

## The Register-Guard

<http://www.registerguard.com/>

---

**[Rapid turnaround has Pac-10 teams giving the Devils their due](http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/sports/4865810-41/story.csp)**  
**[\(http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/sports/4865810-41/story.csp\)](http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/sports/4865810-41/story.csp)**

### **Under Herb Sendek, Arizona State has gone from a conference doormat to a title contender**

**BY [RON BELLAMY \(MAILTO:RON.BELLAMY@REGISTERGUARD.COM\)](mailto:RON.BELLAMY@REGISTERGUARD.COM)**

*The Register-Guard*

---

Two seasons ago, the Arizona State men's basketball team lost 22 games.

This season, the Sun Devils are considered contenders to win the Pac-10 title.

Their new status is a reflection of one of the league's more impressive recent rebuilding jobs, by coach Herb Sendek, plus the fact that the Sun Devils have a star player — 6-foot-5 sophomore guard James Harden — surrounded by battle-tested teammates who play excellent defense.

In what's perceived to be a league that's not quite as talented as last season — star freshmen Kevin Love of UCLA and O.J. Mayo of Southern California left early for the NBA, as did Arizona guard Jerryd Bayless, Cal forward Ryan Anderson and 14 feet of Lopez twins at Stanford — the Sun Devils are no longer under the radar.

“They can win it because they have a veteran basketball team and they have two great players on that veteran basketball team,” Oregon coach Ernie Kent said, referring to Harden and senior forward Jeff Pendergraph.

“And I don't know if the conference is as dominant as it's been in the past, with the top half of the conference being so great. Even though the bottom has come up, the top has come back a little bit, so certainly they can win it.”

As the Pac-10 teams finish their final nonleague games this week, in preparation for the beginning of conference play Friday, the league is in transition.

There are first-year coaches at Stanford (Johnny Dawkins) and Oregon State (Craig Robinson), and an interim coach at Arizona, where Russ Pennell is holding the fort until the Wildcats select a successor for Lute Olson, who retired abruptly in October. And while it doesn't seem right to designate Mike Montgomery as a first-year coach, he is that at California, returning to the Pac-10 after a stint with the Golden State Warriors that was preceded by a long, successful career at Stanford.

UCLA, ranked No. 13 in The Associated Press poll, remains the preseason favorite after reaching three straight Final Fours, though the Bruins are replacing three players who have already started games in the NBA — Love, guard Russell Westbrook and forward Luc Richard Mbah a Moute — plus center Lorenzo Mata-Real.

“I’d be surprised if the winner is better than 14-4 or even 13-5,” UCLA coach Ben Howland said.

There have been only two four-loss league champions in the past 14 years (Oregon in 2002 and UCLA in 2006), and only once since the league expanded to 10 teams in 1978 has the regular-season champion had five losses (in 1985, when Washington and USC tied at 13-5).

“The league might not be right were it was last year, but I don’t think it’s as far away as people think,” Washington State coach Tony Bennett said. “I think there are going to be a ton of close games, and it’s going to be teams that stay healthy and execute.”

Enter the Sun Devils, who hired North Carolina State refugee Sendek in 2006 to replace Rob Evans, let go after an 11-17 season.

Sendek’s first year, 2006-07, was an ordeal. He quickly scrapped the Princeton-style offense he’d used at N.C. State for a flex offense that sought to shorten games with an undermanned team. The Sun Devils have gone beyond that now, but they’ve stuck with another change Sendek made that season, adopting a zone defense, varying the look with the opponent, that makes scoring against the Sun Devils a consistent challenge.

In that first season, the Sun Devils went 8-22 overall, 2-16 in the Pac-10 and at one point lost 15 straight Pac-10 games. They were last in the league in scoring, 58.5 points per game, and last in shooting percentage, .412.

In four Pac-10 games, ASU failed to score 50 points.

“I really felt like we had to be very sweeping in our approach, and we had to literally advance on the broadest possible front,” Sendek said. “So we started at the beginning, in just about every area, and continue to try to move forward.”

