

Blazers think talent is there

Joe Cronin, Chauncey Billups predict bright future following 27-55 record

By AARON FENTRESS
The Oregonian

PORTLAND — Portland Trail Blazers interim general manager Joe Cronin decided about four months ago that the best course of action for the franchise was to make moves and decisions that would create flexibility and garner a high draft pick to retool the roster around superstar Damian Lillard.

That meant losing. A lot. And badly.

It was NBA tanking at its finest.

But with the 16th worst season now in the rearview mirror, Cronin and coach Chauncey Billups are on the clock to deliver fans a winning product. They must prove that trading away franchise cornerstone CJ McCollum and enduring blowout losses on a nearly nightly basis for six weeks was worth the suffering for fans, many of whom paid top dollar for an NBA-level product.

On Monday, April 11, both men faced reporters at the team's exit interviews to discuss the end of a season that saw the Blazers (27-55) finish with the sixth-worst record in the NBA. And as they broached the future, they did so with an air of confidence that a season of misery could lead to something better in the future.

"I feel good about it," Billups said. "I think that we have an opportunity that I don't think that this organization has ever had. To be able to step it back just this one season and be able to get pretty good, pretty fast."

The NBA has evolved into a league that occasionally rewards losing. Bad teams net higher draft picks, providing a chance for struggling franchises to score a future All-Star. The Blazers chased that path in December, after Lillard was sidelined with a severe abdominal injury and McCollum suffered a collapsed lung, sending the team to a 2-11 record with no chance to contend.

By the Feb. 10 trade deadline, McCollum, Norman Powell and Robert Covington were gone, Lillard had undergone surgery and was shut

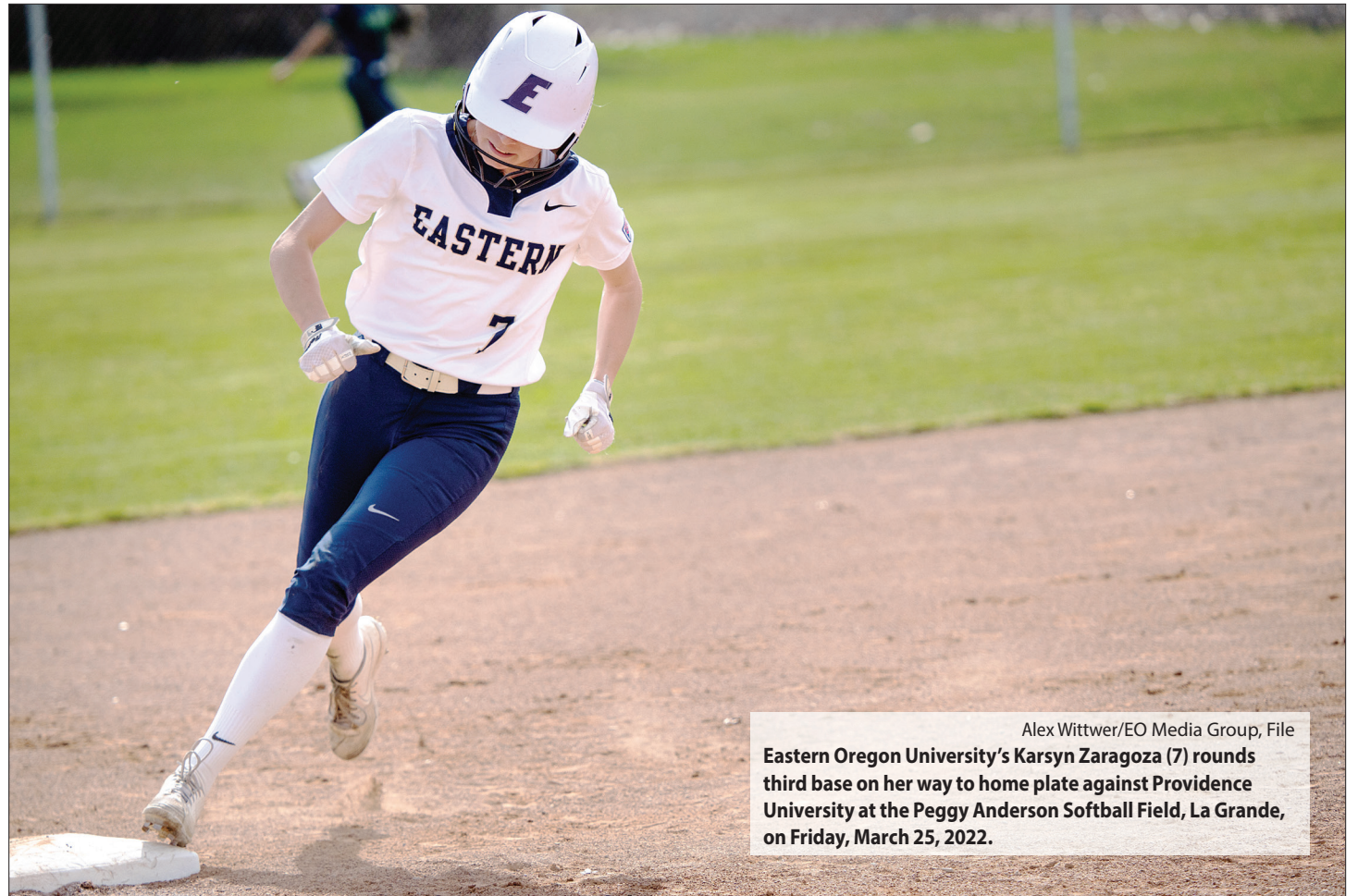
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Billups



