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## Lacrosse team set for competitive season

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

Oakland University's **men's lacrosse club** earned much respect last season from opponents near and far. The team finished 15-3 with a No. 10 ranking after competing for a national title for the first time at the United States Lacrosse Intercollegiate Associates National Championships in St. Louis, Mo. Tournament wins over top contenders Arizona and Colorado also attracted the interest of coaches from other nationally ranked teams, many of whom inquired about adding OU to their 2004 schedules.

Now Oakland is preparing for its 10<sup>th</sup> and toughest season, which opens Friday, Feb. 20, in Tucson, Ariz., against the University of Arizona. Third-year coach Dwayne Hicks welcomes the challenge of facing more competitive opponents, even though his team has yet to hold an outdoor practice.

"My e-mail box was filled this summer with messages from other teams who wanted to play us," Hicks said. "Arizona is ranked 15<sup>th</sup> in the country, and they've already played a couple of games. I think it will be a tough game, but I don't expect us to be pushovers. It's going to be an exciting year."

On that same Arizona trip, Oakland will face Texas Tech on Saturday, Feb. 21, in Tucson and Arizona State on Sunday, Feb. 22, in Phoenix. The opening series of games will be a good indicator of how competitive Oakland will be this year.

"A lot of the top teams will meet that weekend in Arizona for a rumble in the desert," Hicks said. "Our opponents have an advantage in that they've been practicing outside for the last two months, so they're used to playing on a full field. But I believe we'll be up for the challenge."

Since Oakland began its regular practices in January at the mini dome facility alongside the Pontiac Silverdome, Hicks has been working on developing a stronger defense to take some pressure off his attackers.

"We have 22 players on our roster as opposed to 15 last year. We're working on getting our new recruits up to speed," he said. "Our goals-against average last year was 12, and offensively we averaged 17, which was second-best in the country. This year we want to concentrate on our defense and let the offense continue to do what they do best. We want to solidify our midfield defense. If we can stop our opponents there, I don't think we'll have problems winning games."

Among Oakland's biggest impact players are senior midfielder Jeff Serra and junior midfielder Matt Kosek.

"Serra is known in the league as a force to reckon with," Hicks said. "He sets the pace for the game and you have to keep up with him. He's also 6-foot-2, 210 pounds and a very physical player. An agile player like him who has that kind of physical presence is a very strong asset. He will cause havoc for other teams.

"Kosek is one of the best athletes and stickhandlers in the league. He's also a creator on offense. This will be his year to put people on notice that he's among the top midfielders."

Defensively, OU is led by junior goaltender Chris Wood and senior defenseman Nick Panza.

"I think our improved defense will help Wood out a lot this year," Hicks said. "Other coaches at the tournament were very impressed with his goaltending, and we're looking for big things from him. Panza plays high-quality defense and has great quickness. We'll look to him to cover our opponents' best attackman."

Junior attackman Billy Binge was named second-team All-American and Central Collegiate Lacrosse Association

Offensive Player of the Year in 2003. He's expected to be near the top of the league's scorers once again.

"Binge is one of the very best players in the country," Hicks said. "He's fast and a good ball handler. He understands the game thoroughly. I believe he'll be up for player of the year once again. He's a player who could have gone anywhere in the country to play lacrosse, but fortunately for us, he chose to remain in the state and go to Oakland.

Other tough opponents on the schedule include Indiana, Purdue, Michigan State and Michigan, the only team to defeat Oakland last season.

"Michigan beat us three times last year," Hicks said. "They are currently ranked No. 4, and our rivalry is one of the biggest in the country. Everyone will be watching that game. Already there has been a lot of talk on Internet discussion boards about our game with them [on Saturday, March 20, in Ann Arbor]. It's likely to be our biggest game of the year.

"All we have to do is play up to our ability and see how far we will go."

Oakland's first home game is Sunday, March 7, at 1 p.m. at Pontiac Notre Dame Prep High School. For a complete schedule, team roster, game reports, recruiting information and more, visit the [OU Men's Lacrosse](#) Web site.

#### **SUMMARY**

Oakland University's men's lacrosse club finished last season with a 15-3 record and a No. 10 ranking after competing for a national title for the first time at the United States Lacrosse Intercollegiate Associates National Championships. Now Oakland is preparing for its 10th and toughest season, which opens Friday, Feb. 20, in Tucson, Ariz., against the University of Arizona.

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