

Mountaineers aim to raise the bar in 2019

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

With the prospect of home meets on a brand new track, the Eastern Oregon University track and field team is preparing for what may well be a stellar season.

In March, EOU will host its first track meet in La Grande since 2012 when it christens the new track on campus to start the outdoor season, ending a lengthy run of having its "home" meets in Hermiston.

"We're looking forward to that," Head Coach Ben Welch said. "It's so much nicer to be here. As wonderful as the place is and as great a host as Hermiston is, there's nothing quite the same as being at home... Not having to travel for a home meet — I'm really looking forward to that."

In addition to the March 16 meet, the new Eastern track will also be the site of the Cascade Collegiate Conference multi-event championships in April.

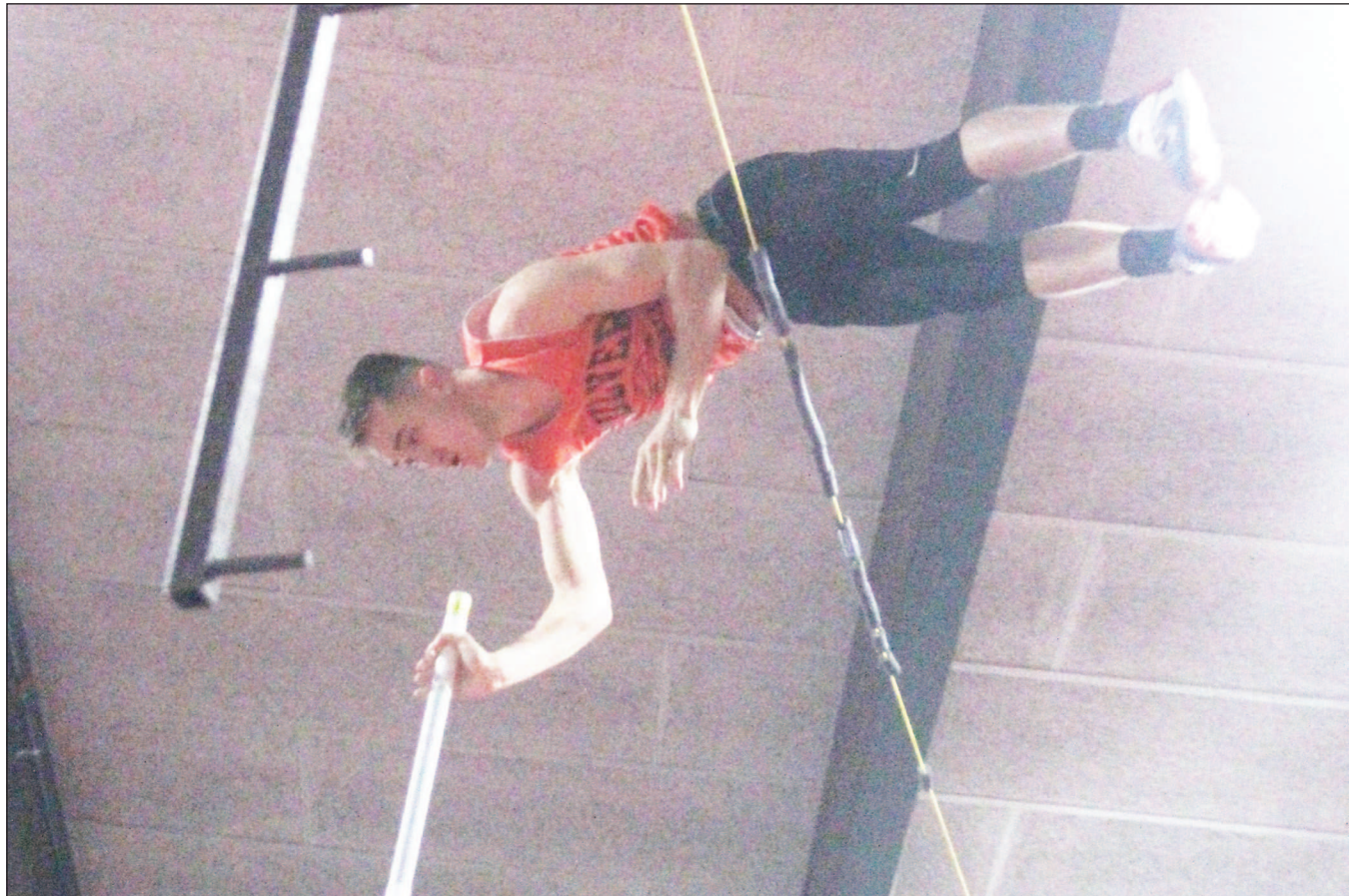
But before the pomp and circumstance of the home meets, the Mountaineers begin the indoor season Saturday in Nampa, Idaho, at the Bronco Invitational.

The men's team has several strong areas and what Welch called a talented group of newcomers, but he said the highlight of the team this spring will be the pole vaulters — a band of five who are "without a shadow of a doubt" — the best vaulting team Eastern has ever had.

"We've had some very good vaulters in the past, but never more than two at a time that were anywhere near what these guys are," the coach said.

That's high praise considering former national champion Robbie Haynie is among those past good vaulters. Welch noted, though, that Lucas Hidalgo, who has been a national qualifier in both the indoor and outdoor seasons, now boasts only the third best personal record of the five. Among the athletes Welch brought in are Corey Sledge and Justin Gould, both of whom have higher marks. Sledge, in fact, has a PR of 16 feet, 4-3/4 inches, and four of the five have cleared at least 15 feet, according to their coach.

