

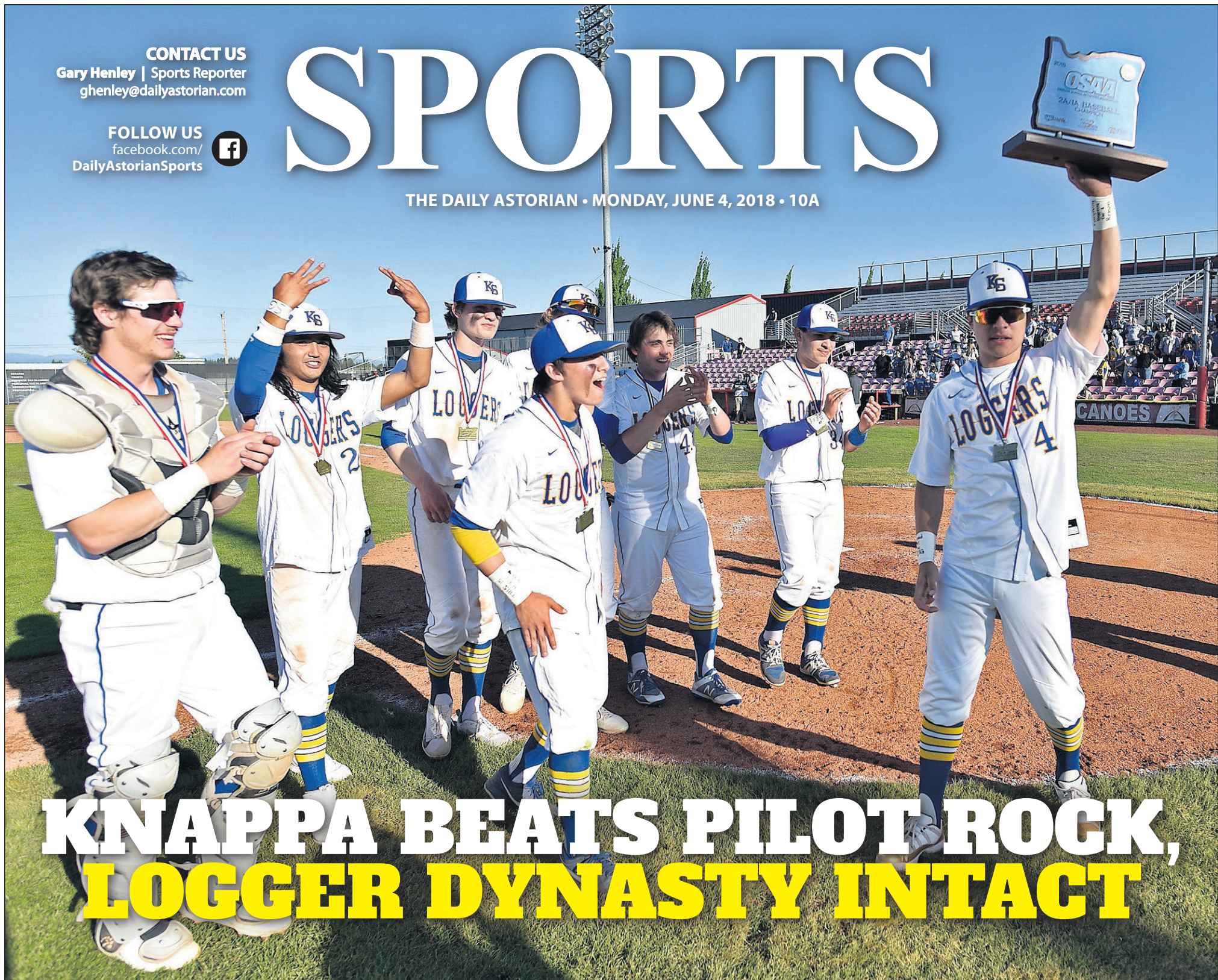
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SPORTS

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Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

The Knappa Loggers celebrate winning back-to-back state baseball championship titles.

By **GARY HENLEY**
The Daily Astorian

KEIZER — No miracles needed. Not this time.

After a one-run loss in the title game two years ago, and a thrilling, come-from-behind victory last season, there were no big comebacks or fantastic finishes Friday in Keizer — just a nice, relaxing, state championship win.

“It was a lot less stressful,” said Knappa senior Mason Hoover, following the 7-1 win in the Class 2A/1A state championship game, over the combined schools of Pilot Rock/Nixyaawii/Ukiah.

The Loggers beat all three, sending nine Knappa seniors out on a winning note.

In just his second championship game, Logger sophomore Eli Takalo said, “them old billy goats that are seniors, they came to play.”

