



Ronald Bond/Observer file photos

Imbler graduate Aspen Birkmaier, left, and Cove graduate Maggie Ledbetter, right, are shown during the OSAA state track and field championships in May. The two state champions are among 15 additions to the Eastern Oregon University women's track and field team.

Juniors one win from a title

Observer staff

The La Grande Juniors All-Star team is one win away from a state title. Cole Jorgensen and Devin Bell combined to toss a two-hit shutout and strike out nine batters, and La Grande posted its most dominant win to date in the 2018 Oregon Juniors state tournament, blasting Crook County, 12-0, in five innings Monday night to reach today's state championship.

Jorgensen and Levi Earp both scored three runs in the victory, while Logan Williams added three RBIs. Noah McIlmoil and Owen Rinker both added two RBIs.

La Grande took the lead for good with three runs in the second inning, added four more in the third, then polished it off with a five-run fourth inning for the double-digit lead.

Jorgensen struck out four batters in two innings of work, and Bell fanned five in three innings.

La Grande faces Raleigh Hills at 11 a.m. today in the title match, needing just one win to advance to the West Regional Tournament, which take place July 28-August 4 in San Jose, California. Raleigh Hills needs to beat La Grande twice to win the double-elimination state tournament.

BRIEFLY

Legends host tourney

The American Legion's La Grande Legacy Ford Legends are hosting a three-day wood bat tournament Thursday through Saturday at Pioneer Park. La Grande plays Pendleton at 3 p.m. Friday and Baker at 8 p.m. Friday, then Hermiston at 11 a.m. Saturday. The championship game is 4 p.m. Saturday.

Local champs among signees

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

A pair of local state track and field champions will be taking advantage of the opportunity to continue their athletic careers in their own backyard.

Cove's Maggie Ledbetter and Imbler's Aspen Birkmaier, both of whom won state titles in 2017 and 2018, are among 15 athletes signed to the Eastern Oregon University women's track and field team, the school announced last week.

Ledbetter was a two-time Class 1A state champion in the discus for the Leopards. She took her game to another level this spring when she added shot put to her repertoire — an event she first tried last summer — and won state in that discipline, as well. In two months, she added more than 10 feet to her distance in the shot put, finishing with a mark of 37 feet, 1/2 inch at the state track and field meet in May.

EOU Head Coach Ben Welch said the team was already looking at Ledbetter, but they really took notice when she raised her stock with the additional event.

"All of a sudden she is a dual-threat thrower," Welch said. "Another thing is she got a lot more consistent in the discus this year under Levi Wiseman's tutelage."

And although she has won state in discus twice, throwing 110-foot-1 as a junior and 130-foot-5 as a senior — a mark that was 17th best in the state in 2018, regardless of classification — the coach believes shot put could be Ledbetter's best event.

"Her potential in the shot is maybe greater than it is in the discus. We're going to find out," Welch said.

Ledbetter said she turned down a couple of other schools she was looking at in both Oregon and Montana to pick EOU. She said both of her parents and her aunt are EOU alums, and she knows Eastern's throwing coach, Dirk Bortz, from her days in Elgin prior to transferring to Cove.

"I feel like I fit into the program," she said. "I know there is good competition within my team, which I haven't had before. I'm excited for that too."

Ledbetter said she's also excited for the opportunity, should it arise, to try the hammer throw, which is not a competitive event at the high school level in Oregon.

"I've always wanted to throw hammer since I started track. I would love to try it," she said.

For Birkmaier, who is a two-time 2A state champion in the pole vault, it was the connection with Eastern's vaulting coach, Bob Heitstuman, that ultimately brought her to EOU.

"The biggest pull to go to Eastern was Coach Bob and to continue working with him," she said. "Not many people get the opportunity to have the same coach in high school and in college."

Heitstuman coached Birkmaier in the Raising the Bar vaulting program. During that time, she improved by leaps and bounds. Birkmaier saw her personal record jump from 7 feet to 10 feet during her junior year, and upped her best mark to 11

feet in 2018. That height registered as the 17th best in the state, and 14 of the 16 marks above her were from 5A or 6A vaulters.

Welch believes Birkmaier has the potential to be a consistent 12-foot vaulter.

"I think with some more time in the weight room and the speed dynamic we can do, she should be able to jump a fair amount higher," Welch said. "How much we don't know."

It is worth noting that Birkmaier's high school best is close to that of Talitha Fagen, EOU's all-time record holder in both the indoor and outdoor women's pole vault. Fagen twice cleared 11-feet-3 during her prep career in Fruitland, Idaho.

"I think 12 feet isn't out of the question, but I don't really have a specific number in my head," Birkmaier said. "I just want to keep improving."

Ledbetter and Birkmaier weren't the only Oregon state champions signed by Welch.

EOU also inked Cascade graduate Kalulusno Ngaida, who this spring was the 4A champion in the high jump at 5-feet-6 and was runner-up in the triple jump at 37-feet-1/2.

But her personal best in both events is higher at 5-feet-7 in the high jump and 39-feet-0 indoors and 38-feet-8 outdoors in the triple jump. Both of those triple jump marks are already further than the program record at EOU, and her

5-feet-7 matches the outdoor high jump record and is 1/4-inch off the indoor record.

The Mountaineers signed a handful of additional Oregon state placers, including Hermiston's Stephanie Mears, who placed fourth in Class 5A in both shot put (38-feet-8) and discus (124-feet-1) as a senior. She also has a personal best of 42-feet-6 in shot put, which would rank fifth all-time at EOU.

Also signing with EOU is Grant Union's Jozie Rude, who was a state placer in shot put, discus, javelin and pole vault as a junior, but an injury kept her from returning to state last year. She has PRs of 122-feet-2 in javelin, 115-feet-5 in discus and 38-feet-8 in shot put, which would likely be her primary events.

"What will be interesting to see is how fast (her recovery) goes and how she can do," Welch said.

Also joining from Oregon are YaYa Chavarria from Hood River, who placed eighth at the 5A state meet in the 100 (12.93); Mikayla Cordle of Jefferson, who placed third in 2017 in the 3A long jump (16-feet-7-3/4); and La Pine's Sydney Bright, who has PRs of 13.14 in the 100 and 28.08 in the 200.

Reno, Nevada's Megan Bolton highlight the out-of-state signees as a major threat in the 400 and 600. Her 400 time of 57.23 would rate fourth all-time at EOU,

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