"That could be a strong



Ronald Bond/The Observer

Eastern Oregon pole vaulter Corey Sledge, shown clearing 16 feet at practice Thursday, is among the newcomers who could have an impact on the men's track and field team this season. Eastern begins the indoor season Saturday.

group and a big highlight for us in the indoor season," Welch said.

While it may be the deepest individual event, pole vaulting isn't EOU's only strong suit. EOU has a stout — albeit not as deep — throwing team, highlighted by Dawson Kennon, who reached nationals in the javelin as a freshman, and last year's CCC shot put champion Chase Van Wyck.

On the track, the Mountaineers will be missing some key components from last year's national champion distance medley relay team due to redshirts. That may also hurt EOU's depth in some of the events, but sprinter Devin Lewis-Allen believes the newcomers will step up, and some of the school records in various events could be in trouble.

"We have a lot of new freshmen and new groups that came in, especially in our 400 pool. We have more depth than we have had in the past," he said. "We are looking at a very good relay team that I think could break every school record in the (relay) sprints. (There are) quite a few other records on the men's distance side that are in danger."

He also expressed excitement about the new track and the opportunity to host a



Ronald Bond/The Observer

Makayla Akers is a reigning all-American in the javelin for the EOU women's team.

meet. He said the team has been looking at some of the records that were set on the old surface, and he believes they're in reach too.

"I think that's really going to motivate people to break those records and work hard," he said.

The women's team is also benefiting from an infusion of new talent. Among the newcomers is freshman Kalulusno Ngaida, who could immediately make waves both in the program and at

the national level. According to Welch, her personal bests from high school in the long and triple jump are already national qualifying marks. Her top triple jump mark also exceeds the program record, and she has jumped a height in the high jump that matches the outdoor record and is only 1/4-inch below the indoor mark.

"She should be an impact performer at the national scene right off the bat," Welch said.

Alongside the new talent, the Mounties are welcoming back a major component from 2017 in Paige Dodd, as the 2017 CCC heptathlon champion redshirted in 2018.

Missing the entire season, though, has given Dodd additional motivation.

"I'm definitely anxious to get back to competing," she said. "A little nervous since it's been so long since I've competed in a meet, but I put in a lot of work last year. I'm a lot fitter and a lot more

experienced in events I was new at."

The coach called the sprint and jumping groups the strongest of the women's team, and he also believes the relays should be strong. EOU brings back three of the four legs from its distance medley relay, and Welch said the 4-by-400 relay, which includes the sister duo Elizabeth and Michelle Herbes, will be tough.

Elizabeth Herbes, a national qualifier a year ago, agreed with Welch on the strength of the sprints team.

"I think we've got the biggest, fastest sprint group we've had in a while," she said.

The former Union standout added that the excitement for the new track facility extends beyond the Mountie track and field team.

"I do know one thing being from this area, a lot of people are really excited to have a meet here again," she said. "There are a lot of local people who are ecstatic that we're going to be able to host our own meets."

Among the standouts on the throwing team to watch are sophomore all-American javelin thrower Makayla Akers, senior Karianne Zollman, and freshman and Cove product and state champion Maggie Ledbetter.

Welch said he hopes to get some national qualifiers in the Mountaineers' opening meet of the indoor season Saturday for a positive kickoff to the season. And when the outdoor season gets going, the aim is to be in the mix for the CCC title on both the men's and women's side.

The men's team is the defending CCC champion, but Welch said the women's team — at least early on — is in a little better position to score well at the CCCs.

"The women's team right now, on paper, is stronger than the men just because of the sheer volume," he said. "There are so many of them (and) that makes a difference."

The indoor national championships take place Feb. 28-March 2 in Brookings, South Dakota, while the CCC outdoor championships are May 10-11 in Ashland. The outdoor national championships are May 23-25 in Gulf Shores, Alabama.

Oregon St. tops USC in OT, now 2-0 in Pac-12

By Kyle Odgaard
The Associated Press

Oregon State's leading scorer and rebounder was injured and out for the game, so other players were challenged by the coaching staff to step up.

Mission accomplished.

"We have depth on our team. When one guy goes down, we can make it up in different ways," freshman point guard Antoine Vernon said.

Stephen Thompson Jr. scored a career-high 34 points with five 3-pointers and 10 rebounds as short-handed Oregon State beat Southern California 79-74 in overtime on Thursday night.

Ethan Thompson added 13 points and Gligorije Rakocevic had 10 points for the Beavers (10-4, 2-0 Pac-12).

"What do you say about Stevie? Just stepping up as a senior and willing our team to victory. Everybody else fed

off of him," Oregon State coach Wayne Tinkle said. "We showed a lot of guts and a lot of grit."

Bennie Boatwright had a career-high 37 points with four 3-pointers and eight rebounds and Jonah Mathews added 13 points off the bench for the Trojans (9-7, 2-1).

"Both teams played hard, both played pretty well and they made a big shot.

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Wrestlers fall to NIC

Observer staff

The Eastern Oregon men's wrestling team managed just two victories in a road dual loss to North Idaho College Thursday, 40-9.

Mhar Caballa (125 pounds) kicked things off for EOU with a 7-2 decision over Jacob Garrison. It was the only win for Eastern

until Marco Retano (184) pinned Austin Burrell in the third round. The stretch in between saw six consecutive NIC victories, including two by fall and two by forfeit. EOU dropped three matches by fall on the night.

The Mountaineers are back in action tonight when they host Warner Pacific.

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