

EAST OREGONIAN SPORTS

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A8

EOU softball enjoying sustained success

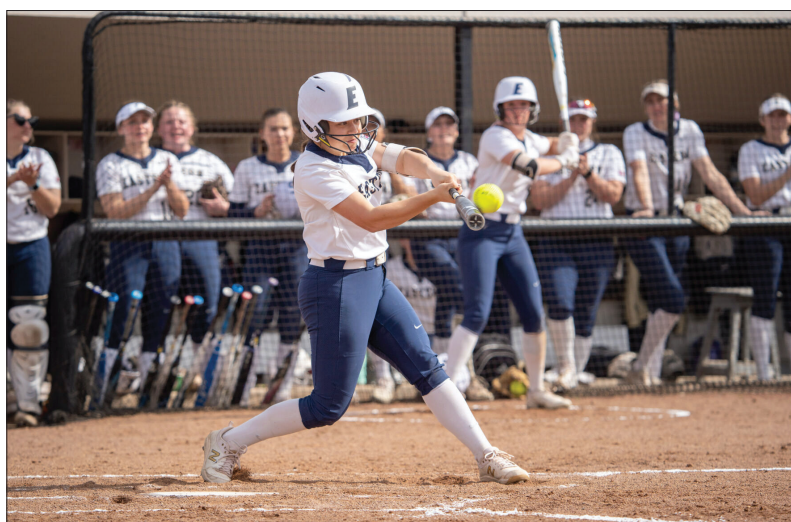
By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

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 eight 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," Mountaineers' head coach Nicole Christian said. "It's those little things that build up the program and the winning mentality."

Christian is in just her third year



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Eastern Oregon University's Taylor Dow (5) drives a pitch during the the second game of a doubleheader March 25, 2022, against Providence University. The Mountaineers swept the series. Now with three weeks left in the regular season, EOU has 30 wins and is eight wins away from setting the program record for wins in a season.

as head coach, taking the reins of a team that went 13-32 in the previous season before her hiring in 2019. Not

much changed in terms of winning percentage over the last two seasons, but the 2022 campaign has seen a

major shift in the momentum of the program.

Eastern is 30-11 on the year and 16-5 in conference play, standing just three games back of first-place Oregon Tech. The Mountaineers have 12 games remaining on the schedule, four of which are against the Hustlin' Owls. With the conference tournament and potential NAA tournament appearance on the horizon, Eastern is within reach of the program's all-time single-season win mark of 37 set in 2000.

"We're putting ourselves in a great place to get to the CCC and possibly nationals, you never know how the rankings will play out," Christian said. "We're just playing it day-by-day in regards to the games we've got left and who we're facing."

A big part of the Mountaineers' success has been its solid pitching staff, led by senior Amanda Smith.

Eastern's ace is 13-4 on the year, a win total that is second highest in the Cascade Collegiate Conference. Smith is fifth in the conference

with a 1.82 ERA, fourth in opposing batting average at .197, third in innings thrown with 119, second in strikeouts with 100 and third with three saves. The senior was arguably at her best all season on April 1 against Warner Pacific, throwing a five-inning no-hitter.

On top of Smith's consistent outings in the pitcher's circle, Abby Giles and McKenna Stallings have totaled seven wins each. Giles ranks second in the conference with a 1.54 ERA and fourth in opposing batting average at .206. According to Christian, Giles has been a crucial player this year in being able to step in and provide composed innings during a bases-loaded jam or a difficult pitching situation.

"She has been our workhorse," Christian said. "Abby has just been that girl that goes in there with a stellar attitude and takes care of business. She's been our savior numerous times this year."

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PENDLETON VOLLEYBALL

Speer takes over

She coached in the NWAC at Mt. Hood and WWCC

By ANNIE FOWLER
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Chelsie Speer is coming home. The 2001 graduate of Pendleton High School was named the Bucks' volleyball coach earlier this week, bringing her back to where her coaching career started.

