

Men's basketball: Strong start has Pac-12 eyeing more tourney bids

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The contenders at the Pac-12 Tournament won't have all of their postseason chips on the table in Las Vegas.

Last season no teams in the conference entered the tournament at the Staples Center in Los Angeles feeling like they had already wrapped up an at-large berth to the NCAA Tournament.

Washington, the regular-season champion, had to settle for the NIT after losing to ninth-seeded Oregon State in the quarterfinals. Cal needed a win over rival Stanford to sneak into the field as one of the last at-large selections ticketed for first round games in Dayton, Ohio.

After Colorado's 53-51 victory over Arizona in the championship game, Sean Miller acknowledged that the Wildcats were not worthy of invitation to the Big Dance.

Colorado had to win four games in four nights to punch its ticket.

A poor showing during non-conference play was the main culprit in the "power" conference only having two teams in the NCAA Tournament while the Mountain West received four bids.

Based on results this November and December, coaches around the conference believe the Pac-12 will be a much bigger factor in March.

"I think the league's good," USC's Kevin O'Neill said during a coaches conference call with the media on Tuesday. "I think we're going to end up with four, five or six NCAA Tournament teams and two or three NIT teams."

Arizona is surging in the polls after a 65-64 victory over then-No. 5 Florida last Saturday. Oregon is off to a 9-1 start that has included a victory at No. 18 UNLV.

CU got the conference off to a strong start by winning the Charleston Classic with quality victories over Dayton, Baylor and Murray State. The dominant home win over Colorado State could also look good on the Buffs' résumé at the end of the season.

"Our game at Kansas, we didn't perform that well," Tad Boyle said of CU's 90-54 loss at Allen Fieldhouse in a nationally televised game. "I think every team in our league, other than Arizona, can point to a game or two they'd like to have back."

On Tuesday at RealTimeRPI.com, the Pac-12 was ranked third in conference RPI behind the Big Ten and Big East.

CU (4) and Arizona (8) were both in the top 10 in RPI with Oregon (30) and Cal (39) in the top 50.

"We are in this together, there's no doubt about that. Arizona's big win over Florida was definitely big for our conference," Oregon head coach Dana Altman said. "I think our conference is moving in the right direction and our teams are going to get better and it's going to be a heck of a conference race."

There have been some pleasant surprises at the bottom of the conference.

Arizona State is 9-2 this season after winning just 10 games last season. Utah is 6-3 after finishing 6-25 last season.

Washington (6-4) has been a disappointment early on with home losses to Albany, Colorado State and Nevada. Cal was blown out at Wisconsin (81-56), blew a home game against UNLV (76-75), and also lost to No. 16 Creighton (76-64) in Berkeley.

"I think what we all learned last year is the strength of our league helps us all and the weakness of our league hurts us all," Boyle said.

Arizona, No. 4 in the Associated Press poll and No. 5 in the USA Today Coaches poll, is the only Pac-12 team currently ranked. Oregon is receiving votes in both polls.

The Wildcats embrace the challenge of being the team to beat in the Pac-12 this season.

"We just want to be able to compete for that championship, and as long as we control the process as we have to this point, we will be able to live with the results," Miller said.

This year Arizona and other teams at the top of the Pac-12 standings shouldn't have to win the conference tournament March 13-16 at the MGM Grand in order to get into the NCAA Tournament.

"It's my gut feeling that we're all doing a better job than we did last year," said Oregon State head coach Craig Robinson, whose athletic and veteran team has only lost to Kansas (84-78) and Alabama (65-62). "But we won't be able to tell until we get down to the end of the season and see how many teams we're getting into the NCAA Tournament."

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