

# New Alt-itude By TheNumbers

## Dana Altman wants UO to respond to success by aiming higher

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Over and over, when Oregon coach Dana Altman was asked what playing in and ultimately winning a championship in the College Basketball Invitational will mean for his program, his answer remained the same.

“It’s how the guys respond,” Altman said. “I hope it’ll give us a jump start ... that it will help us move to next year but it’ll only be that if our players respond.

“It does us no good if we’re satisfied with this. We’ve got higher aspirations.”

That the Ducks do, but before they put this season entirely behind them, Altman, his staff and his team might take a moment to find some satisfaction in what was accomplished by this Oregon team, which finished 21-18 with a victory in the title series of the CBI.

That’s only the 12th time in 105 seasons of basketball that Oregon has won as many as 20 games, and it’s only the second time a first-year coach has done it.

“I know we had to play a lot to get to 20, but we did win 20 games,” Altman said when the Ducks reached that milestone number. “Winning breeds winning, so hopefully it’ll help us down the road.”

It wasn’t exactly a direct path to 21 wins for the Ducks. They opened 7-3, and then dropped six consecutive games. Moving into Matthew Knight Arena seemed to help spur them again, winning seven times in 10 games, but then came a four-game losing streak.

That left Oregon 14-16 entering the Pac-10 tournament, but from there the Ducks won seven of their final nine games, including five of their six games in the CBI.

“We were a new team, a new coach, new players, a new system. It just took us a little time,” Oregon senior Joevan Catron said of the inconsistency earlier in the season. “When we started clicking, we were a dangerous team.”

There were great challenges to overcome before the season even began. Three players were planning to leave Oregon prior to Altman being hired, and Jamil Wilson said he’d make his decision in the summer, when he opted to transfer to Marquette, near his family’s Wisconsin home.

When Michael Dunigan took a professional contract overseas to avoid a looming NCAA probe of his eligibility over the issue of extra benefits, and LeKendric Longmire didn’t make it academically, the roster was further reduced. When Tyrone Nared, one of the players Altman had added in a short recruiting effort in the spring, was suddenly in doubt until undergoing a procedure on his heart, the Ducks were down to a roster of seven scholarship players late in the summer.

“That was a little bit of a challenge,” Altman recalled recently. “We just didn’t have any players. We were worried about being able to field a team ... that was a long month there.”

The situation improved when Nared was cleared by doctors, and the Ducks made two late additions to the roster in transfer Jay-R Strowbridge and freshman Martin Seiferth.

Still, the media made Oregon an almost unanimous choice to finish last in the Pac-10. Altman said he and the players were aware of the speculation that the Ducks might not win a conference game. They began practice, one of the Ducks said at the time, “with a chip on our shoulder” to prove the skeptics wrong.

There were early moments of promise, including a gallant comeback against Missouri, then ranked ninth in the nation, but there was also a season-low 48 points in a loss at Virginia, and a home loss to Idaho, that left Oregon 7-5 entering the Pac-10 season. The lowest point in the season might have come when the Ducks were swept in the opening weekend of the Pac-10 season, as Oregon bid farewell to McArthur Court.

“I was disappointed in the way the team and I communicated in the month of December,” Altman said in a review of the season. “We just didn’t get much done. Part of that’s coaching, part of that’s players, we’ve all got to take our share of the responsibility, but we didn’t make the progress in December that we should have.”

Altman candidly said the issue was that “I was nagging at ’em, and they didn’t like me nagging, and we didn’t get much done. We’ve done a better job of communicating (since then and) we’ve made progress.”

There wasn’t a dramatic confrontation or one of those clear-the-air meetings. Altman has said there was great influence by Catron and Strowbridge on the other players and “guys stayed with it, and they put up with me.

“I believed in these guys from the start,” Altman said. “We’ve got a lot of competitors on the team. I was never going to give up on them. I just worried for a while there they might give up on me.”

The losing streak reached six when the Ducks were swept on another weekend series, on the road at Washington and Washington State, but Altman said he felt the Ducks were starting to show signs of improvement, even as they battled health issues. That improvement continued with a win over USC in the first game at Matthew Knight Arena, and the Ducks followed that with road wins at Oregon State and Stanford, the latter a place where Oregon hadn’t won in 25 years.

Oregon achieved its success playing with a rotation of only eight players, once Jeremy Jacob was lost to knee problems. It forced Altman to make some accommodations as the Ducks pressed less, and less aggressively, and Oregon played much more zone defense than Altman teams did in his 16 seasons at Creighton.

Altman did a masterful job of managing the minutes for his short roster. E.J. Singler ended up leading the Ducks in minutes played, averaging 30.5 minutes. Four Ducks averaged between 25.6 and 27.6 minutes as Altman shuffled players and used the media timeouts to gain rest during games, and he reduced the length of practices between games.

The Ducks had their shortfalls. They were outrebounded by about two per game, and Oregon’s three-point shooting was inconsistent, with the Ducks finishing eighth in the Pac-10 in percentage at a .339 percentage; even in winning the CBI, Oregon’s three-point percentage was .341 in those six games.

While Joevan Catron was usually the predominant offensive player, the Ducks showed some balance. Eight different players led Oregon in scoring at least once, and seven of them at least twice. In the CBI, even with Catron averaging 20.7 points in the six games, E.J. Singler added 13.3 points and three other Ducks averaged at least 8.3 points.

What Oregon did best was know the value of having possession of the basketball. The Ducks led the Pac-10 and finishing in the top 25 nationally in turnover margin, and Oregon's defensive pressure on opponents resulted in the Ducks finishing in the top 30 nationally in steals.

Yes, it was quite an accomplishment overall, considering all the challenges the Ducks faced this season. Some of that won't change, as the Ducks haven't added any recruits taller than players in this season's regular rotation, and it remains to be seen how quickly the four incoming freshmen, all signed to letters of intent, and a junior college transfer, who has verbally committed, will contribute.

"There's no easy way," Altman said. "We're going to have to outwork people. We're not as big, we're not as athletic we're going to have to outwork people.

"We've got a long ways to go with our program, we're not kidding anybody."

But after a winning record in his first season, after a championship in a postseason tournament — no matter what anyone thinks of the CBI — the Ducks have already raised the hopes of their followers for future success.

"We want that," Altman said. "We don't want to be picked (last in the Pac-12) next year.

"The expectations are going to be high (but) we want them to be higher. That's a good thing."

And so was this season, taking it all into account.

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8,018

Oregon's average home attendance, with the 24 games split evenly between McArthur Court (6,559) and Matthew Knight Arena (9,477). Oregon was third in the Pac-10 in home attendance, behind Arizona (13,680) and Washington (9,650).

321

Total steals for the Ducks this season, setting a school record that bettered the previous mark of 263 set in the 2002-03 season. That included 89 by Malcolm Armstead, as he bettered his school record of 65 set a year earlier.

3.2

Positive turnover margin for Oregon, which led the Pac-10. The Ducks averaged 12.2 turnovers while opponents averaged 15.4 turnovers.

.852

Free-throw percentage by E.J. Singler, the best in the Pac-10. Singler's two-year percentage is also .852, which ranks fourth on Oregon's career list, behind Tajuan Porter (.871), Rob Closs (.868) and Luke Ridnour (.859).