

Sports

HIGH SCHOOL BASEBALL & SOFTBALL

Key storylines at bat



Dallas' Kaelynn Simmons is one of 10 returning players who saw action in last season's title game. ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Battles for the postseason are already underway

Pete Martini and Gary Horowitz
Salem Statesman Journal
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With spring break now behind them, high school softball and baseball teams are beginning their conference seasons across the Mid-Valley, as everybody battles for the postseason.

For softball players, the ultimate goal is to reach the state championship games June 1 and 2 at Oregon State. For baseball, the title games are at Volcanoes Stadium, also on June 1 and 2.

Here are five storylines to watch for this softball and baseball season:

Dallas softball loaded with experience

Last season, the Dallas softball team made a memorable run all the way to the OSAA Class 5A state championship game, falling just short of winning a title, losing 12-7 to Marist.

This season, the Dragons are loaded with experience, and they look to be in good position for another deep playoff run, possibly even a championship.

"I know that a lot of the girls were disappointed about the outcome of the (loss to Marist) because we expected so much out of ourselves," Dallas senior catcher Lauren Wallace said. "But it's putting a fire underneath us to try to get back there. And that's the main goal this season, to get back to that position again, but possibly win it."

Dallas returns 10 of 13 players who saw action in last season's title game, including junior pitcher Kaelynn Simmons.

"She is throwing a lot harder this year, and her pitches have a lot more movement," Wallace said of Simmons. "I can just tell that she's matured a lot from last year."

Dallas is off to a fast start, with a 12-0 overall record and No. 4 OSAA ranking. The Dragons have outscored opponents 120-15.

"We talk a lot about short-term goals, and we don't look ahead too far," Dallas coach Brandi Jackson said. "We talk about being consistent, communication and having each other's backs. We want to play our game every game, no matter who is across the field."

Sprague's Spencer Plant wants to leave on top

Spencer Plant has excelled for Sprague throughout his career, both on the football field and the baseball diamond.

This spring, Plant is wearing the Olympians' uniform for the final time as a senior pitcher and short-stop for the baseball team, and he would like nothing better than to win a Greater Valley Conference championship on his way out of high school.

"We're definitely trying to get a league title this year," Plant said. "We've got a great group of guys here, and we're just trying to play good Sprague baseball and continuing the brand of pitching and good defense that we always do. And I think we've got some bats this year to add to that as well."

As a quarterback, Plant was the GVC co-offensive player of the year in the fall, when the Olys finished 9-2 overall and advanced to the second round of the OSAA Class 6A state playoffs. He missed Sprague's second-round loss to Jesuit after suffering a concussion in the opening round.

But he's feeling good now, and Sprague's baseball team is 7-3 overall, including 3-0 in the GVC.

"We really need to focus on playing together as a team and minimizing errors," said Plant, who plans to go on a mission for his church during the next two years, then re-open his recruiting to play football at the college level. "Something that I don't think we did super well (last year) is getting started early. We got off to a slow start in that (playoff loss) against Lake Oswego last year. Getting the bats going early is something that we're really focusing on."

Regis baseball is replacing a legend

First-year coach Kyle Baker has big shoes to fill.

Former coach Don Heuberger, who led Regis to two state championships and 27 consecutive state playoff appearances, retired in June after 35 seasons at the helm.

Baker played against Heuberger's teams during his high school days at Santiam Christian and coached against him as an assistant at his high school alma mater

and as head coach at East Linn Christian.

"I've always known about the Regis program and seen the success they had," Baker said. "They presented me with the opportunity to take over that program, and it was just a great opportunity for me and my coaching career, but then also to step into having resources like Don and a field and a facility that he's worked so hard to have there."

"I'm just trying to do it justice and keep it up and hopefully continue where he left off."

Senior pitchers/infielders Nate Joyce and Cole Olheiser are the only starters back from last year's team that finished 18-2 and lost in the 2A/1A semifinals. Senior Brandon Piette, a standout catcher/pitcher in 2017, elected to participate in track and field this season.

In addition to Joyce and Olheiser, Baker said sophomore catcher/lead-off hitter Joe Alley has been a bright spot thus far.

The Rams have started 4-4-1 overall and 0-2 in the Special District 2.

Baker was an assistant coach at Santiam Christian for seven years and head coach the past six seasons at East Linn Christian.

"I wouldn't say I'm anywhere near the Don Heuberger status, but I've got a fair share of varsity coaching experience, and I've had great mentors," Baker said.

With just two seniors on the roster, there figure to be some growing pains for the Rams.

"I expect to compete every day. What I want from the boys is to give me 110 percent effort 100 percent of the time," Baker said. "They've done pretty well, working hard and getting better every day."

Maygen McGrath leads youthful Saxons

Maygen McGrath has had a stellar career with the South Salem softball team, and the senior has a bright future ahead of her at the University of Montana.

But before she embarks on her college career, McGrath is looking forward to taking on a strong leadership role with the Saxons this spring.

South Salem is young, with five freshmen and five sophomores on

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Lauren Wallace
senior catcher for the Dallas softball team

its roster, and as a four-year varsity player, McGrath is eager to help them improve throughout the season.

"We're still adjusting; there's a lot of adjustment compared to last year," McGrath said. "We're a very young team, and we have a lot of new players that aren't familiar with playing at the varsity level. It's all about getting that playing time together so we can build as a team."

McGrath is an infielder and pitcher for the Saxons, but she does not expect to pitch at Montana.

"I'm really excited," McGrath said about playing at Montana. "It's going to be a whole new culture, a whole new everything. I'm really looking forward to being around players with so much more experience than I do and are already at that level."

During her freshman season in 2015, South Salem made it to the OSAA Class 6A state quarterfinals, and after missing the playoffs in 2016, the Saxons won their play-in game last season to make it to the state playoffs, where they lost in the first round to Westview, the state runner-up.

South Salem started the season 4-6 overall and 1-0 in the GVC.

"I feel like last year it was a lot of stress, and I feel like this year as a senior, I just want to have fun and make sure everyone else is having fun on the team," McGrath said.