

Ionescu returns to Oregon for final season to chase title

By JANIE MCCAULEY
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Sabrina Ionescu has no doubts she did the right thing returning to Oregon for her final season and working toward her master's degree rather than turning pro.

"One hundred percent, I feel like it was the right decision for me," she said. "I couldn't imagine not being here, not being with my team and being overseas or playing pro."

Ionescu and the Ducks have some unfinished business after reaching the program's first Final Four and losing to eventual champion Baylor in the national semifinals, not that you will hear coach Kelly Graves or his group talking national championships at this early stage.

"There's just so much that goes into getting to a Final Four, getting a Pac-12 championship, getting a national championship, that if you lose sight of everything that happens along the way you usually don't end up reaching those goals," Ionescu said. "We really just try to get better every day individually and collectively, and focus on what's next to come."

Everyone will be looking to dethrone the Ducks, though perennial power Stanford captured the Pac-12 tournament championship.

Oregon is coming off consecutive 33-win seasons and went 16-2 in Pac-12 play to capture its second straight regular-season crown.

"I'm eating right, I'm happy, and quite frankly I'm feeling none of the pressure," said Graves, beginning his sixth season in Eugene. "We've been in this situation before. The whole team has been really good about managing expectations and ignoring the noise that we get. It's funny the way we talk goals, it's never, 'Hey, we want to win the national championship, we want to win the Pac-12.' That's not who we are. Our true goal is that we



Oregon's Sabrina Ionescu, left, and Satou Sabally speak to reporters during the Pac-12 Conference women's NCAA college basketball media day on Oct. 7, 2019, in San Francisco.

AP Photo/D. Ross Cameron, File

want to get better each and every day. We want to keep our heads down, work hard. We know we're good enough to do those things, but that's not something that we focus on. It doesn't permeate everything surrounding our program."

Ionescu, who already holds the NCAA career record for triple-doubles with 18, is the veteran star in the league while Stanford freshman Francesca Belibi will be a top newcomer to watch.

She can dunk

All eyes will be on Stanford freshman sensation Belibi, well known as Fran.

Oh, yeah, she can dunk. Hall of Fame coach Tara VanDerveer wants the situation to be right for slammin'.

"I think it's just going to happen organically. Maybe we'll have to run like a lob play. Talk to (War-

riors coach) Steve Kerr about some good lob plays that he runs," VanDerveer said. "But you know, I just want her to not put pressure on herself. Maybe just do it in warm-up and get it over with. But obviously we know she can dunk. But I don't want her getting hurt doing it, either."

Poised leader

Pac-12 Player of the Year Ionescu seems unfazed by the constant attention, such as regular shout-outs from NBA stars, such as Stephen Curry.

"She's so used to being a star and she handles it so well, always with poise, grace," Graves said. "I know deep down inside she's got to get tired of signing autographs, taking pictures. It happens all the time in a smaller community."

Ionescu begins her senior season with 1,984 points, 792 assists

and 756 rebounds with a chance to become the first player in NCAA women's basketball history to reach at least 2,000 career points, 1,000 assists and 1,000 rebounds.

PAC-12 depth

Oregon was picked to win the Pac-12 for the third straight season in a poll of the conference coaches, followed by perennial power and defending Pac-12 Tournament champion Stanford and Oregon State in third. UCLA was fourth, followed by Arizona State, Arizona, Utah, USC, Washington, Washington State, California and Colorado.

Everybody expects another year where every win will be hard-fought given the depth of talent throughout the league.

"We've had really good teams in the past at the top. What differentiates our conference this year is the

depth of excellence. I think we're going to have eight teams vying to be in the NCAA Tournament and maybe more than that," UCLA coach Cori Close said.

Striving for Final Four

Pac-12 teams have reached the Final Four in 10 of the last 12 years.

Commissioner Larry Scott is eager to see how the conference continues to shine on a national stage in the nonconference schedule and come NCAA Tournament time.

"I think this is the strongest we've certainly been in our modern history. As you say, certainly at the top. We're going to have teams that are expected to be competing for Final Fours this year," Scott said. "The last few years we've had at least half the league make the NCAA Tournament, so there's a nice momentum that's built."

New face

Charmin Smith takes over coaching Cal after Lindsay Gottlieb departed to become an assistant coach for the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Smith left Berkeley briefly this spring to join the New York Liberty as an assistant coach, then returned to the Bay Area to lead the Golden Bears — providing continuity and familiarity given she had been on Gottlieb's staff and played for VanDerveer at Stanford.

"It's been a really good transition. Charmin has always been that consistent coach that we've had, and she always comes in ready to work, like knows what we should be doing. And we want to work for her and all the other coaches," senior guard Sara Anastasieska said.

"I think it was probably the best possible thing that could happen for us because we know Charmin, we love Charmin, we've always loved her. So for her to come back, it was incredible, and we couldn't have thought of anything better."

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