Sendek’s experience at ASU resonates at a couple other Pac-10 programs — Washington State, where Bennett (with groundwork by his father, Dick) accomplished another impressive turnaround, and Oregon State, where Robinson is starting a major rebuilding project.

“You’ve got to get your system instilled,” Tony Bennett said. “You’ve got to get your kind of kids in the program, and it’s going to be painful and it takes time. Some places take longer, and even in our place, you kind of have to go through cycles; you rebuild it, and you rebuild it again.”

Robinson said rebuilding involves developing “a mind-set on how to win games, and how to behave; how to have practice, how to go through the travel to and from games. There’s a plethora of behaviors that you have to learn. That’s what we’re trying to do. We’re

following the template of start-at-the-bottom. Not quite the (case of) John Wooden telling them how to tie their shoes, but certainly how to go about behaving at practice and in games and things of that nature.”

Nothing shortens the rebuilding process quite like recruiting a star, which Sendek did with Harden, helped by the hiring of Harden’s Artesia High School (Los Angeles) coach, Scott Pera, as director of basketball operations. Pera, now an assistant coach, was hired in June 2006; Harden committed two months later and wound up following another of Pera’s athletes, point guard Derek Glasser, to ASU after Glasser had been considering walking on at USC.

As a freshman last season, Harden led the Sun Devils in scoring at 17.8 points per game — he set an ASU freshman record with 16 games of 20 points or more — led the league with 73 steals and joined fellow freshmen Love and Mayo as first-team all-Pac-10 selections.

As a result, the Sun Devils went from those 22 losses in 2007 to 21-13 last season, including two wins in the NIT after being snubbed by the NCAA Tournament selection committee. In so doing, ASU became just the second team in the 30-year history of the Pac-10 to lose at least 20 games one season and win 20 games the next season; only Cal, in 1988 and ’89, can match that feat, and nationally among the major conferences only Miami (2006 to 2007) and Texas A&M (2004 to 2005) have done so, according to ASU research.

That means that this kind of turnaround has never happened in the 76-year history of the Southeastern Conference, or the 103-year history of the Big Ten.

After not considering entering the NBA draft, Harden, who turned 19 in late August, has returned and is better, leading the Pac-10 in scoring at just over 24 points per game. Pendergraph averages almost 13, and he and Harden ranked fifth and sixth in rebounding in the most recent Pac-10 stats. When teams collapse on Harden, sophomore Rihards Kuksiks has developed into a reliable three-point shooter, and the often-overlooked Glasser leads the league in assists-to-turnovers ratio.

Since Sendek’s 8-22 first season, the Sun Devils are 31-14. They were 4-17 in games decided by 10 points or fewer that first season; they’re 10-5 in such games the past two seasons and at 10-1 are ranked No. 20 in the current AP poll.

Kent said this is the best ASU team he’s seen as the Oregon coach; Sendek sounded far from satisfied.

“I think our team has a hell of a lot of work to do, to be honest with you,” Sendek said. “In every manner. I think we’re still a work in progress. There’s quite a leap between where we finished last year and the expectations that have been laid upon our plate for this year. So we’ve got to figure out how we’re going to be that much better if we’re going to live up to some of the expectations that others have talked about. Because we have to get a lot better.”

Well, there is the pressure of expectations — “they’ve got a bull’s-eye,” WSU’s Bennett said — and of a special window of opportunity this season. Harden and Pendergraph might both be first-round NBA picks in June, if Harden leaves; success this season would

certainly help with recruiting, as should a \$25 million practice facility scheduled to open in April.

“He’s built his team for a year like this,” Bennett said of Sendek. “Last year, you saw some of the fruits, and this year they have a phenomenal player in Harden and some upperclassmen around him.

“You have to be willing to be patient and stay true to your system and be fortunate with health and a lot of other things. He’s in that spot right now. ... A kid like Harden, he’s so special; it was huge that he decided to stay and now he (Sendek) is in the spot where they want to be.

“He’s gone through the hard stuff, and I’m sure those kids, with all those experiences that they have, are so much better because of it.”

---

Copyright © 2008 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA