

2. Oregon Ducks

For the last two years, the Oregon men have headlined our freshman class rankings, sitting at our TSR #1 spot in both 2021-22 and 2022-23. But this winter, the Ducks fade to our TSR #2 position, a somewhat surprising development considering that this may end up being one of their best collections of young distance stars ever.

There are six men who headline Oregon's current group of freshmen -- and each one of them would leave me terrified to race them in the future.

We must first begin with Simeon Birnbaum, someone who you could argue was the best overall high school distance runner in the nation last year. The South Dakota native was simply unreal on the track, flexing elite range that many multi-time collegiate All-Americans couldn't replicate.

With marks of 1:47 (800), 3:37 (1500), 3:57 (mile), 8:05 (3k), 8:31 (3200), 8:34 (two-mile) and 14:39 (5k XC), Birnbaum was an absolute nightmare to race against. He could handle any elite high school field that he was in and he ran well in higher-level fields as well! The Rapids City star could take you down via a monster kick or he could simply run away from you. Birnbaum also finished 6th at NXN and 4th at the Foot Locker during the 2022 cross country season.

He was just flat-out awesome.

But what makes this class so other-worldly impressive is the fact that Connor Burns, a Missouri megastar, is also part of this freshman contingent.

An aerobic-centric ace who has been unafraid to push the pace, this ambitious distance star briefly held the boy's high school 5k national record on the track last spring (13:37) before that time was broken by Lex Young (13:34).

With a 3:58 mile PR, Burns has the skillset to be a true NCAA star in the near future assuming he stays healthy and continues to develop. For an Oregon roster that is seemingly aiming to be a team of the future in cross country while still thriving in distances like the mile, Burns is a perfect fit for this group.

Between the raw talent of Birnbaum and Burns, you could argue that it's the Ducks, not the Stanford Cardinal, who have the best duo of American distance recruits from the Class of 2023...but that's a conversation for another day.

Of course, Oregon's current group of rookies is so much more than Birnbaum and Burns. In fact, this may be the most complete group of distance recruits in the nation, even if it's not the biggest.

Sergio Del Barrio, a distance star from Spain, is a fascinating name. Not only can he effectively attack most racing distances -- holding times of 1:51 (800), 3:47 (1500), 8:05 (3k) and 14:20 (5k) -- but he is also an elite steeplechaser!

With a personal best of 8:39 over the barriers and water pits, Del Barrio is seemingly aerobically mature enough to potentially contend for a national qualifying spot as soon as this spring. And while the Ducks did have steeple success with Alex Slenning last spring, it feels like this Spanish distance star will eventually eclipse Slenning's 8:34 mark and maybe even contend for a national title one day.

And of course, if you're running 8:39 in the steeplechase before even being a college freshman, then his potential impact on Oregon's cross country squad could also be massive.

We then find ourselves moving to another overseas rookie star, Archie Noakes.

The Aussie distance ace is a true aerobic animal, having run 7:53 (3k) and 13:52 (5k) before joining the Ducks. Those are probably his most impressive marks, although his other personal bests of 4:01 (mile) and 8:57 (steeple) put him in very similar territory as Birnbaum and Burns as far as talent is concerned.

Noakes' skillset as a prep athlete suggests that he'll be at his best in the 10k, an event that Oregon has been somewhat quiet in over the last few years. And more importantly, if he can effectively translate his 3k and 5k efforts to the 8k and 10k distances on the grass, then he'll undoubtedly be a cross country All-American...right?

As we move on, Will Heslam jumps onto our radar. The in-state Oregon product slightly deviates from the traditional distance-heavy model that Coach Jerry Schumacher seemingly employed with this rookie class.

Heslam's marquee time is a brilliant 1:49 mark over 800 meters, bringing some welcomed speed and turnover to an Oregon roster that will be without Elliott Cook and Matthew Erickson by the time Heslam is an upperclassman.

In theory, that's an ideal timeline. Heslam can build and refine his fitness over the next two years while Cook and Erickson thrive in the middle distance events. And by the time those two men leave the NCAA, Heslam could take the mantle and be just as effective -- or maybe even better.

The nice thing about Heslam is that he also has great versatility, holding personal best marks of 4:08 (mile) and 8:29 (3k). Could he be the next Elliott Cook? It certainly seems that way...

We will then wrap up our analysis with Utah native, Tayson Echohawk.

When this guy is healthy, he is one of the scariest American milers you could face from the Class of 2023. With a 4:01 mile PR, Echohawk is very much someone who could join the sub-four minute as an underclassman, maybe even as soon as this year.

Despite hitting a setback with illness during his senior year of high school, the current rookie Duck still pulled off a legendary triple (800/1600/3200) at the 2023 Utah State Championships, winning gold in all three events. And when he reached the latter stages of the postseason, Echohawk was still running his best times ever, including that 4:01 mile PR while staying competitive in major fields.

Based on that, you could argue that Echohawk has one of the higher ceilings of any American first-year distance star in the NCAA.

It's hard to put into words just how lethal every single freshman in this group is. And when you remember that they originally had 1:47 (800) man Dan Watcke, there may have been an argument for this team to be listed at TSR #1!

As far as American distance recruiting classes go, this is an all-time group. It may even be the very best, although that would require much more extensive digging and research. Even so, despite what happened this past fall, no team in the NCAA has a future that is quite as bright as Oregon's.

3. Oregon Ducks

With two iconic coaches, Jerry Schumacher and Shalane Flanagan, now at the helm for the Oregon Ducks, it's easy to see why every top recruit is seemingly flocking to Eugene.

