

**SOFTBALL PREVIEW**

# Bringing talent to the diamond

By **RONALD BOND**  
Wallowa County Chieftain

**E**NTERPRISE — Gary Gasset has a problem on his hands this spring. Although it's a problem most teams in the region wish they could lay claim to.

"We've got 12, 13 good players," the Wallowa Valley softball coach said. "My biggest problem is going to be getting everyone playing time."

The Outlaws did lose two seniors to graduation in shortstop Claire Farwell and second baseman Grace Collins. Not only do they lose that leadership, but the added experience Farwell brought as the team's lead-off hitter.

However, the team has a good blend of talent, youth and experience as it gets set to take the field, Gasset said.

"We do (have) a lot of players and we have a good mixture of young, good players and older good players," he said. "And a lot of younger kids that have been well coached earlier in their career. They know how to play, and that is always good when you get them. They know what to do, you just kind of got to push the buttons."

He's also not confined to just one spot for each player, either.

"A lot can play a lot of positions," he said. "You are going to be able to mix and match and move players around a bit."

Among the players back for the Outlaws, who went 11-8 last year, are both starting pitchers, including sophomore Aimee Meyers, who led the team with an 8-3 record on the mound.

"Aimee being a freshman (last year), I thought she did fabulous," Gasset said. "Liz (Rowley) is a



Wallowa Valley's Rylin Kirkland connects for a home run during a doubleheader with the Echo/Stanfield Cougars on Saturday, May 1, 2021.

Ellen Morris Bishop/For the Wallowa County Chieftain, File

good pitcher, and throws about as hard as anybody, but does have a tendency to get wild."

He noted that as a pitching staff, the team does "have to cut down on

the walks."

Another positive that Gasset believes he'll have this spring is an explosive offense. The team averaged just fewer than 10 runs per

game a year ago, with 188 runs in 19 contests.

Scoring runs I don't think is going to be a problem for us," he said. "... We can outpitch most teams,

and I think that this year we'll be able to outpitch most teams."

Those set to fuel the offense include Rowley, who led the team with four home runs last year, Meyers, catcher Rilyn Kirkland, Sophie Moeller and Cooper Nave.

"Rilyn is going to be a player to watch. She was the best catcher I saw last year out of any team we played," Gasset said. "Cooper Nave is a great defensive first baseman and also hit well last year."

As for Moeller, the coach expects the sophomore will be stepping into the leadoff role and taking over at shortstop.

"Last year I think she batted second, and she did a good job there," he said. "It should be a good transition."

Wallowa Valley will be road warriors to start the season, with 18 of its first 20 contests outside of Wallowa County, save for a home-opening doubleheader April 1 against Pilot Rock/Nixyaawii. The team doesn't return home until April 29 against Riverside. In that stretch, the Outlaws play some traditionally strong teams in nonleague, including Weston-McEwen in their opener March 18, Grant Union, Union/Cove, and Heppner/Ione.

But due to the pandemic altering sports the past two years, one thing Gasset doesn't have a gauge for is the level of his team's competition.

"I have no idea what we're walking into," he said, though he is optimistic. "... I expect good things. They're a pretty young team, so I do expect some issues along the way, but it's probably the first group of kids that I've had (that) they know how to play softball. We've had good teams, but we had a couple softball players and a bunch of basketball players. This team, they're softball players."

**BASEBALL PREVIEW**

# New head coach, but similar game plan for Wallowa Valley baseball

By **RONALD BOND**  
Wallowa County Chieftain

**J**OSEPH — While there is a new head coach for the Wallowa Valley baseball team this spring, much is going to be the same, including what has become one of the strong points for the Eagles the last few years — deep pitching.

Tanner Shelton will steer the ship this spring, but he has been on the staff for several years, and said, in fact, the coaching staff is largely the same as it was a year ago, when Wallowa Valley took third in the pandemic-shortened season.

"We didn't turn over any coaches," he said. "We actually added a coach and still have the same staff. We all have our input, we accept it from each other and make the best decisions."

The Eagles' M.O. in recent years has been its pitching staff, and that won't change even with the graduation of Trace Evans and Flynn Nave, two of the team's top pitchers from last year's 13-3 squad.

"We did lose some very key pitching last year, but we have guys stepping (up)," Shelton said. "We've got Trace Collier. Cody Fent came on really good last year, especially toward the end. I think he's going to play a (role). And his brother, Caden. He is always in the game, it seems."

"Really excited about (Lane) Rouse and Maclane (Melville) and Jaxon Grover on the mound."

And that isn't even the extent of the arms available. Shelton said especially early in the season as



Wallowa Valley's Trace Collier, center, is shown trying to escape a rundown during a game against Grant Union on Saturday, May 1, 2021.

Ellen Morris Bishop/For the Wallowa County Chieftain, File

pitchers are building endurance, pitch counts will be kept lower. There also isn't a designated staff ace, nor, as of March 9, had the varsity and JV teams been set.

"We let that play out as the season goes on, who takes over that lead starting role," he said. "As of right now, we're a bullpen team."

Also gone due to graduation are David Salim and Zeb Rams-

den, with the departure of Ramsden a big hole to fill due to his play as catcher.

"Zeb is going to be hard to replace because he caught everything — every inning of every game," Shelton said, adding that Ramsden was remarkably steady, whether it was early in Game 1 of a doubleheader or late in Game 2. "Cody Fent and Maclane are both

very skilled catchers, and I think, they're going to be bouncing back and forth behind the plate for us."

Offensively, Shelton said there is a bit of a focus "to get a little pop out of our bats," but said the offense will be catered to what the team has.

In-game decisions about how to handle a scenario already were being made by Shelton, who already had been the third-base coach.

"I've been making the calls on small ball or long ball," he said. "We're going to stay the same until we can get stopped or we see something to change our philosophy."

The biggest challenge ahead for now is getting on the field for practice. The team has been largely using the indoor practice facility in Enterprise with snow still on the field, but even that has its limitations.

"Obviously, we haven't been able to throw over 90 feet, so that's going to be tough to adjust to once we get back on the field," he said.

The slate is road-heavy for Wallowa Valley this spring, with the first 12 and 15 of the first 16 games on the slate outside of Wallowa County.

The team also starts in earnest with some stiff competition, opening March 18 on the road against traditional 3A power La Pine, the 2018 and 2019 3A state champions. The Eagles face St. Mary's, Medford, later in the day.

"We've been wanting these big games early in the season for power ranking," Shelton said. "We're excited about playing these opponents and seeing how we measure up."

The first home game isn't until April 18 against the Baker JV, and the first home league set is an April 29 doubleheader against Riverside.

"We're really excited. New head coach, but same coaching staff," Shelton said. "We all know each other, and think we're going to be able to make this group of kids as good as we have been in the past."

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