Knappa senior Kaleb Miller said, “We’ve played pretty relaxed. This is where we wanted to be, and we had been here three times already.”

In fact, this year’s state championship game was about as anticlimactic as it gets.

The Loggers were big favorites. The only missing pieces were the opponent and the final score. Other than that, followers of 2A/1A baseball had seen this one coming.

In the end, the Loggers backed up the predictions with their second perfect season in four years, finishing 24-0 and winning their third state title in the same four-year span — the only Oregon high school baseball program that can claim that distinction.

Knappa overcame an early 1-0 deficit, then won it going away. The Loggers scored three runs in their first at-bat, and led 5-1 after four innings.

From there, the Takalo brothers did the rest, as Eli and Dale Takalo combined on a six-hitter, with six strikeouts and no walks.

Knappa was in complete control after two innings. Even the postgame celebration was a bit more subdued than last year’s craziness.

“Last year was different, just because it was a huge comeback,” Hoover said.

That doesn’t mean the Knappa players and fans were enjoying this postgame celebration any less. The Loggers were still partying like it was 1999, the last time the Loggers won back-to-back state titles in anything (boys basketball, 1998 and ‘99).

The X factor

It was clear where the difference was in Friday’s championship — the experience factor.

Pilot Rock was making its first state championship game appearance since 2000. On the other side of the field, Knappa seniors were playing in their fourth title game in four years.

And in the heat (literal and figurative) of Volcanoes Stadium, the Rockets failed to launch. In fact, they had a complete meltdown, committing four crucial errors.

For the coach, “it’s always stressful,” said Knappa’s Jeff Miller, who has stressed his way through five championship games in nine years. “You’re here in this atmosphere, and you know you’re playing a good team.

“But I think there was a difference,” he said. “Our kids were excited and relaxed, and (the Rockets) came out a little tighter than normal. You could see our kids had the advantage of being here before. I had a great feeling arriving at the stadium, and just seeing our kids. They were excited, with zero nerves. That’s a testament to those seniors.”

In the big inning ...

Rarely does a team’s first contact at the plate



Cameron Miethe puts the ball in play for the Loggers.

set the tone for an entire day, but the first plate appearance by the Loggers certainly seemed to set the pace.

A slow infield grounder by Knappa lead-off hitter Kaleb Miller should have resulted in an easy out. Instead, the throw to first base was about 10 feet over the head of the first baseman, and Miller advanced all the way to third on the error.

And that’s how the rest of the day went for Knappa. The hits, the big defensive plays. The Loggers had them all at the right time. Knappa only had one more hit (seven) than the Rockets, but it was what they did with those hits that made the difference.

“It’s not the number of base hits,” Jeff Miller explained. “We try to measure the quality at-bats, sacrifice and move the guy along. We did a very good job of that today. We still stranded too many runners (eight), but luckily we had lots of them to get the job done.”

Kaleb Miller eventually scored on a sacrifice fly by Dale Takalo, and Knappa had another runner at third moments later, when Hoover tripled to left field.

Logan Bartlett was hit by a pitch, Eli Takalo’s single drove in Hoover, and Pilot Rock’s second error of the inning allowed Bartlett to score.

After giving up a run in the top of the first, Knappa led after one, 3-1.

“The first inning’s been our inning all year,” coach Miller said. “We didn’t do anything poorly in (the top of) the first inning. They’re a good team and they swing it.

“The bottom of the first inning, what a response,” he said. “A normal team would start to get nervous, but our guys know how to win an inning, and they did.”

Pitchers ‘dialed in’

Not taking anything away from Knappa, but for the second year in a row, the Loggers did not have to face their opponent’s ace pitcher in the championship.

Pilot Rock’s No. 1 pitcher, Levi Thieme (and his 7-0 record), was not available for the game, after throwing 109 pitches in a semifinal win.

But it really didn’t make a difference.

The Takalo brothers allowed a few baserunners, but the Rockets never really threatened to score after the first inning. Once the Loggers had a four-run lead, they handed the game to the Takalos.

Dale pitched the last two innings (he threw

14 pitches, 13 for strikes), and said, “Mr. Miller’s been confident in both of us, and he knew we could get the job done.”

Eli got the victory, and said, “the lead always helps, but I felt confident from the start. I didn’t have my best outing, but I knew I had my brother behind me. Both of us pitched pretty dang good.”

Knappa’s catcher, Kaleb Miller, would know.

“They were dialed in,” he said of the Takalo boys. “Especially on this mound, which is pretty steep compared to other mounds. It’s tough for the hitters. Our fielders had their back, and helped them relax.”

Hitting the ball hard

Miller’s second at-bat had Knappa fans ecstatic. He sent a Chris Weinke offering deep over the left field fence for a solo home run and a 4-1 lead.

