

Jerise Freeman's energetic sideline presence

The addition of assistant coach Jerise Freeman was just as notable as any player — and she's helped the Ducks to an NCAA Tournament berth

By Lily Crane



Photos by Jordan Martin

The Matthew Knight Arena crowd erupted into cheers that were deafening to the ears on the court. It didn't matter that it was only the first quarter. It didn't matter that it was Super Bowl Sunday. The Ducks possessed all the momentum against the undefeated No. 1 team in the nation. The fans were locked in on the action.

Oregon assistant coach Jerise Freeman was just as fired up as the sea of green and yellow in the stands. She hopped out of her seat on the sideline and clapped her hands, shouting words of encouragement at her players. The Ducks mimicked her energy on the court, flexing and roaring as they forced turnover after turnover.

Oregon held UCLA to only 12 points on just over 30% shooting in the first quarter. Even though it ended as a 62-52 loss, defensive stops are what kept the Ducks in the game against the Bruins longer than any team up to that point. It was the side of the floor that Freeman specialized in.

About a month earlier, Freeman sat in the practice gym after the team's workout wearing a patterned green pom beanie with the Duck logo at the center.

“It's easy for them to be excited about getting a stop and all of those things because we talk about it every single day,” Freeman said. “It is a big thing if we get a charge in practice, just like it's a big thing if we get a charge in the game.”

Freeman's contagious energy comes from her playing days. She was known as a defensive stopper at Seward County Community College and later Pacific, where she averaged 13.2 points and 7.2 rebounds a game in her senior year. A smile flashed across her face as she recalled a moment in high school when she started to understand that her energy is what makes her stand out.

“My high school coach came to me and he was like, ‘You don't have the opportunity to have ups and downs. You're energy — that's what you are. That's what you bring,’” Freeman said. “That is your constant. And so if you're having a bad day, unfortunately, you're going to have to hide it because we feed off of the low energy just as much as the high.”

In the past few seasons, the Ducks didn't have a personality like Freeman, whose spirit could inject energy into the program.

“Sometimes I had to fill that role, give the energy,” head coach Kelly Graves said. “I'm 62 years old. My energy is different than [the] young energy that she's been giving us.”

Three days after the UCLA loss, the Ducks played a nail-biter against their rival Washington Huskies. Washington guard Devin Coppinger received the ball on the baseline inbound and her contested jumper rolled off the rim. The Matthew Knight Arena crowd cheered in celebration as the final buzzer sounded and the scoreboard indicated a 68-67 Oregon victory.

Freeman jumped into the air, pumping her fists in excitement as she celebrated with Graves. Once again, the Ducks sealed a much-needed win on the defensive end. A rivalry win clinched a spot in the Big Ten Tournament — and it kept Oregon's hopes of reaching March Madness alive.

The thought of the Ducks reaching the 2025 NCAA Tournament would've been laughed off at the end of last season. The program lost 14-straight games and its top two scorers transferred. Coach Graves went to work in the offseason, not just recruiting top talents from the transfer portal, but adding a proven assistant coach to his staff.

Freeman achieved a lot of success in her previous stops as an assistant at Oklahoma State and then Utah. She helped both teams to multiple NCAA Tournament appearances

and coached multiple players who were drafted into the WNBA, such as the eighth pick in 2024, Alissa Pili.

She still made the decision to exit the Utes' program for Oregon in the offseason, despite the disparity in success the two programs achieved in recent years. Graves called Freeman last summer with a vision: Oregon would get back to a place of prominence similar to where it stood five years prior, when it reached the Final Four.

"It's not like he hasn't been to the Final Four. It's not like he hasn't been to the Sweet 16," Freeman said. "It's like he's been there and done that. When a head coach calls you and says they want you and we're getting back there and they want you to be a part of that, it's special and you want to be a part of that."

Freeman said that when Graves called her about the opportunity in Eugene, she almost didn't take it — not because of the program's thorny past season, but because she was afraid of how she'd handle increased responsibility.

"I was nervous. I didn't want to fail him," Freeman said. "I knew they were coming off of a tough season and I didn't want to be the reason why we failed."

Freeman ended up taking the position, in part due to the support of Graves and his coaching staff.

"Being able to coach through the mistakes, being able to still build them up, but hold them accountable — I think those were all things that I had to learn," Freeman said. "Kelly, [assistant coach Jodie Berry], their minds of how they work, I leaned on them hard. Still do in those tough moments."

Freeman said that the confidence Graves and the coaching staff had in her never wavered, even during periods when the team struggled on the defensive side of the floor.

"She's taken ownership of [the defense]," Graves said. "She just has the personality, I think the team feeds off that. They love her energy and she's upbeat every single day and they've bought into it."

In terms of completely flipping the team's narrative in the span of one year, Freeman saw similarities in the rough season the Ducks were coming off of to the situation she entered in Utah.

"[The Utes] had a bad season prior," Freeman said. "And then we flipped it and turned it around and made it to the NCAA Tournament."

Losses to Nebraska and Washington in the final three games of the regular season kept Oregon's postseason placement in flux. The Ducks team sat in Matthew Knight Arena on Mar. 16, anxiously awaiting to hear if their name would be called during the NCAA Tournament Selection Show.

Finally, the vision Graves presented to Freeman last summer became destiny. The Ducks return to the tournament for the first time in three years to face off against Vanderbilt, despite the turbulent road it took to get to that point.

"We really needed to get back to the tournament," Graves said to the media on Sunday. "That was our goal right at the very start and we put ourselves into that position."

Just like her prior stops, Freeman helped another program to the "Big Dance." She said that what she took from each team she worked with was the importance of attention to detail.

"If you let something go in practice and it continues to be a thing, well, that's the thing that's gonna beat you in the game," Freeman said.

Freeman said the squad hasn't taken any practice lightly down the stretch of the season because every practice, every chance to improve has mattered when it came to reaching the NCAA Tournament.

Beyond a single season, programs are always in search of new stars on the court to pick up lost production as a result of inevitable roster turnover. Regardless of how far the Ducks finish in the tournament, keeping Freeman on the staff will only allow Oregon to continue building what she's started on the defensive side of the floor.