

The Observer’s top 10 sports stories of 2019

4 — Enterprise girls track team wins first state title in thrilling fashion

A state championship secured by a fraction of a second from an athlete who barely qualified for state. A Herculean effort from a second individual who had to overcome food poisoning just to compete. A crucial victory in a relay race over a district rival. Continued dominance in a second relay race.

These are just a few of the myriad elements that fell in place for the Enterprise Outlaws girls track and field team to finally get what has eluded it for years — a state trophy. But the Outlaws didn’t just get any trophy. They grabbed the state title.

Enterprise swept the relays, added a vital win in the 100 and had numerous key efforts to edge Grant Union by a mere half point — 64.5 to 64 — to win the 2A girls state championship at Western Oregon University in Monmouth.

“They rose up for two days in a row,” longtime EHS head coach Dan Moody said. “I was hoping we would be in the trophies, and then everything started falling into place.”

And it all happened, no less, at Moody’s alma mater.

3 — EOU announces additions of baseball, women’s lacrosse

Howard Fetz has been feverishly advocating for baseball’s return to Eastern Oregon University.

Fetz, who coached the Mountaineers from 1967 to 1987, and several former EOU players have been imploring the university to bring back the sport, which was dropped 13 years ago.

“I believe in it,” Fetz said. “I love the game. I love the opportunity to reach kids and adults through the medium of athletics, and in this case baseball.”

The efforts have paid off — baseball is coming back to Eastern Oregon University.

The national pastime, which was cut from EOU in 2006, will be reinstated, President Tom Insko announced Oct. 12 at EOU’s alumni breakfast. The first season for Mountaineer baseball will be in 2021.

“We’re fortunate that we have the financial resources to bring men’s baseball back to Eastern Oregon University,” he said at the breakfast, making the statement with Fetz at his side.

It’s not the only sport Eastern is adding, either. Insko said the university will also add what he described as a sport rising in popularity, women’s lacrosse. The inaugural season for the sport will also be in the spring of 2021.

“It’s an opportunity for EOU to lead in a new, exciting, emerging sport, bring that to La Grande and bring that to a rural community,” Insko said of the addition of lacrosse. “It’s got a rich history in the East and, to a certain extent, the Midwest.

“It’s an emerging sport in the West,” he added. “It’s the fastest growing youth sport in the nation and has been for a number of years.”

2 — La Grande softball repeats as state champions

The high expectations. The pressure. The target on their backs as being the defending state champions.

None of that kept the La Grande Tigers from doing what they intended to do all season — repeat as state champs.

The Tigers scored four early runs to build a lead it would never relinquish and put a stop to a late rally



Photo by Ben Lonergan/EO Media Group

La Grande’s Spencer Gerst, center, kisses the OSAA trophy Nov. 30 in Hermiston, after the trophy presentation. La Grande defeated Banks in the 4A state championship game, 21-0, for its first football title in 45 years.

on the way to a 4-2 win over the Henley Hornets Saturday in the 4A softball state championship game at Jane Sanders Stadium in Eugene.

“The expectation of us coming back (to the championship game) and to win motivated us to play well,” junior pitcher Allie Brock said after a 12-strikeout effort in the win. “We play really well under pressure, and I think that contributed to our performance today.”

The Tigers faced their share of pressure in Saturday’s title game rematch against the Hornets, but none tougher than when Henley made its final push at the lead in the sixth inning. Trailing 4-1, the Hornets opened the sixth with two straight singles and a fielder’s choice, then cut the deficit to two runs on an infield RBI single by Lilly Poe — with the top of their potent offense coming up, bases loaded and nobody out.

The infield met in the pitcher’s circle to regroup, shake off the rough start to the frame and — in the familial sense that has carried the team all year — encourage one another through the pressure-packed moment.

“We just wanted to let each other know we were all present there mentally, that we needed to stay calm and pull through, and we had a lot of confidence in each other,” Brock said.