In her inaugural year leading the women's team, Coach Shalane Flanagan excelled as her Ducks dominated the middle distance events. Such success naturally raises expectations, particularly for a school with the prestigious reputation of Oregon.

With heightened expectations, the need for top-level talent has also increased. Luckily, for the past few years, the Ducks have been assembling a roster packed with young talent -- and this year may be their best assembly yet.

Oregon's 2023-2024 freshman class is full of superstars, making it particularly difficult to pick someone to begin our discussion. So let's start by keeping things close to home with Oregon native, Kate Peters.

When it comes to elite talent, there aren't many better than her.

The Duck rookie, who was originally committed to Oklahoma State, has the perfect blend of speed and strength, something that is going to be extremely valuable at a program like Oregon. Not to mention, she has excelled on the grass and the oval at the prep level.

The former Lake Oswego high schooler possesses arguably one of the most breathtaking resumes in the country with times of 4:17 (1500), 9:25 (3k), 9:51 (two-mile), and 16:40 (5k XC). Her blistering mark in the two-mile ranks her among the best high schoolers ever over that distance.

But what truly sets Peters apart is her ability to consistently deliver at the championship level. During her time at Lake Oswego, Peters was a two-time Oregon state champion, the winner of

the NSAF Outdoor National Championship two-mile title and a top-10 finisher at both the Eastbay XC National Championships and the NXN Championships (in separate seasons).

That remarkable set of accolades not only affirms Peters ability to race at the highest level, but it also suggests that she can be a threat at the collegiate level across all three seasons.

Transitioning from one megastar to another, we now introduce you to Lily Cridge.

The Indiana native is a formidable competitor on the grass, boasting an astounding 16:22 (5k) personal best. That mark not only ranked Cridge as the second-best 5k cross country talent nationwide in 2021, but it also secured her a runner-up position at the 2021 Garmin RunningLane XC National Championships behind Natalie Cook -- a familiar name in the high school distance running record books.

While cross country is likely where Cridge will make the most significant impact, it's essential to note that she is no slouch on the track, either.

As a current freshman, she holds impressive marks of 4:54 over 1600 meters and 10:12 for the two-mile. While these times may not precisely match up with Peters, it's evident that Cridge possesses all of the tools and talent to excel over longer distances, whether that be on the grass or the oval.

One significant similarity they do share, however, is their ability to shine when the lights are brightest. Cridge has also proven to be highly competitive in high-pressure settings. She has not just raced against, but she has also beaten, some of the top high school girls that the nation has to offer.

At their peak, the Peters-Cridge duo is formidable, and that may be putting it lightly. Granted, our only minor concern lies in their availability as neither rookie has raced in 2023 (according to MileSplit). However, once they are fit and ready to compete, we have no doubt that they will make an immediate impact, particularly in enhancing the scoring potency of the Ducks cross country lineup which will seemingly be heavy with 1500-meter runners.

Speaking of making an instant impact, Ohio native Katie Clute has done just that.

The former prep star arrived in Eugene in 2023 showcasing terrific versatility with exceptionally strong PRs on the track: 4:46 (mile), 9:28 (3k) and 10:09 (3200).

With a resume as strong as that, it wasn't too surprising to see Clute integrate immediately into the Ducks' scoring contingent. Her debut season was highlighted by 24th place finishes at both the West regional meet and the PAC-12 XC Championships. She also posted a quietly great 111th place finish at the NCAA XC Championships.

Such scoring effectiveness from a true freshman is seriously impressive, and her performance in Charlottesville ultimately led to the Ducks securing a top-10 team finish. If she can continue to make the improvements that we observed from her this past fall, then there should be little reason to doubt her ability to earn multiple All-American finishes over the course of her collegiate career.

Next, we turn our attention to Allura Markow who joins Oregon after a successful high school career in California. She will likely focus on the middle distances as she enters the class with the fastest 800-meter and mile PRs, clocking impressive marks of 2:10 and 4:44, respectively.

Much of Markow's success will likely come from the track, but her 17:43 (5k XC) and 34th place finish at the 2022 Champs Sports XC Championships suggest that she has the aerobic capacity to go the distance. Given some time to develop, maybe by the time that she's an upperclassman, and we could see Markow turn from a dual threat to a triple threat.

Having a 4:44 (1600) runner join a program that is now the best in the NCAA for milers almost feels like a match made in heaven. But maybe more importantly, in a freshman class that is seemingly long distance-heavy, the Ducks were able to add some event diversity with Markow. Rounding out this talented group is in-state star, Ella Thorsett. The former Summit High School ace has a very respectable list of PRs, highlighted by times of 9:42 (3k) and a 17:27 (5k XC). While it's likely that we won't see her in action initially, the Oregon native provides some fantastic depth for the Ducks as she is able to offer her service no matter the surface.

On many other top-tier rookie classes, Thorsett would be a focal star. And just because she hasn't quite matched the resumes of Peters or Cridge (yet) doesn't mean that she won't provide great value over the long-term.

What this class lacks in numbers, it more than makes up for in talent. Coach Shalane Flanagan has assembled an exceptionally gifted group of young women who boast terrific versatility and, more importantly, know exactly how to handle races at the championship.

Clute's positive influence on the team as recently as this past fall suggests that the other rookie Ducks, given their strong resumes, will likely follow suit.

Simply put, the future looks extremely bright for the women of Oregon.