

USMNT success productive for youth soccer



DAVIS CARBAUGH
CARBAUGH'S CORNER

The World Cup frenzy has arrived. Soccer has continued to slowly grow in popularity as a sport and viewing event in the U.S., highlighted by one of the strongest national teams the country has produced in recent history.

The national team's major increase in talent and production, with most players still in their early 20s, is a good sign of turning tides.

The U.S. Men's National Team secured enough points in the qualifying rounds in a match against Costa Rica on Wednesday, March 30, to earn a spot in the 2022 World Cup in Qatar this November. Later this past week, the team was drawn into a group with England, Iran and the winner of Scotland/Ukraine versus Wales.

The qualification comes in the wake of the team not qualifying in 2018, a devastating blow to the progress of the sport in the U.S. Four years later, this year's team was poised and expecting nothing less than a World Cup qualification — the attitude toward the sport has shifted on a national scale, impacting how youth view the sport from an early age.

The success of the young players on a world scale is garnering attention in a country that has historically focused more on football, baseball, basketball and other sports. From big cities to rural towns, high school and youth athletes are taking the fields and looking up to national heroes like Christian Pulisic and Gio Reyna.

Top homegrown players are no longer putting together a miraculous push at making the World Cup, but instead entering as quality competitors after joining the team from top international club teams. As the sport continues to grow on a national scale, local schools and youth programs will feel the dividends of a shifting emphasis on the sport. What was once a niche activity and an object of ridicule on the national stage is now one of the fastest growing sports for young athletes.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Union's Tee Ledbetter (3) drives down center court at Imbler High School on Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. The Bobcats defeated Imbler 55-27 in their season opener. The sophomore had a standout year and was named 2A second team all-state.

TOP OF HIS GAME



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Tee Ledbetter keeps his eye on the basket during a Union practice on Monday, Nov. 22, 2021. Ledbetter, a transfer from Cove, helped fill the void left by seven graduating seniors from last year's Bobcats boys basketball team.

"It felt pretty good. I felt like I accomplished a lot this year. For a sophomore, I thought I had a pretty good year. It just felt awesome to have that experience."

— Tee Ledbetter, Union post player

Union sophomore Tee Ledbetter leads the way for Bobcats, looks to build on season's success next year

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

UNION — It was a strong year of basketball in Union, topped off with all-state team honorees on both the boys and girls sides.

At the conclusion of the season, Union sophomore Tee Ledbetter was named 2A second team all-state. The forward led the scoring and rebounding efforts for the Bobcats, helping the team finish 15-10 overall and 8-4 in league play.

"It felt pretty good. I felt like I accomplished a lot this year," Ledbetter said. "For a

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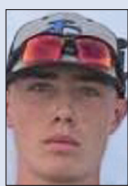
SPORTS SHORT

Devin Bell named OSAA athlete of the week

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Recent performances on the diamond from one of La Grande's standout baseball players was recognized by the Oregon School Activities Association.

OSAA named La Grande senior infielder Devin Bell the Toyota athlete of the week on Thursday, March 31. Bell was honored along-



Bell

side Hallee Hughes, a track athlete for Willamina High School.

Bell was a crucial part of La Grande's road trip to Arizona last month, helping the Tigers go 3-1 through four consecutive days of competition. The senior hit a combined .385 and totaled five runs and 11 RBIs. Bell also took the mound for La Grande, striking out eight batters over four scoreless innings.

The award is given out every week to varsity athletes in Oregon who performed at the top of their sport in the previous week. Athletes of the week receive a letter of recognition from OSAA, a sling bag, Nike prize pack from Toyota and recognition on OSAA's social media platforms.

The Tigers are 8-1 on the season, following weekend road wins over Seaside/Jewell, North Marion and Astoria.



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File

La Grande's Devin Bell (5) slides into second as Chase Elliot, of Hermiston, waits for the throw on Thursday, March 17, 2022, at Hermiston's Weber Field.

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