"To be honest, it feels comfortable," Speer said. "I lived in Walla Walla, but I always identify myself as being from Pendleton."

Speer (nee Freeman) replaces Amanda Lapp, who stepped down after last season after eight years.

"We hit a home run with Chelsie," Pendleton Athletic Director Mike Somnis said. "We are extremely fortunate to hire a coach of Chelsie's caliber with such a wealth of coaching experience at the college level."

Speer coached the Bucks for one season in 2008, and was named the Intermountain Conference Co-Coach of the Year after leading the Bucks to a 16-5 overall record. Pendleton was 11-3 in IMC play.

She then moved on to Mt. Hood Community College, where she led the Saints for five seasons.

She most recently was the head coach at Walla Walla Community College for eight years. She was relieved of her duties at WWCC for failure to get the COVID-19 vaccination because of religious beliefs.

Somnis said Speer applied for and received a religious exemption with Pendleton.

"It's pretty crazy times," Speer said. "It was hard to leave. I got ripped away with a month of the season left. We had a really good record. I have strong faith and God



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Pendleton High School's new head volleyball coach Chelsie Speer poses for a photo Wednesday, April 13, 2022. She begins the roll this fall after coaching at Walla Walla and Mt. Hood community colleges. Speer graduated from PHS in 2001 and coached at the school in 2008.

is redirecting us in another direction. Coaching is not just about Xs and Os, but directing kids in life."

In addition to Speer losing her teaching and coaching job, her husband Justin, who was the WWCC baseball coach, suffered the same fate.

"That was a pretty traumatic experience to go through," Speer said. "It took awhile to get through this. Just have to be patient and let things play out. People have been really supportive in the community."

When she was at Mt. Hood, Speer led the Saints to five Southern Region titles, one NWAC Championship, two NWAC second-place finishes, one third-place finish and

one fourth-place finish.

Speer also received Southern Region Coach of the Year in 2009, 2010, 2012 and 2013. Her overall record in five seasons at Hood was 175-43.

The Saints won the NWAC title in 2011, beating WWCC.

Speer went to Walla Walla in 2014. She twice was named East Region Coach of the year. Through her first seven years, her record was 211-98.

"She has an excellent track record as a head coach and is a big believer in building the volleyball culture in Pendleton," Somnis said. "She is extremely student centered

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Javelin showdown

Pendleton's Jennings, Wa-Hi's Sirmon are nationally ranked

By ANNIE FOWLER
East Oregonian

PASCO — On the road, 45 miles separate two of the top three high school javelin throwers in the nation. On the javelin runway, that distance is 2 feet, 2 inches.

Top-ranked Sam Jennings of Pendleton, and No. 3 Dash Sirmon of Walla Walla, will face-off in the javelin event Saturday, April 16, at the 59th annual Pasco Invite.

"I am super excited," said Sirmon, who comes into the meet with a personal best throw of 207-3. "He is a great athlete. I am so excited to be able to compete against him. It will be good."

Jennings, who hit 209-5 at the La Grande Invite last week, was a little conflicted about the Pasco Invite with a meet at Pendleton the day before.

"Competition is fun, but I would rather my family and friends get to watch," Jennings said. "I'd like to throw against him, but I don't know what that would prove. It's about who throws the best that day. I try not to get caught up in the records and rankings. I just try to get a good mark for myself."

The Pasco Invite is one of the largest one-day track meets in the nation, drawing schools from all over the Northwest. Participants have to have qualifying marks and times to compete.

The meet starts at 9 a.m., with the boys javelin starting at 10 a.m.

The Pasco Invite and stadium record for the javelin is 229-5, set by Derek Eager of Tahoma in 2010.

"It's awesome," Wa-Hi coach Eric Hisaw said. "It's just crazy they are 45 minutes apart and they finally get to compete against each other. I think it will be really special for them."

Pendleton coach Larry Brizendine said it's important for his top athletes to compete at meets such as the Pasco Invite.