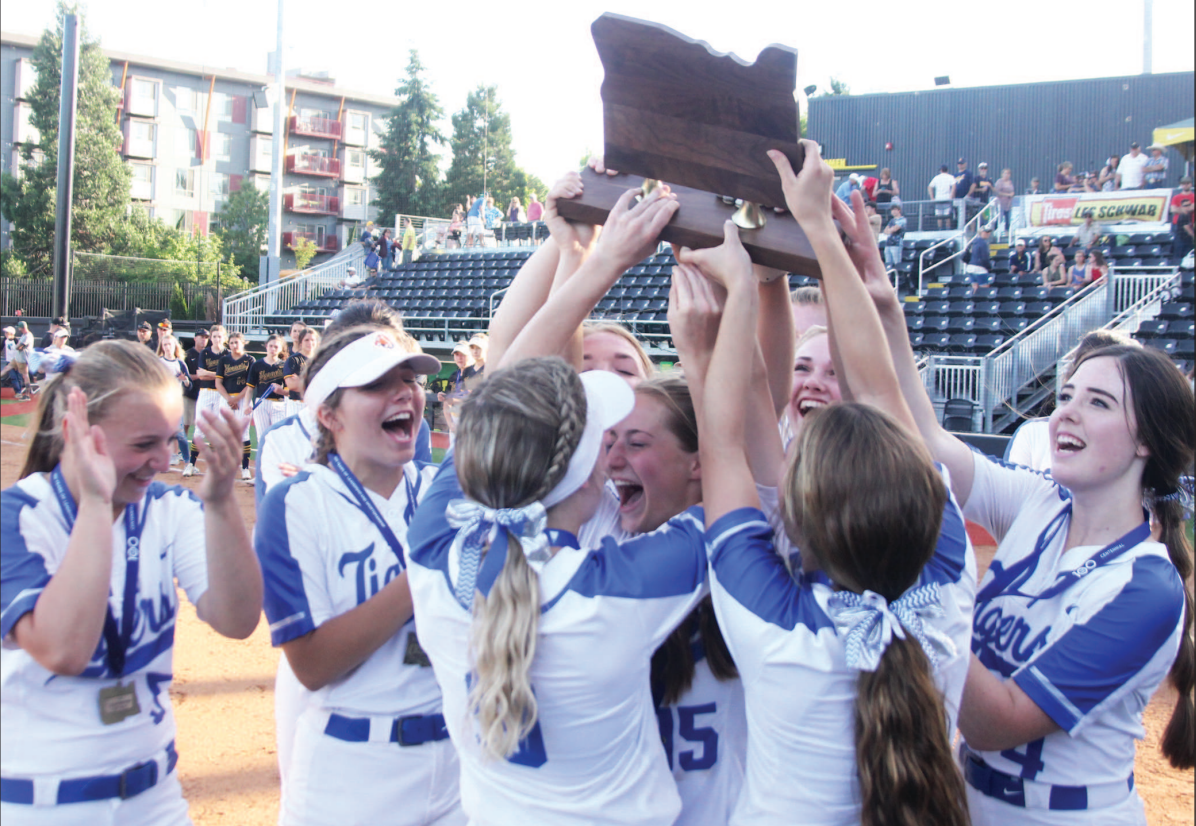
Junior Jaiden Hafer, who had two RBIs in the win, said in that huddle they reminded themselves that they had one other’s backs and to take it one play at a time. Brock even said she had to focus on one pitch at a time.

One by one, the Tigers’ ace navigated the top three batters to get out of the inning with the lead intact. Brock forced Paige Barnett to pop out to Jacie Howton at second base, struck out Kylie Melsness for the fourth time, then induced Kaila Mick to pop out to Howton to end the threat.

1 — La Grande football finishes perfect season for first state title since 1974

Eli Leavitt was like many La Grande Tigers the night of Nov. 30 — unable to find the words to express being part of a team that ended a 45-year championship drought.

“I’m so speechless, man,” the senior defensive lineman said. “I want to thank the fans, my team-



Staff photo by Ronald Bond

The La Grande softball team celebrates after receiving the championship trophy June 1 following its 4-2 win over Henley in the state championship game in Eugene.

mates, the coaches — we came in with a goal and we got it.”

La Grande used an elite defensive effort to force the defending Class 4A champion Banks Braves into four turnovers and held them to 167 yards — including just 50 in the second half — as the Tigers blanked the Braves, 21-0, Nov. 30 in front of a raucous pro-La Grande crowd in Hermiston to win their first state football title since 1974.

“It feels unbelievable,” said senior quarterback Parker Robinson, who threw two touchdowns in the title game win. “Especially to be with the group of guys that I’m with. They work so hard and put in the time. I’m so thankful to be with (this) group of guys.”

La Grande’s defense, which has been solid all season and even more so in the playoffs, perhaps saved its best effort for last. The Tigers (12-0 overall) flew around, confounding a Banks team (11-1) that had scored 56 points in the semifinals a week before and shutting down the Braves’ lethal passing attack.

“We’ve taken great pride in our defense all year, and I take great pride in my coaching staff and coach (Matt) Wolcott and the things he’s put together for this team,” head coach Rich McIlmoil said.



Staff photo by Ronald Bond

The Enterprise girls 4x400 relay team of Kyla Hook, Savannah Vaughn, Shelby Moncrief and Karli Bedard with the state title trophy May 18 after winning the 2A state title.

It was a new scheme, in fact, the Tigers drew up for the Braves, pressuring Banks quarterback Tanner Shook from multiple angles and forcing him to throw two second-half interceptions — one

Nathan Reed took 27 yards for a touchdown and a 21-0 lead late in the third quarter — while also throwing in a heavy dose of nickel defense with five defensive backs to slow the Banks’ pass offense.

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Happy New Year!

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