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NCAA top scorer focused on tournament run

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

When opposing men's basketball teams play Oakland University's Golden Grizzlies, attention often is focused on junior guard Mike Helms, and with good reason.

With 702 points in 26 games, Helms is one of the most productive offensive players in Division I basketball. Since late January, he's been at or near the top of the national scoring leaders. Currently, Helms is third nationally with a 27 points-per-game average.

Helms' high scoring game this year came Dec. 27 when he had 43 against Texas Southern in the Islander Classic Tournament in Corpus Christi. He's also scored 30 or more points 13 times this year. For his outstanding play, Helms has earned three Mid-Continent Conference Player of the Week honors.

Besides getting the attention of opposing teams and the conference, Helms' productivity hasn't gone unnoticed by local and national media, including the Detroit Free Press, Oakland Press, several local TV stations and USA Today. There's no doubt Helms will garner more media coverage should he end the season atop the national point leaders. But leading the nation in scoring is not the driving force behind Helms' play.

"I always knew I could score," Helms said. "I knew I had it in me, but I never thought I'd be recognized nationally for it. But right now our focus is on getting to the (NCAA) Tournament. It's priority No. 1, 2, 3 and 4. Being the top scorer would be a nice individual accolade. But the biggest thing is to get to the tournament. Then we'll get all the media attention we need."

OU coach Greg Kampe said his own goal is to have his team peak in late February heading into the march Mid-Con Tournament and the possibility of earning a spot in the NCAA Tournament. He also knows Helms plays a major role in his team's success.

"Helms can carry a team through a season. He's the best offensive player I've ever had," Kampe said. "He's scored a lot of points in many different ways: three-point shots, free throws, a put back on an offensive rebound, on an alley-oop or a dunk. He's very efficient and hard to guard. He also has a flair for making spectacular plays. He can block shots and make dunks that rock the place."

Helms was Oakland's leading scorer last year with 18.4 points per game while earning All Mid-Continent Conference honors. But Kampe said Helms only fully developed into an offensive machine over the last off-season.

"In his sophomore year, he started to wear down late in the season. After the season ended, he decided to eat properly, go to the weight room and become stronger. It's changed him dramatically," Kampe said. "His strengths now are his athleticism, jumping ability and mental makeup. He's a complete offensive player who believes he can score at any time."

"Last year, we had four senior starters and three of them were career 1,000-point scorers. Even so, Helms led the team in scoring. This year, we spread it around more – the difference is that we have a lot of young players, and Helms has stepped up and become a leader by example."

Helms said he's more comfortable in his role on the team this year, and his teammates have helped him become a better player.

"I was paying my dues in my first two years on the team," he said. "Last year's team belonged to the seniors. I just tried to fit into that system. Now I'm in a position where I'm doing everything I can to help my team win games. If other teams double cover me, I make sure my teammates get their shots. Once our opponents find out my teammates can play, it opens things up for me."

Much of the media attention Helms is getting stems from the fact that he's not in the Big Ten or playing with a bigger program like Michigan or Michigan State. But both Helms and Kampe acknowledge that Oakland's environment allowed for the development of his playing skills.

"I was recruited by San Diego State, Kent State and Western Michigan," said Helms, a communication major and graduate of

Detroit King high school. "But what brought me to Oakland was coach Kampe. Other schools sent assistant coaches to talk to me. But Kampe himself contacted me and said I could play right away in his program. I developed because I was allowed to play. If it weren't for OU, I wouldn't be one of the leading scorers. And the media attention has been good for Oakland. Everybody wants to know who Helms is, but they may not know about Oakland. They need to know about us because we're a Division I program with Division I players."

"He's developed into the type of player he is because he had a chance at Oakland," Kampe said. "He wouldn't have had the playing time in another program like Michigan or Michigan State. This season he's reached the point where he could play at that or any level."

At six feet tall, Helms' chances at making the NBA after graduation are limited. But he'll more than likely attract some interest, Kampe said.

"Next year, we suspect he'll get some attention from NBA teams," Kampe said. "It's still a game where putting the ball in the basket is a premium. The fact that he can do that so well means he's going to get an opportunity."

At the moment, professional play is far from Helms' mind.

"It's everybody's dream to move on past the collegiate level. But I can't let that be the focus or the main point of my season," Helms said. "Right now, it's all about playing OU basketball, winning games and getting to the tournament."

Oakland (16-10, 9-4 Mid-Con) concludes its season with a home game against Southern Utah March 1. The **Mid-Con Tournament** is March 8-11 at Kemper Arena in Kansas City, Mo. The **NCAA Tournament** begins March 18, with the Final Four to be played at the Superdome in New Orleans. The championship game is April 7.

Fans can hear webcasts of Golden Grizzlies games, as called by announcer Jon Bloom, from the **OU Athletics** Web site. A RealPlayer plug-in, which can be downloaded for free, is required to listen to the streamed audio. For rosters, schedules, statistics and detailed game notes, visit the **men's basketball** pages on the **OU Athletics** Web site.

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