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Stanford Men Face New Rival At Inaugural Pac-12 XC Championships

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Jake Riley & Chris Derrick
leading Stanford into battle
(PhotoRun.net)

The Stanford men dominated Pac-10 Conference cross country scene over the last two years and look to win a third consecutive conference title at the inaugural Pac-12 Cross Country Championships. Standing in their way will be an unfamiliar foe in the Colorado Buffaloes, a new admit in the expanded Pac-12 Conference.

The Cardinal, currently ranked fourth in the USTFCCCA coaches poll, are looking solid heading into Saturday's race at the Wigwam Resort Golf Course in Litchfield Park, Arizona. After winning its home Stanford Invitational in late September, the team finished third in a loaded Wisconsin Invitational race despite **Chris Derrick** having an uncharacteristic bad day and fading to sixth place over the last kilometer.

But the challenge all season long for coach Jason Dunn has not been Derrick or number two man **Jake Riley**; instead, it has been shoring up the depth in the third, fourth and fifth spots. **Ben Johnson**, **Brendan Gregg** and **Erik Olson** will likely be the men to fit into those positions. The key to Stanford's success lies in how highly they can finish before the stampede of Buffaloes runs past them.

Sixth-ranked Colorado has a tremendous cross country tradition back when it was in the Big 12 and now hopes to continue the success against the West Coast's premier teams. The Buffs won Pre-Nationals behind the strong efforts of individual runner-up **Andy Wacker** and fourth place finisher **Richard Medina**. Freshman **Ammar Moussa** opened up in the black and gold CU jersey in 19th place. They have done all this without last year's number one man **Joe Bosshard** who has yet to race this fall. It is not clear whether or not Bosshard is healthy, but if he is, his presence could be a major threat to Stanford's three-peat hopes.

The battle for the next few positions is a relative crap-shoot between three teams – UCLA, Washington State and Oregon.

The Bruins have been on the rise in recent years under the leadership of coach **Forrest Braden** in his third season at the helm in Westwood. The men were sixth at Notre Dame and 12th more recently at the Wisconsin Invitational. Senior **Kent Morikawa** has led the way for UCLA with a young core of runners including freshman **Shayne Collins** and sophomores **Dustin Fay** and **Nohe Lema** playing critical roles.

Washington State coach **Pete Julian** has really turned around the Cougar program that was at the cellar of the Pac-10 for years. The team surprised many with a fifth place finish at Notre Dame but decided not to race a second big invitational. Look for senior **Jonathan Lafler** to be the team's front runner and good runs from the pack consisting of **Andrew Kimpel**, **Andrew Gonzales** and **Justin Englund** could bolster Wazzou to a podium finish.

Oregon had a sub-par race at Wisconsin where the Ducks tied for 14th. **Luke Puskedra** in ninth and **Parker Stinson** in 18th ran up to expectations but the rest of the team – including star freshman **Lukas Verzbicas** – struggled. Verzbicas made a typical freshman mistake of going out too hard but will likely learn his lesson in time for Pac-12's. The x-factor for Oregon will be the performance of their fourth and fifth runners.

Host team and 25th ranked Arizona State, along with Arizona, California and Washington will also toe the line in the Grand Canyon State for the right to win the Pac-12 Cross Country title on Saturday. The gun for the men's race goes off at 9:00 AM Pacific Time while the women are scheduled to start at 10:00 AM.

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