

Beavers aim for return to College World Series

By LES GEHRETT

Albany Democrat-Herald

CORVALLIS — Nothing stands in the way of Oregon State making another run to the College World Series in 2022.

That is the message from coach Mitch Canham and his players as they prepare for the start of their season on Feb. 18 against New Mexico in Surprise, Arizona.

The Beavers lost several key contributors to last year's team which went 37-24 and reached a regional final. Those losses include ace Kevin Abel, which was expected, and star catcher Troy Claunch, whose transfer to Texas A&M was not.

But Canham is confident that the development of the returning players and the arrival of a talented freshman class will once again put the Beavers in position to challenge for the Pac-12 title and a trip to Omaha.

Oregon State's 2021 baseball season ended with a loss that no one associated with the program will ever forget. The Beavers held a 5-0 lead over Dallas Baptist after three innings, but squandered that lead in an 8-5 loss. The rally was made possible in large part by OSU pitchers issuing 10 walks and three hit batters.

Canham calls those mistakes free bases and this season he wants to see fewer of them.

"Obviously free bases is something we've talked a lot about and it just goes to confidence, intent, attacking the zone," Canham said. "I'd like to eliminate as many three-ball counts as possible. You can't walk anybody unless you get to three balls, right?"

Pitcher Cooper Hjerpe said the entire pitching staff is focused on being more efficient and trying to average fewer pitches per at-bat. This would both reduce walks and help keep arms fresher longer.

"Obviously last year was less than ideal with the way that ended. I know we reflected on what we did last year and what we could improve on. Basically the free bases and the two-out stuff. We've obviously been working on it, being more consistent in those situations," Hjerpe said.

The Beavers weren't afraid to talk about the season-ending loss because they didn't forget about it during the offseason. Instead, they used that disappointment as motivation.

"It left a really sour taste in our mouth and I think it's still there, I really do," said junior Wade Meckler. "I don't think anyone's forgot about that meeting afterwards."

See, **Beavers**/Page A10

Building a program

Eastern Oregon softball working toward a winning culture

By DAVIS CARBAUGH

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Spring is on the horizon and the Eastern Oregon University softball team is gearing up for its 2022 season.

Third-year head coach Nicole Christian leads the way for the Mountaineers, who are aiming to surprise teams around the softball landscape. Coming off a trip to the conference tournament as the No. 5 seed last season, Eastern is aiming to establish itself near the top of the Cascade Collegiate Conference.

"We're really excited," Christian said. "I think the girls have been putting in the work in the weight room and we've been getting out on the turf. I think if we don't place in that top five or top six to make the CCC tournament, it would be a disappointment."

The Mountaineers finished 16-32 overall last season, compiling a 10-17 conference record. Eastern earned a trip to the conference championships, but ultimately came up short with back-to-back losses against Corban and the College of Idaho.

Building depth

Eastern saw three players earn conference honors at the end of the season, two of which the team will be looking to replace this year. Catchers Jordan Henley and Makenzie Chambers led the way in batting average and hits, as well as finishing top three on the team in runs, RBIs and home runs.

One key addition that will help fill that void is junior infielder Caitlin Crist, who transferred from Idaho State. The Mountaineers will be relying on Crist to be a defensive centerpiece in the infield this year.

"I have not seen someone in a long time cover the ground that she can cover," Christian said.

Crist is joined by newcomers Grace Gather and Hannah Tyree. Gather is a transfer from Oregon State who plays utility, mostly slotting in the middle of the field and at third base. Tyree, a freshman, is expected to help replace the production at the catcher position.

"She instantly stepped up in the catching spot for us," Christian said. "We're excited to have her for four years, she'll make a big impact for us."

The Mountaineers have several key pieces returning, in the field and on the mound. First baseman Haley Ebner returns after hitting .306 last year and leading the team with 29 RBIs and six home runs. Amanda Smith, last season's top pitcher, leads the way for Eastern after compiling a 6-8 record last season with a 4.09 ERA and 45 strikeouts. The Mountaineers are looking to build upon



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Eastern Oregon pitcher Amanda Smith (14) delivers a pitch Friday, April 23, 2021, against the University of Providence at Peggy Anderson Softball Field, La Grande. Smith is set to lead Eastern's pitching rotation in 2022 as the Mountaineers look to contend in the Cascade Collegiate Conference.

a strong committee of pitchers, including several key returners.

