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Head Coach Doug Schow, above, gives direction to his team during practice Monday. Sam Tsiatsos, below, fields a ground ball.

Devin Bell delivers a pitch during a drill at Monday's practice. The La Grande Junior All-Stars being play at the West Regional Tournament in San Jose Sunday.

Cesar Rodriguez, above, makes a throw to first base at practice. Noah McIlmoil, below, swings at a ball in the batting cages.

Eyeing another deep run

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

Once-in-a-lifetime opportunities are usually just that — they only happen once.

But for Head Coach Doug Schow and nine of the 14 players on the La Grande Juniors All-Star team, they're getting to enjoy one for the second year in a row.

The all-star team won the state title last week in Beaverton and is in the final preparations for the Juniors West Regional tournament, which begins Saturday in San Jose, California. The team will be contending with 10 other teams for a berth to the Junior World Series in Taylor, Michigan.

Schow and the nine players were part of last season's run to the Little League Northwest Regional tournament that finished one win shy of advancing to the Little League World Series. A year later, they're teamed up with a group of five older athletes who are experiencing their first deep run.

For the players who are getting a first opportunity at regionals, it's

somewhat redemptive after taking second place in state tournaments when they were younger.

"The five who haven't gone yet are all excited," said infielder Devin Bell, who is among those going to the regional tournament for the first time. "We were always getting second place (in Little League), so to finally get first in state and head off to California is really, really exciting."

Catcher Cole Jorgensen, another player making his first regional trip, expressed a similar sentiment, saying all the previous times coming up short were an additional driving force at this year's state tourney.

"I've been waiting for a long time to go to the next tournament after state," Jorgensen said.

"We took second two years in a row (in Little League). (At this year's) state championship game I was looking for revenge. I was thinking, 'We need to go out here and win this game. I can't go another year getting second.'"

This year's tournament will be a

stiffer challenge. Unlike last year's Little League Northwest Regional tournament, when La Grande was up against just five other teams, the Juniors team will be in a field nearly twice as large, all battling for the one spot to Michigan for the Aug. 12-19 World Series.

In fact, the Junior tournament is one Oregon representatives have not historically done well in. Since 1981, the first year the West Region existed, no Oregon team has earned a regional title. Southern California leads the way with a total of 16 titles, and Hawaii has earned 14.

A bit more parity has taken place in the last decade. Southern California still leads in that time with four titles, and both Hawaii and Arizona have three.

But Schow believes his team will be able to contend as the new kids on the block.

"We're right in there with those teams," he said.

La Grande's first game at regionals will be against one of those recent mainstays, facing Arizona at 9 a.m. Sunday.

"We're going to come out right off the bat against Arizona guns blazing. At this level I don't think you can look past anybody," Schow said.

Last year's team hung its hat on pitching, and it'll be a similar story this year.

"Last year we had five guys who threw hard, threw strikes and threw multiple pitches," he said. "This year we've got the same deal. We got five or six who can throw hard."

Schow said it's an element of the game the players have been working on for years, adding, "If you don't have pitching, you're kind of hung out to dry."

Bell said part of what makes the pitching so solid is the pitchers have confidence in the players around them.

"The pitcher knows he has a great defense behind him, so he shouldn't have to worry if we're going to drop a fly ball or miss a ground ball," he said.

Another key off-field element that helped La Grande reach regionals last year is back — community

support.

Schow said Friday the team has been able to raise close to \$30,000 to help the families with hotels and travel in just a week of fundraising, one year after individuals and businesses pitched in \$40,000 to support the team's trip to the 2017 regionals in San Bernardino.

"It's really uplifting to know the community cares that much to give (so) much last year and then this much already (again this year)," said Noah McIlmoil, who is one of the players making a return trip. "It's amazing how much the community supports us."

Schow expressed his gratitude for the way the community stepped up again, and on such short notice.

"It's pretty fantastic that our town and all the businesses, the parents and the grandparents, these kids' teachers (and) just the community in general (show their support)," he said. "It's amazing that they come together, and they see what this group of kids is doing."

The tournament runs through Aug. 4.

Riders post high scores during first two nights in Joseph

By Katy Nesbitt
For The Observer

JOSEPH — The 73rd Chief Joseph Days Rodeo got off to a fast start Wednesday night with cowboys getting the best of the bucking horses and bulls.

In bareback riding, Kevin Lusk of Bonney Lake, Washington, is the top contender after two nights with a 78.5-point ride topping Cauy Pool of Long Creek, who had a 77-point ride. Logan Patterson of Kim, Colorado, is in third with 69 points and Kirk St. Claire of Blodgett is in fourth with 67 points.

Saddle bronc riding was dominated by two of the Wright brothers, a family of seven rodeo cowboys from Utah. Alex Wright of Milford, Utah, rode Wednesday and was still in the lead after the second night with his 84-point

ride. Jake Wright of Milford rode for 81 points, Shane Proctor of Grand Coulee, Washington, is in third with 77 and as of Thursday night there was a three-way tie for fourth place — Joey Sonnier III of New Iberia, Louisiana, Johnny Espeland of Tygh Valley and Stetson Wright of Milford all completed 76-point rides.

Wednesday night's bull riding competition was the fiercest in recent years. After earning a qualified ride in saddle bronc, Proctor returned to the bucking chutes to tie Chase Dougherty of Canby with 84.5-point rides. Jordan Wacey Spears of Redding, California, is just behind the leaders with his 83.5-point ride, and Stetson Wright is in third with 78.5 points. Caleb McMillan of Soap Lake, Washington, was the only qualifier Thursday

night with a 73-point ride.

After two rodeo performances the average leaders in tie down roping are Ty Harris of San Angelo, Texas, in first with an aggregate of 18.8 seconds, Jordan Ketscher of Squaw Valley, California, in second at 21.3 and Jake Pratt of Ellensburg, Washington, is in third at 21.8.

Levi Rudd of Chelsea, Oklahoma, leads steer wrestling by a large margin after two nights with a combined time of 10.1 seconds. La Grande's John Green is in second with a combined time of 19.3 and J.J. Rosenberg of Ione is in third with 22.4.

Dan Williams Jr. of Standish, California, and Brushton Minton, Oakdale, California, have a solid lead in team roping after two days with a combined time

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Alex Wright is the leader in saddle bronc riding through two nights of action at the 73rd Chief Joseph Days Rodeo.



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