"We like to take them to bigger meets," he said. "When they are winning handily, they need to be pushed."

Both throwers have Division I scholarships in hand, with Jennings going to BYU and Sirmon to the University of Washington. Both also hold their respective high school records in the event.

Jennings' personal best is 224-9 3/4, which he hit July 10, 2021 at the USATF Oregon Association Youth Track and Field Championships in Portland. Since it was out of season, the 209-5 stands as the school record.

Though they live relatively close to one another, Sirmon said they have only thrown against each other twice in the past four years.

"The first time was our freshman year in Sacramento, and second time this past summer in the Tri-Cities," Sirmon said. "In Sacramento, I was



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File

Pendleton's Sam Jennings prepares to throw the javelin May 22, 2021 at the 5A state track and field meet in Wilsonville. Jennings, the top thrower in the nation this spring, will throw Saturday, April 16, 2022, at the Pasco Invite.



Eric Hisaw/Contributed Photo

Walla Walla High School senior Dash Sirmon topped the school's javelin record during the summer of 2021 with his throw of 206 feet, 8 inches, at a meet in Cheney, Washington. He is No. 3 in the nation and competes Saturday, April 16, 2022, at the Pasco Invite, where top-ranked Sam Jennings of Pendleton also is throwing.

first and he was fourth, and this last time he got me by a few feet."

With one school in Oregon and the other in Washington, the teams don't see each other often, and Jennings said he doesn't like the javelin rules in Washington that require throwers to have a rubber tip on the end of their javelin for safety purposes.

Washington is one of five states that require the rubber tip, and the only one west of the Mississippi.

Pendleton also has Andy Oja entered in the 110 and 300 hurdles. His best time in the 300s is 42 seconds, and 15.31 in the 110s.

Meet personnel in the Invite might look into padding the wall of the locker rooms at the end of this discus sector, which is roughly 200 feet from the front of the ring.

Hermiston's Caden Hottman's school-record throw of 185-8 ranks him 11th in the nation and second

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ON THE SLATE

Riverside at Sherman, 4 p.m.
Stanfield/Echo at Arlington, 4:30 p.m.

Track and field
Hermiston at River City Relays, Hanford, TBD
Ione, Irrigon, Umatilla at Columbia River Invitational, Riverside, 3:15 p.m.

FRIDAY, APRIL 15
Prep baseball
Burns at Riverside (2), 1 p.m.
Umatilla at Nyssa (2), 1 p.m. (MT)
Pendleton at The Dalles (2), 3 p.m.
La Grande at McLoughlin, 4 p.m.
Hermiston at Kennewick (2), 4 p.m.

Prep softball
Umatilla at Nyssa (2), 1 p.m.
Burns at Riverside (2), 1 p.m.

Elgin at Heppner/Ione (2), 1 p.m.
La Grande at McLoughlin (2), 2 p.m.
The Dalles at Pendleton (2), 3 p.m.
Pasco at Hermiston (2), 4 p.m.

Prep golf
Heppner vs. Grant Union, John Day Golf Club, 10 a.m.

Prep tennis
Hermiston at Tri-City Invite, 1 p.m.
Prep lacrosse
Selah at Hermiston, 7 p.m.

Track and field
Griswold, Pilot Rock at Buck Track Classic, Pendleton, 3 p.m.
Heppner, Irrigon, McLoughlin, Riverside, Stanfield/Echo, Weston-McEwen at River's Edge, Umatilla, noon

Schedules are subject to change

THURSDAY, APRIL 14

Prep baseball
Pendleton JV at Heppner, 3 p.m.
Irrigon at La Grande JV, 4 p.m.

Prep softball
Pendleton JV at Irrigon, 4 p.m.

Boys soccer
Hermiston at Chiawana, 7 p.m.

Prep golf
Hermiston at MCC pod, Richland, 10:30 a.m.

Prep tennis
Weston-McEwen boys and girls at Pendleton, 3 p.m.
Hanford at Hermiston, 4 p.m.