

Sports is at its peak in March



DAVIS CARBAUGH
CARBAUGH'S CORNER

Many sports fans can agree that March is one of the best times of year for sports.

The combination of eyeing your NCAA tournament brackets, the ping of bats starting up and local athletes gearing up to take part in their spring competitions is a sport's lover's dream. With NBA playoffs and MLB right around the corner as well, we find ourselves in the pinnacle of the sports schedule.

Locally, that excitement is present as high school athletes get set to compete in their respective spring sports. At the college level, Eastern Oregon University is midway through its baseball and softball seasons, while track athletes are just getting up and running in their outdoor season.

EOU softball is off to a strong start, going 6-0 in conference play thus far and compiling a 16-5 overall record. The Mountaineers take their 10-game winning streak into a four-game series against the rival Raiders of Southern Oregon this weekend.

Eastern's lacrosse program continues to build momentum in its second year as an official program. The Mountaineers are set to host Whitman at Community Stadium in La Grande at 1 p.m. on Sunday, March 20.

The La Grande track and field team has roughly 70 total participants this year, a good sign for interest in the sport. The Tigers will look to contend at the 4A level, while Powder Valley will look to defend its throne on the boys side of the 1A state competition. The Elgin girls team is coming off a great finish in 2021, taking third place at the 1A state championship — replacing star athlete Aaliyah Burton will be no easy task, but the Huskies are trending in the right direction. Imbler and Cove will also look to make noise at the 1A level, while Union's strong finish in cross-country this year bodes well for the Bobcats' hopes on the track this season.

La Grande tennis kicked off its season with a match at Vale this week and is looking forward to a strong season. The Tigers join Union/Imbler as local golfers set the stage for a productive year on the course.

As spring sports get underway, scores and recaps will be available at The Observer's website under the sports tab.

Davis Carbaugh covers news and sports for The Observer. He can be contacted at dcarbaugh@lagrande-observer.com.



Alex Wittwer//EO Media Group, File
Jace Schow throws a strike against Hodgen Distributing at La Grande's Pioneer Park on Friday, July 23, 2021.

High hopes

La Grande upperclassmen setting tone for title run

By DAVIS CARBAUGH • The Observer

LA GRANDE — With two outs in the final inning of last year's 4A state title game, a walk-off grand slam by Hidden Valley ended La Grande's season just one out away from a state title.

This time, the Tigers want to finish the job. A large group of returners from last year's team is set to take the field again this season, leading the way for what could be an exciting year in La Grande. The Tigers will lean on a wide array of talented, experienced players across their lineup as the team aims to end this season on top.

"Ultimately our goal every year is to win a state championship. That's what we want," La Grande head coach Parker McKinley said. "That's the way that we conduct business and prepare ourselves."

La Grande graduated three seniors from last year's roster, returning the majority of its starters who played big roles in the team's 14-2 record last spring. The narrow loss to Hidden Valley in last year's final has lit a fire under some of La Grande's players, while the end goal still remains the same across the board.

"I think about it every day," junior Logan Williams said. "I think it makes me that much more hungry this year."

"This preseason, I think we're all just chomping at the bit to get back on the field and get the feeling back for baseball," senior Devin Bell said. "I don't think what happened last year defines us for this year. I think we can do better."

Bell is one of 12 seniors on La Grande's roster who will be looking to end their careers as state champions. As for Williams, this year's junior class showed major promise toward the spring season and into the summer season with the La Grande Legacy Legends.

Senior catcher Cole Jorgensen returns for one final prep season before joining Western Oregon University's baseball team. Jorgensen posted a .643 average last spring, totaling 32 RBIs, 10 runs and 36 hits in 56 at-bats.

"This whole class has been playing together since we were about 9 years old, so we have a really good chemistry and dynamic," Jorgensen said. "We're going to do everything we can to win this time."

Bell, an infielder and pitcher, led the team with 35 runs last spring and posted a .462 average across 52 at-bats. In the summer season with the Legends, he went 3-0 over 16 innings and recorded 22 strikeouts.

After last year's ace Riley Miller graduated to play for Clark College, Bell will be one of the players looking to round out a solid rotation for La Grande. Williams, Bell, Jace Schow and Sam Tsiatsos are set to serve as the core of an upperclassmen-led group of arms.

