

Softball:

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Makenzie Chambers led the way in batting average and hits, as well as finishing top three on the team in runs, RBIs and home runs.

One key addition that will help fill that void is junior infielder Caitlin Crist, who transferred from Idaho State. The Mountaineers will be relying on Crist to be a defensive centerpiece in the infield this year.

"I have not seen someone in a long time cover the ground that she can cover," Christian said.

Crist is joined by newcomers Grace Gather and Hannah Tyree. Gather is a trans-

fer from Oregon State who plays utility, mostly slotting in the middle of the field and at third base. Tyree, a freshman, is expected to help replace the production at the catcher position.

"She instantly stepped up in the catching spot for us," Christian said. "We're excited to have her for four years, she'll make a big impact for us."

The Mountaineers have several key pieces returning, in the field and on the mound. First baseman Haley Ebner returns after hitting .306 last year and leading the team with 29 RBIs and six home runs. Amanda Smith, last season's top pitcher, leads the way for Eastern after compiling a 6-8 record last season with a 4.09 ERA and

45 strikeouts. The Mountaineers are looking to build upon a strong committee of pitchers, including several key returners.

"Abby Giles is going to have a key role, as well as Kayla Berg," Christian said. "Natalee Hall put in a ton of work on the mound in the offseason, so I'm excited to see what she can do for us."

Trial by fire

Christian and the Mountaineers are not hiding the fact they play in one of the toughest softball conferences in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. Southern Oregon is the reigning national champion, defeating conference opponent Oregon Tech in the final game — the College of Idaho

finished third overall in a sweep of Cascade Collegiate Conference teams.

To be the best, Eastern is aiming to beat the best. The Mountaineers have a heavy slew of road nonconference games to start the season, facing difficult opponents before starting conference play in March.

Eastern starts its season with 17 consecutive road games, including a streak of games against teams in California — opening day is set for Saturday, Feb. 12, with a four-game road series against Willamette. The Mountaineers have two matchups against top-25 Hope International on Feb. 25 and Feb. 26.

"All we've talked about is trying to win these games and make it known that we're

a top team. That was one of our goals, to go out and get some of these teams in the preseason to see where we need to be and also get on their radar," Christian said. "That's what we have to do to compete, get out and face those teams."

Eastern is stepping up its scouting this season, keeping an eye on top conference teams to gain an advantage. Christian credited close losses last year against top teams as motivation for the upcoming year. The Mountaineers went to extra innings in one matchup against Oregon Tech and saw close games against the College of Idaho and Corban.

"Just knowing that we're starting to be in every single game, with some of these

coming down to one inning or a couple runners, it's starting to pick up," Christian said.

Christian emphasized that in her third year, the coaching staff at Eastern is holding the bar high and working toward a winning culture. The Mountaineers, who are running through final preparations before the upcoming season begins shortly, are looking to challenge the top teams in the Cascade Collegiate Conference this year.

"I think we're going to upset some of those top teams," Christian said. "I think last year we were right there, but I think this year we have that capability to play, upset and get series wins against some team we're not supposed to win against."



Sean Meagher/The Oregonian, File Oregon head coach Mark Wasikowski as the Oregon Ducks face the Portland Pilots in a college baseball game April 14, 2021, at Joe Etzel Field.

Turf:

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The players like the renovations and naturally hitters and pitchers have different perspectives on the changing dimensions in the outfield.

"It's going to take some time to get used to because the old park was a little bigger obviously," outfielder Anthony Hall said. "I'm more excited for the offensive part. I think it'll help us a little bit, especially me."

Hall hit .286 with 11 doubles, a triple, six home runs and 36 RBIs last season and was also one of UO's best defensive outfielders.

The changes certainly won't turn PK Park into a bandbox but the extreme edge for pitchers, particularly in the early spring, will be lessened.

"That just means I'm going to have to keep the ball low and at the knees and lower than that," pitcher Isaac Ayon said. "Other than that it feels beautiful. I'm glad we got a renovation. We couldn't be happier."

The new turf will also impact the infield. Older FieldTurf fields had more rubber and ground balls would take bigger hops, whereas newer technology includes cork and coconut husks that are much closer to natural dirt infields.

"It's awesome," shortstop Josh Kasevich said. "I think the coolest part for me is the infield. Kind of a different material. I think actually it's coconut shavings on the infield so it plays kind of like dirt. Get some more true hops and plays really nice."

The Ducks began team practices Friday, Feb. 4.

The season opener at San Diego is Feb. 18, and the home opener against St. John's is Feb. 25.

ON THE SLATE

- TUESDAY, FEB. 8**
Prep girls basketball
 lone/Arlington at Echo, 6 p.m.
 Riverside at Irrigon, 6 p.m.
 Weston-McEwen at Union, 6 p.m.
 Pendleton at Ridgeview, 7 p.m.
Prep boys basketball
 Pendleton at Ridgeview, 5:30 p.m.
 lone/Arlington at Echo, 7:30 p.m.
 Riverside at Irrigon, 7:30 p.m.
 Weston-McEwen at Union, 7:30 p.m.
- WEDNESDAY, FEB. 9**
College men's basketball
 Blue Mountain at Spokane, 7:30 p.m.
College women's basketball
 Blue Mountain at Spokane, 5:30 p.m.
- Prep girls basketball**
 Nixyaawii at Griswold, 6 p.m.
Prep boys basketball
 Nixyaawii at Griswold, 7:30 p.m.
- THURSDAY, FEB. 10**
Prep girls basketball
 Nixyaawii at Pendleton JV, 4:30 p.m.
 Irrigon at Umatilla, 6 p.m.
Prep boys basketball
 Nixyaawii at Pendleton JV, 6:30 p.m.
 Irrigon at Umatilla, 7:30 p.m.

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