

# EAST OREGONIAN SPORTS

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## Questions hang over NWSL in World Cup season

By ANNE M. PETERSON  
Associated Press

PORTLAND — The NWSL opens its seventh season this weekend with some lingering questions about its health, but also the encouraging possibility of a World Cup “bump.”

The National Women’s Soccer League has already outlasted any of the other previous pro women’s leagues in the United States. With support from the U.S. Soccer Federation, the NWSL was always positioned to fare better than the earlier attempts.

That doesn’t mean there aren’t concerns going into Year 7 — many of which were there in the sixth season, too. Possible expansion, the stability of some individual clubs, a need for sponsorships and the lack of a TV deal are among the issues faced by the league that hasn’t had a commissioner since Jeff Plush stepped down in March 2017.

Still, the NWSL could get greater exposure starting in June when the World Cup opens in France, since NWSL rosters are filled with national team players from around the globe. Teams will have to navigate player absences during the tournament but could win fans for the latter half of the season — much like after the last World Cup in 2015.

Portland Thorns defender Meghan Klingenberg said she believes the league is still headed in the right direction, but, like anything, continued success will depend on both investment and the will to see it through.

“The most important thing is investment across the league, in human resources; whether that’s coaching or whether that’s just staff that’s helping out, whether that’s in better fields, whether that’s in better housing, whether that’s in whatever. Making the league better, in the league front office but also the clubs’ front offices, I want that,” she said. “And if we can get that, year after year after year then I think we’ll be in a good place.”

The defending champion North Carolina Courage will open the season Saturday night at home against the Chicago Red Stars, one of four games set for this weekend. The Courage defeated the Thorns 3-1 in the title game in front of a crowd of 21,144 in Portland last fall.

The victory capped a fantastic season for the Courage, who went 18-1-6 overall, won the league’s Supporters’ Shield for best record and never dropped a game on the road.

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Staff photo by Kathy Aney  
Hermiston’s Bailey Noland receives a welcome at home plate after hitting a home run during Friday’s game against Kamiakin.

## DAWGS BRAVE KAMIAKIN

Studer’s walk-off grand slam helps Hermiston to doubleheader win



Staff photo by Kathy Aney  
Hermiston’s Sydney Stefani lets a ball go by during Friday’s game against Kamiakin. On the next pitch, she smashed a home run.

By BRETT KANE  
East Oregonian

On Friday, Hermiston’s softball team left their home field with two more wins, in part thanks to Grace Studer.

While the Bulldogs cruised to an 11-5 win against the Kamiakin Braves in the first of two games, a fourth-inning stumble in game two threatened a split. Studer’s grand slam at the bottom of the seventh inning propelled the Dawgs to a last-minute 12-10 win to end

the day. “When she came up to that last at-bat, she had a plan,” coach Kate Greenough said of Studer. “She centered her hit and extended the ball. Hitting-wise, this was her best performance so far this season.”

And Studer wasn’t the only Dawg to bring the firepower on Friday. Sydney Stefani led off with a home run that sparked a six-run first inning. Bailey Noland would knock away a two-run

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### THE MASTERS

## Zach Johnson’s practice swing doesn’t miss the ball

By DOUG FERGUSON  
AP Golf Writer

AUGUSTA, Ga. — In his 15 years at the Masters, in his two decades as a pro, Zach Johnson had never experienced a shot like this.

He had never hit one that short, either, but at least it didn’t count.

Johnson was going through his practice routine on the par-5 13th on Friday when the tip of his driver hit the golf ball. It went straight right into the tee marker, and then ricocheted to

the left about 5 yards away.

Johnson was so stunned he blurted out, “Oh, (s---)” before turning to his group to figure out his next move. Matt Kuchar, Ian Poulter and the caddies replied in unison that the shot wasn’t intentional and there was no penalty.

“I thought I had done it all,” Johnson said. “But now I know I’ve done it all. ... I don’t think I could do it again if I tried.”

That he wasn’t trying to hit the shot is what kept him from the penalty, a decision in place even before the new Rules of

Golf this year. It’s covered under Rule 6.2b(5) on starting a hole: “If a teed ball falls off the tee or is knocked off the tee by the player before the player has made a stroke at it, it may be re-teed anywhere in the teeing area without penalty.”

Johnson said he knew the rule. His reaction was “only because I have never done that.”

The rest of the group apparently hadn’t either because they couldn’t stifle their laughter.

“Y’all can laugh,” Johnson said as he prepared to hit again.

“That is embarrassing.”

Johnson drilled his tee shot and wound up making birdie on his way to a 73.

### Missing the cut

Two years ago, Justin Rose and Sergio Garcia faced off in a playoff for the green jacket.

On Friday, both were heading home.

Rose and Garcia missed the cut by a single shot, each carding a 4-over 148 for the first two rounds at Augusta National.

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AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez

Zach Johnson hits on the 18th hole during the first round for the Masters golf tournament on Thursday in Augusta, Ga.

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