1, USC (32)	254
2, Stanford (8)	231	2, Arizona St. (7)	200
3, California	174	3, UCLA (6)	180
4, Washington	129	4, Arizona	155
5, Washington St.	89	5, Utah	105
6, Oregon St.	60	6, Colorado	46

BURBANK, Calif. — Southern California was picked to win its first Pac-12 football title since 2008 in a preseason media poll Thursday.

The Trojans received 21 of 45 votes for the title, edging defending champion Oregon. The Ducks got 17 votes for the top spot and were picked to win the North division, while USC is favored to win the South.

Oregon has won four of the last six league titles, reaching the national championship game last season. Stanford, which won the crown in 2012 and 2013, was picked to finish second in the North division ahead of California.

"You know everybody is going to be better than they were a year ago," said Stanford coach David Shaw, who has quarterback Kevin

Hogan back for another year. "It's going to be an insane year in our conference with the teams we have and the players we have."

While USC has 16 returning starters from coach Steve Sarkisian's debut team last season, quarterback Cody Kessler likely is the biggest factor in the selection. The prolific passer is back for his third season as the Trojans' starter, while Oregon must replace Heisman winner Marcus Mariota.

"USC will be one of the better teams in the country," Washington coach Chris Petersen said.

USC was hardly a consensus choice: Five teams received votes as the conference champion.

USC hadn't been picked to win the league since 2012, when the Trojans were the preseason No. 1. They finished 7-6 and unranked, and coach Lane Kiffin was fired less than a year later.

Arizona State was picked second in the loaded South division. The Sun Devils are just ahead of UCLA, which has beaten crosstown rival USC three straight times.

Arizona, which won the South last year, is picked fourth in the division.



Larry Scott, Pac-12 Commissioner, speaks during Pac-12 Football Media Days, Thursday, July 30, 2015, in Burbank, Calif.

AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill

Pac-12 commish: No expansion plans, but bright future ahead

By GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

BURBANK, Calif. — Pac-12 Commissioner Larry Scott envisions fierce competition, Heisman Trophy challengers and national championship bids for his loaded football conference in the next few years.

Scott doesn't expect any new members, however.

"I do not see us expanding in the foreseeable future," Scott said Thursday while opening the Pac-12's media days. "We are delighted with 12 schools. It's worked exceedingly well for us."

Scott projected optimism and contentment at Warner Bros. Studios as the Pac-12 heads into its 100-year anniversary celebration. He believes the league is gaining the national respect it deserves, and he is optimistic that AT&T's merger with DirecTV will allow the Pac-12 Networks to increase its distribution to a less embarrassing portion of the nation.

But the conference hasn't expanded since adding Utah and Colorado before the 2011 season, and it won't be putting out the welcome mat soon. After considering additional expansion in previous years, particularly when the Big 12 appeared to be on the verge of disintegration, Scott now believes the current format provides an optimal balance of tough league games and nonconference opportunities.

"As a 12-team conference playing nine conference games, this is an interesting

distinction between us and some other conferences," Scott said. "This is why I'm confident standing up and saying no one has got a tougher schedule than the Pac-12, and the Pac-12 champion has got the toughest road, because there aren't many misses that you can have within your conference."

The Pac-12's football rise isn't just the product of the optimism of a perpetually upbeat commissioner. Marcus Mariota's Heisman Trophy victory and Oregon's appearance in the national championship game were just the latest manifestations of the West Coast league's rise in quality and esteem.

Oregon State coach Gary Andersen demonstrated its draw when he left Big Ten powerhouse Wisconsin after just two seasons to take over the Beavers, a solid program that's mostly known nationally for being perpetually in the Ducks' shadow. Granted, Andersen is a native West-erner who got to be closer to home, but the Pac-12's spotlight is undeniably attractive.

"I absolutely have felt a huge swing in the last two years," Andersen said. "During those two years I was in the Midwest, the Pac-12 has gained a ton of respect nationally, (and) it's because of the investment in athletics as a whole, is my opinion. It gives you the opportunity to take better care of the kids. If you play in the Pac-12, you play at Oregon State, you deserve to have the best of the best."

Scott also said the Pac-12 prides itself on tough nonconference schedules, but doesn't believe it hurts the West Coast schools' chances in the College Football Playoff.

"I think now we're being rewarded for that strength of schedule, and part of it is (having) 12 (teams)," Scott said. "When you go beyond 12, you're going to dilute somewhat. You're going to have more erratic types of schedules within your conference."

The Pac-12's coaches realize that collective success carries an individual price, however.

The league landed six teams in the preseason coaches' poll, topped by defending champion Oregon at No. 5 and preseason media-poll favorite Southern California at No. 10. The South division appears particularly loaded, with UCLA, Arizona State, defending champion Arizona and Utah all looking like contenders.

"I would not be shocked if this is the year we have a conference championship with a team in there that has two losses," said Stanford coach David Shaw, who led his second straight team to the Rose Bowl in January 2014.

"Talking to those (selection) committee members, they recognize how difficult this conference is. If you can come out of this conference as a conference champion, you're going to get into that four-team playoff because of the road you have to travel."

BARRS-WOODS: Hyphen added to honor mother

Continued from 1B

first two seasons at Oregon State, living up to his billing as one of the nation's top prep linemen, and could play any position on the line.

"I expect Isaac to start camp the first day and be ready to go, which is great," Andersen said. "I don't want to see him on the injury report anymore. We're past that. No young man in the country deserves to have an opportunity to play football again (more) than him. Nobody has worked harder."

Barrs-Woods also has worked to be the centerpiece of the offense, including changing his mindset on and off the field. When Barrs-Woods was sharing the backfield with Sean Mannion, the Pac-12's career leader in yards passing, he could defer to the veteran quarterback.

Now Barrs-Woods has to be more focused in

his duties to make things easier for potential starting quarterbacks Seth Collins, Marcus McMaryion or Nick Mitchell.

"It just magnifies what I have to do even more, because the room for error is not as big," Barrs-Woods said. "With Sean Mannion back there, All-American quarterback, NFL quarterback, he pretty much knows everything. Not saying these young guys won't, but they don't have as much experience, so it is just my job to help on pass (protection), catch every single ball, run the ball. That is the way I can help those guys the most, by controlling the clock and helping play-action get set up."

Andersen took a similarly conservative approach at Wisconsin, riding Melvin Gordon for 4,196 yards rushing and 41 touchdowns over the last two seasons.

A self-professed "sports

junkie," Barrs-Woods was watching Gordon long before Andersen became Oregon State's coach, measuring his production against the best in the nation.

"I'm a competitor, too," Barrs-Woods said. "I would look at my stats, see what the other running backs did. Of course Melvin blew me out of the water. Seeing a guy like him and (Georgia running back Todd) Gurley was so exciting."

Besides adding to his 2,250 career yards rushing and 24 touchdowns, Barrs-Woods will also have a new addition to the back of his jersey this season, hyphenating his last name to recognize his mother, Faith Barrs.

However, Barrs-Woods won't legally change his name until after the season. There are limits to how busy Barrs-Woods plans to be this fall.

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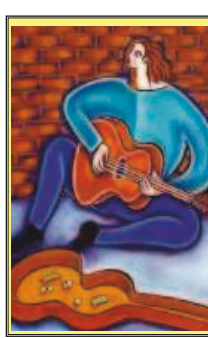
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