"Abby Giles is going to have a key role, as well as Kayla Berg," Christian said. "Natalee Hall put in a ton of work on the mound in the offseason, so I'm excited to see what she can do for us."

Trial by fire

Christian and the Mountaineers are not hiding the fact that they play in one of the toughest softball conferences in the NAIA. Southern Oregon is the reigning national champion, defeating conference opponent Oregon Tech in the final game — the College of Idaho finished third overall in a sweep of Cascade Collegiate Conference teams.

To be the best, Eastern is aiming to beat the best. The Mountaineers have a heavy slew of road non-conference games to start the season, facing difficult opponents before starting conference play in March.

Eastern starts its season off with 17 consecutive road games, including a streak of games against teams in California — opening day is set for Saturday, Feb. 12 with a four-game road series against Willamette. The Mountaineers have two matchups against top-25 Hope International on Feb. 25 and Feb. 26.

"All we've talked about is trying to win these games and make it known that we're a top team. That was one of our goals, to go out and get some of these teams in the preseason to see where we need to be and also get on their radar," Christian said. "That's what we have to do to compete, get out and face those teams."

Eastern is stepping up its scouting this season, keeping an eye on top conference teams in order to gain an advantage. Christian credited close losses last year against top teams as motivation for the upcoming year. The Mountaineers went

to extra innings in one matchup against Oregon Tech and saw close matchups against the College of Idaho and Corban.

"Just knowing that we're starting to be in every single game, with some of these coming down to one inning or a couple runners, it's starting to pick up," Christian said.

Christian emphasized that in her third year, the coaching staff at Eastern is holding the bar high and working toward a winning culture. The Mountaineers, who are running through final preparations before the upcoming season begins shortly, are looking to challenge the top teams in the Cascade Collegiate Conference this year.

"I think we're going to upset some of those top teams," Christian said. "I think last year we were right there, but I think this year we have that capability to play, upset and get series wins against some team we're not supposed to win against."

SPORTS SHORT

Malatare selected as conference player of the week

By DAVIS CARBAUGH

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon University men's basketball player Phillip Malatare had himself quite a week.

The point guard hit the game-winning shot in an unexpected upset victory and averaged 21 points per game as the Mountaineers went 2-1. The Cascade Collegiate Conference named Malatare its men's basketball player of the week in an announcement on Monday, Jan. 31.

Malatare led the way in a 93-91 overtime vic-

tory over No. 13 College of Idaho on Jan. 25, which was arguably one of the team's biggest wins in recent years. It was Malatare's 11 overtime points and

game-winning fadeaway that led the charge for the huge upset victory. The guard drove to the right wing and connected on a shot from just inside the arc with three seconds remaining in overtime.

The Arlee, Montana, native finished with a game-high 27 points off 10-20 shooting in the win over the Yotes, adding five assists and



Malatare

two rebounds.

Eastern lost a tough matchup to Bushnell 82-75 on Jan. 28, but bounced back with a 84-74 win over Corban on the following day.

Malatare led the Mountaineers in scoring against Bushnell, tallying 22 points — he added five rebounds and dished out three assists.

In the win over Corban, Malatare contributed 14 points, four assists and three rebounds. The point guard fed the ball to the hot hand, as junior Xavier Lovelace led all scorers with 29 points on the night.

Malatare shot 52.3% across the three game swing and went 15-18 at the free-throw line. The junior is averaging 20.4 points, 5.2 rebounds and 3.6 assists per game this season.

The recent victories improved Eastern's record to 14-10 on the year, sitting at sixth in the Cascade Collegiate Conference standings. The Mountaineers are set to travel this weekend, facing Walla Walla on Feb. 4 and Lewis-Clark State on Feb. 5. Eastern previously defeated Walla Walla 88-70 on Dec. 18 and lost to Lewis-Clark State 76-72 on Dec. 17.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Phillip Malatare (0) drives to the basket during a match between Eastern Oregon University and Montana Western University at Quinn Coliseum on Saturday, Oct. 30, 2021. Malatare's 15-point performance helped EOU to a 67-61 win in the team's home opener.