

Sledge vaults his way to the top

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

Corey Sledge collected on Saturday what eluded him three months earlier — a national championship.

The Eastern Oregon University sophomore won the national title in the men's pole vault during the final day of the NAIA National Championship meet in Gulf Shores, Alabama. According to the EOU website, it's the first title won by EOU in the men's pole vault in eight years, with the last coming from Robbie Haynie in 2011.

"That's what I've worked for all year," Sledge said. "I fell short of it during indoors, came up with fourth place, so it was nice to have a great day during the outdoor championships and take it."

Sledge, who credited pole vault coach Bob Heitstuman for helping and motivating him, held off Jordan Downs of Bethel for the championship, clearing a final height of 16 feet 8-3/4 inches, which is his personal best.

He said one thing that made a difference in his outdoor win was being able to practice a full eight-step approach on the outdoor track during the spring. He didn't have this opportunity during the indoor season, because EOU's current indoor setup allows for only a six-step approach.

"It's really hard to transi-



Eastern Oregon University's Corey Sledge, shown earlier this season, won the NAIA national title in the men's pole vault Saturday in Gulf Shores, Alabama.

EOU Athletics photo

tion from doing one thing (during practice) all (of the) indoor (season) to moving back to something you haven't practiced," Sledge said, adding he was also able to "fix a few things" in the technical aspect

of the jump. "The extra approach was the biggest factor in how high I jumped and how well I jumped."

EOU head coach Ben Welch agreed that being outdoors made a difference

for the sophomore.

"A lot of it was just being able to get outside and get full approaches," he said. "He came into his own."

But even with the title, Sledge will have plenty of

motivation headed into next year. He missed the height he ultimately wanted to reach this season — 17 feet — which he believes he can get early next season.

"I think it is possible I can

get 17 during indoor. Outdoor I would like to jump 5.35 meters (17 feet 6-1/2)," he said.

Sledge wasn't the only EOU athlete to finish the season strong, as two additional individuals and a relay team grabbed all-American recognition Friday and Saturday to go along with the two all-American nods earned on Thursday.

The highest placing aside from Sledge's championship Friday and Saturday was a fifth-place finish by the women's 4x800 relay team. The squad of Katie Jo Gebhardt, Michelle Herbes, Faith Homer and Megan Boals finished the race in 9:13.82, marking the third time this spring the group broke the program record in the event.

"They ran that thing three times this year and set the record three times. With two freshmen, a sophomore and a senior, that's impressive," Welch said. "They had a lot of poise."

Lane Inwards staged a major rally in the final race of his career to garner an all-American nod, charging from 11th place midway through the final lap of the men's 1,500 to finish in sixth in 3:56.64.

"A wonderful way for an extremely hardworking young man who had brought a lot to the program to end

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Bowen's big hit boosts Tigers back to semis



Ronald Bond/The Observer

La Grande's Kinzy Bowen had what proved to be the game-winning hit with an RBI triple in the bottom of the sixth inning as the Tigers edged Sweet Home Friday, 3-1.

By Ronald Bond
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The La Grande Tigers softball team has a roster full of high-caliber upperclassmen.

But on Friday, it was a freshman who came through with the biggest hit of the season to date for the defending state champions.

Kinzy Bowen hit a two-out RBI triple in the bottom of the sixth inning to drive in Lexee Gomes with the eventual winning run, and the Tigers held off a stiff challenge by Sweet Home for a 3-1 win in the quarterfinals for the 4A state playoffs at Sam Marcum Field in La Grande.

"That was a great game," La Grande head coach Woody Wright said. "It's the kind of game you're looking for going into the semifinals."

Bowen said her previous

at-bats "weren't the best" — she had struck out and walked — when she stepped to the plate with the score tied in the bottom of the sixth inning. Her message to herself was simple.

"I just thought, 'I'm going to hit this, I'm going to hit this,' and (I) hit it," she said.

Bowen lifted a pitch to the fence in right field to easily score Gomes from first for the go-ahead run, then scored from third when Jayde Wiggins reached on an error for a two-run cushion.

That margin was all junior pitcher Allie Brock needed.

"When we got those hits we really took all the momentum back and you could tell they (Sweet Home) were flat on the other side," Brock said.

"It was a huge relief for the whole team and huge relief for me coming out in the

seventh to close the door."

The seventh was arguably Brock's best inning, getting a popup and a pair of strikeouts to finish off the Huskies and help send the Tigers to a third straight semifinal appearance.

The seventh inning, though, was a stark contrast to the sixth. Sweet Home, which had scored the tying run in the fifth when Marissa Kurtz scored on a fielder's choice, opened the sixth with back-to-back singles from Sunhee Bitter and Graci Zanona to put pressure on the Tigers.

"I just told myself I needed to focus on every pitch, focus on one pitch at a time and stay composed," Brock said of her mindset in the tight situation.

Brock responded with a strikeout, forced a lineup to

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