Cronin



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File
Eastern Oregon University's Karsyn Zaragoza (7) rounds third base on her way to home plate against Providence University at the Peggy Anderson Softball Field, La Grande, on Friday, March 25, 2022.

In a groove

Eastern Oregon University softball finds success behind pitching, well-rounded effort

By DAVIS CARBAUGH • The Observer

LA GRANDE — The Eastern Oregon University softball program is on the brink of a historic season.

With just three weeks left in the regular season, the Mountaineers have tallied 30 wins and stand at third in the Cascade Collegiate Conference. Just one year removed from a 16-32 record, Eastern is 12 wins away from securing the program record for wins in a season. Despite the success and accolades so far this year, the Mountaineers are taking things one game at a time in pursuit of competing with the conference's best schools.

"The girls are buying in and realizing that we're one of the top teams who can compete against top teams in the nation," head coach Nicole Christian said. "It's those little things that build up the program and the winning mentality."



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File
Amanda Smith (14) delivers a pitch during the Mountaineers' matchup with Providence University on Friday, March 25, 2022, at the Peggy Anderson Softball Field, La Grande.

Christian is in just her third year as head coach, taking the reins of a team that went 13-32 in the season before her hiring in 2019. Not much changed in

terms of winning percentage over the last two seasons, but the 2022 campaign has

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SPORTS SHORT

Northwest University to add beach volleyball

Cascade Collegiate Conference school to add program in 2023

The Observer

KIRKLAND, Wash. — Northwest University Director of Athletics Gary McIntosh formally announced the sponsorship of beach volleyball beginning in 2022-23.

Following the addition of beach volleyball, Northwest will sponsor 11 NAIA athletic programs. The addition of beach volleyball will add approximately 12 female student-athlete opportunities to the Northwest athletic program and will become the seventh female sport at Northwest University.

"We are excited about the opportunity to add beach volleyball to our department," said McIntosh. "We are confident that beach volleyball will be a good addition here at Northwest and will achieve success in conjunction with our current women's volleyball program. Beach volleyball is a growing sport in the NAIA, and we are excited to bring that growth to Northwest."

Beach volleyball consists of two-player teams with dual matches featuring five pairs from each team. The school that wins three matches first is the winner. Each match consists of three sets, with the first to 21 winning the first two sets and the third set to 15 points if needed.

"Beach volleyball competition at Northwest is set to commence in the spring of 2023. We are currently searching for a head coach," McIntosh said.

Beach volleyball was declared an emerging sport by the NAIA in 2019 and has since garnered national invitational tournament status with more than 25 programs.

Although beach volleyball is not a conference sport, the Cascade Collegiate Conference, which includes Eastern Oregon University, has six member or associate member schools sponsoring the sport: Arizona Christian, Bushnell, Corban, Life Pacific, Southern Oregon and Vanguard.



Bushnell University/Contributed Photo
Bushnell's Camille Guerrero (20) prepares to spike the ball over the net as Corban's Avari Ridgway (23) defends during the Warriors' 4-1 win over Bushnell on Saturday, April 2, 2022. Northwest University has announced it is joining Corban and Bushnell in sponsoring beach volleyball in 2023.

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