

Defense carrying WSU

Cougar defense ranked No. 1 in country

By Devin Rokyta, Daily News staff writer

Washington State could be poised for a strong finish to the season - if only the WSU offense could step up to the level of the Cougar defense.

However, judging from their play thus far, that is not likely to happen.

The Cougars (11-8, 3-4) are last in the Pac-10 in scoring and 321st in the nation, averaging just 58.5 points per game.

Much of the low point production can be placed squarely on how poorly the team is shooting. As a team, the Cougars are connecting on just 42.6 percent (ninth in Pac-10) of their shots and only 33.1 percent from 3-point range.

WSU was at its worst offensively on Saturday in its 46-44 loss to USC. The Cougars only hit on 14 of 51 shots. Although, having a chance to win the game late says a great deal about just how good the Cougar defense is.

"The fact that we went 14-of-51 and still had a chance to win - I am not going to say it is unheard of, but it might be close to it," WSU coach Tony Bennett said. "We've been in so many close games, and it is because our defense has held us in there even when we labored to score.

"That is what gives us a chance," Bennett added. "If that is not real strong, then we are not even going to be in games and have heartbreaking losses if we are struggling from the floor."

The Cougars have been the stingiest defense in the conference and the nation, allowing their opponents to score just 52.5 points per contest. They also hold their opponents to just a 36.9 field goal percentage, lowest in the Pac-10 and fifth lowest in the country.

That great defense will be tested today when the Cougars square off against Arizona State in Tempe, Ariz., at 6 p.m. The Sun Devils come into the game boasting a 16-3 record, thanks in large part to their offense, which averages 72.3 points per game and shoots 49.5 percent.

"They are certainly one of the top teams in our league and the country," Bennett said. "This is the year they have been built for."

ASU also has one of the most talented players in the country - one projected to go as high as the second pick in the NBA draft this summer - in sophomore James Harden.

Harden is putting up 22 points and 5.7 rebounds per game.

"When his jumper is falling it is a nightmare," Bennett said.

The Sun Devils also aren't a cake-walk on defense. They are just giving up 57.8 points per game, second lowest in the conference and seventh lowest in the country.

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