"I think we're just as good as we were last year," Jorgensen said of the rotation. "We lost

Riley, but we have some guys that can fill his spot and be really strong pitchers this year." The coach agreed. "We're pretty fortunate to have the number of pitchers that we have in the program," he said. "A lot of our guys are going to compete."

Senior Nick Bornstedt will be another key piece of La Grande's lineup. The first basemen hit for an average of .567 off 30 at-bats last spring, tallying 14 RBIs and 10 runs.

"Our lineup is really strong," Bornstedt said. "We all try to really work hard at hitting. Our pitching is going to be good this year and we have a sound defense. We're strong all around."

The Tigers have a large turnout this season, with a mix of upperclassmen and new players. From the coach's point of view, the winning expectations are passed down from the upperclassmen to position the program to be successful for years to come.

"I truly believe that it's not just the guys on the field for the varsity team that make that happen," McKinley said. "It starts with the seniors, who are working really hard right now. I think that will continue to be passed along."

Coming just one out away from finishing on top last season, the expectation for La Grande is a return trip to the championship game. According to McKinley, that same expectation is put into place at the beginning of every season.

"I think the kids have very much bought into the philosophy of the program," he said. "Winning and losing is often a byproduct of the hard work, the character, the discipline and all these things that go into it. We all hold each other accountable."

ON THE SLATE

Wednesday, March 16

PREP SOFTBALL
Hermiston 18 — La Grande 17

Thursday, March 17

PREP BASEBALL
La Grande 12 — Hermiston 2
La Grande 7 — Hermiston 6

Friday, March 18

(Games not completed by print deadline)
PREP SOFTBALL
Union/Cove at Toledo Tournament, 5 p.m.

PREP TRACK & FIELD

Cove, Imbler, Union at Diana Thurmond Invitational 2022, Harper, 11 a.m.
Cove at Lewiston Invitational, noon

Saturday, March 19

COLLEGE SOFTBALL
Eastern Oregon at Southern Oregon (2), 2 p.m.

PREP SOFTBALL

La Grande at Philomath, 10 a.m.
La Grande vs. Gladstone, Philomath High School, noon
Union/Cove at Toledo Tournament, TBA

Sunday, March 20

COLLEGE BASEBALL
Eastern Oregon at Oregon Tech (2), 11 a.m.

COLLEGE SOFTBALL
Eastern Oregon at Southern Oregon (2), 11 a.m.

COLLEGE WOMEN'S LACROSSE
Whitman at Eastern Oregon, 1 p.m.

Monday, March 21

COLLEGE BASEBALL
Eastern Oregon at Oregon Tech (2), 11 a.m.

PREP BASEBALL

La Grande vs. Canby, Surprise, Arizona, 2 p.m.

Tuesday, March 22

PREP BASEBALL
La Grande vs. Shadow Ridge, Surprise, Arizona, 5 p.m.

Wednesday, March 23

PREP BASEBALL
La Grande vs. Dakota Ridge, Surprise, Arizona 2 p.m.

SPORTS SHORT

Stricklin named CoSIDA Academic All-American

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Coming off a strong senior season, Eastern Oregon University's Taylor Stricklin was honored for her performance on and off the court.

Stricklin earned a second-team selection on the College Sports Information Directors of America's Academic All-American women's basketball team. The honor recognizes athletic excellence along with high marks in the classroom.

The senior forward was a key player on the court for the Mountaineers this season, helping the team qualify for the NAIA National Tournament after accumulating a 22-11



Stricklin

record. Stricklin led the team with 8.4 rebounds per game and added 13.4 points per contest. The senior shot 42.1% from the field and was second on the team with 68 assists on the year. Stricklin converted a team-high 69 three-pointers and averaged 36 minutes of playing time per game.

Stricklin has tallied a 4.0 GPA as she works toward a master's degree in teaching — she earned a 3.99 GPA during her undergraduate studies toward a bachelor's degree in health and human performance.

The award marks Stricklin's first career CoSIDA Academic All-American selection. Stricklin was previously named Academic All-District twice. She was the only player from the Cascade Collegiate Conference to earn a selection on this year's CoSIDA Academic All-America team.



Alex Wittwer//EO Media Group, File

Eastern Oregon University's Taylor Stricklin makes a layup at Quinn Coliseum, La Grande, on Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. Stricklin earned a second-team selection on the College Sports Information Directors of America's Academic All-American women's basketball team.