



Ronald Bond/The Observer

The La Grande softball team poses with the state title trophy following Saturday's win over Henley.

**FAMILY**

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got a lot of talent and a great youth program."

The Tigers repeated as state champions and capped off the best season in program history Saturday with a 4-2 win over Henley. They won the tiebreaker against the Hornets that some of the players spoke about earlier in the week.

And they won a championship that many of the players said was sweeter and more difficult than a year ago because of the expectations they — and many in the town — had. Almost each player I talked to after Saturday's victory spoke to some degree about that pressure.

Jaiden Hafer: "We didn't want to let anybody down, and we didn't want to let ourselves down."

Jayne Seavert: "(From) the very first game, the very first practice, we had a target on our back (and) people want to be beating you. But we came together as a team. We stuck it through."

That's not to say, though, that it was all bad pressure. Jacie Howton, in fact, called it mostly positive, saying it was "more of a motivation than a pressure."

Seavert's comment of how they came through to the other side with the title points to the key, and one that several of the players talked about often in the last few weeks. They are, indeed, a family. You can see that too.

They are upbeat. They are positive. They play for one another. There isn't, from what I can see, an ounce of selfishness within the team. A player can have an off day or a couple off games, and while they may show a moment of frustration when an at-bat doesn't go well — and there were some of those instances Saturday — they are able to bounce right back and encourage the next batter.

Any dissatisfaction displayed is because the player want to do well for their teammates. Their coaches. Their community.

They all put it on the line for one another, and at the same time know that if they are having a down day, someone else will be on and will get the job done.

Because the other players have those same expectations.

"They are definitely a family and the true definition of a team," head coach Woody Wright said. "(If) somebody has a rough day or starts struggling, someone is going to pick up the slack. They pick each other up. (It's) the true definition of a team, hands down."

Cody Bowen, an assistant coach whose daughter, Kinzy, is on the team, also talked

about the family connection — from the coaching staff all the way to the players — and the level of class he sees in the team.

"It's special to be a part of that. I get the pleasure of being the School Resource Officer, and I look at all these kids like they are mine. I love them on a daily basis," he said. "To get to come to

the softball field and be a part of the coaching staff and see them on a different level out in the community, just being a part of that is huge.

The girls we have right now, the girls who are graduating, the girls coming up — they are an amazing group of young ladies who represent our community so well. Having my daughter on the team

was extra special for me."

It's also a family in large part because many of these players have played together for years.

"Our bond is incredible," Seavert said. "We've grown up playing softball together since grade school."

As a result of the family connection that has been building for years, the team

has put together one of the best on-field runs ever by an LHS sports program, joining the LHS boys swim team (2001-04) and the LHS boys golf team (2011-12) in winning consecutive state titles.

The head coach, and some of the seniors, called it a bittersweet ending, because while it is a second title in a row, the dynamic will change. The family will be a little bit different next year. "I'm beyond sad that I

won't be playing softball with these girls again," said Kara Gooderham, one of the three seniors, "but I know they'll have a great future."

Even as it becomes a more extended family next season, the expectation will still be there.

And given this team's family dynamic, don't be surprised if they again rise up to meet the pressure as they pursue a three-peat in 2020.

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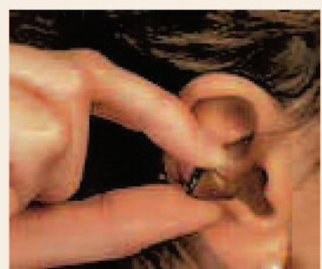
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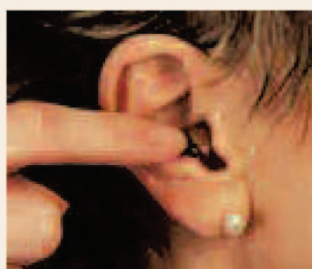
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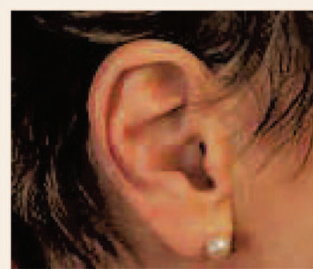
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