“It might be one of the farthest hits I’ve had,” Miller said. “I just made solid contact.”

Dale Takalo quipped, “We were squaring the ball up all day. Even the ones they caught, we felt like we were on that pitcher and had his timing.”

Hoover said Knappa assistant coach Chad Harrington “was throwing to us before the game, and we were all smokin’ the ball. So we knew what it was like to hit velocity beforehand.”

The Loggers added a run in the fourth and two in the sixth.

Knappa’s biggest producers of the day were Miller (who only had the one hit), but reached third on an error and had three plate appearances in the first three innings. Hoover was 2-for-2 with three runs scored. Eli Takalo was 2-for-2 with three RBIs.

Making their fourth straight trip to Keizer, the Loggers knew the routine. No pep talk needed from the coach, Jeff Miller said.

“It’s all the kids, all the time,” he said. “There’s not a lot I can say to them. They’ve been here, they know what it takes to win. They’re great leaders amongst themselves. I’m lucky, I get to watch them every day. I’m blessed to work with these kids.”

Missing Reuben

Meanwhile, the “Road to the Ring” for Knappa’s Reuben Cruz was washed out two weeks ago, when the senior suffered an accidental postgame shoulder injury, ending his season. “We certainly missed Reuben,” coach Miller

SCOREBOARD

BASEBALL

2A/1A state championship

Knappa 7, Pilot Rock 1

Pilot Rock 100 000 0—1 6 4

Knappa 310 102 x—7 7 1

C.Weinke and Pierce; E.Takalo, D.Takalo (6) and Miller. W: E.Takalo. L: C.Weinke. RBI: PR, Pierce; Kna, E.Takalo 3, Miller, D.Takalo. 2B: PR, L.Weinke; Kna, Bartlett. 3B: Kna, Hoover. HR: Kna, Miller. HBP: Kna, Hoover, Bartlett. SH: Kna, Coffey. SF: PR, Pierce; Kna, E.Takalo 2, D.Takalo. SB: PR, Lankford; Kna, Hoover, Weirup. LOB: Pilot Rock 4, Knappa 8. DP: Knappa. Mod Health Players of the Game: Pilot Rock-Chris Weinke; Knappa-Eli Takalo. Attendance: 1,378.

Clatsop County baseball

State champions, coach

1957: Seaside (A-2) Baily Brim
1960: Seaside (A-2) Everet Clary
1972: Seaside (AA) Jim Auld
1994: Warrenton (2A/1A) Lennie Wolfe
2006: Astoria (3A) Dave Gasser
2009: Astoria (4A) Dave Gasser
2010: Knappa (2A/1A) Jeff Miller
2011: Astoria (4A) Brian Babbitt
2015: Knappa (2A/1A) Jeff Miller
2017: Knappa (2A/1A) Jeff Miller
2018: Knappa (2A/1A) Jeff Miller

Knappa baseball

Championship appearances

(Class A/B)

1979: Wahtonka 5, Knappa 0
1984: Yoncalla 2, Knappa 1
(Class 2A/1A)
2010: Knappa 3, Heppner 1
2015: Knappa 3, Monroe 0
2016: Burns 4, Knappa 3
2017: Knappa 10, Reedsport 9
2018: Knappa 7, Pilot Rock 1

said. “He’s a part of everything we’ve done the past four years. Since he’s been hurt, he has literally been another assistant coach. He’s taken the young outfielders under his wing. He’s on them during the game, and a big part of what we’re doing.”

Dale Takalo added, “it was tough for Reuben, but he was just as into the game as if he would have been playing. That’s the kind of guy he is. This was supposed to be his moment in the sun, and he celebrated just as much with us.”

Speaking for the Knappa seniors, Takalo said, “we were as loose as we ever were going into a championship. We were confident in ourselves, and that early lead was awesome. But we kept saying to ourselves, ‘we have to keep our foot on the gas, and get runs when we can.’ Because we know the other side of it. You have to play to the last out.”

Coach Miller said, “it was an awesome way for (the seniors) to go out. They got to four championships, and to win three is incredible.”

True, 2A/1A baseball had a pretty deep field this year. But the 2018 Loggers were in a class by themselves, as Knappa is quickly gaining the reputation of being the state’s most efficient producer of baseball dynasties.

And with a current 38-game win streak, the No. 1 ranking and nine seniors on the roster — the Loggers had come too far to *not* win Friday’s championship.

In his second year of high school, Eli Takalo has now been the winning pitcher of record in two state championships — and the sophomore is a big reason why the Loggers could be heavily favored each of the next two seasons.

That same title game experience will return with Knappa’s young players next year, when they will be more experienced Loggers, ready to lead Knappa to more championship game appearances. This dynasty is just warming up.