

Cottage Grove begins season in search of new leaders



The Lions must make up for the loss of four seniors, who keyed last year's dramatic run to the state playoffs

BY MATT HOLLANDER
The Cottage Grove Sentinel

Coming off of a last-place finish in the Sky-Em in 2013, the only direction that last year's Cottage Grove baseball team could go was up. By mid-April the Lions had already bettered their win total from the previous season. But still, a 9-2 finish and a berth to the state playoffs hardly seemed to be in the cards.

Whether or not there was something in the water during the final month of the Lions' season, coach Dan Geiszler will tell you that he never thought to look.

file photo

Cottage Grove's Zach Thomason was a first-team all-league pitcher a year ago.

"Honestly, I never thought about it," he said of his team's torrid finish. "I know it's a cliché, but we just thought about the next game. Sometimes as a coach you project out, but so many things could have happened with teams winning and not winning. We knew the teams we had to beat, and that's what we focused on."

Cottage Grove stood at 8-9 before their stretch run, but Geiszler said he had already seen what his team was capable of in a nonconference showdown with Pleasant Hill in early April. The Lions trailed the Billies 7-3 and were down to their final out with nobody on base before rallying to win the game in extra innings, 8-7.

Although Cottage Grove lost several games afterward, Geiszler, who was named Sky-Em League Coach of the

Year, said this was the turning point of the season and the moment of belief for many players.

"I knew we had that run in us because we were starting to play well as a team," said senior pitcher Zach Thomason. "And then it all came together when it mattered the most."

That conviction was tested and affirmed through a different set of circumstances in Cottage Grove's May 12 game against Sweet Home. The Lions led the Huskies 9-4 in the bottom of the seventh before allowing them to tie it up. But Cottage Grove did not flinch. It got three base hits and a scored a run in the top of the eighth and shut down Sweet Home to seal the victory.

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Lions earn postseason honors

After a runner-up finish in the Sky-Em, four members of the Cottage Grove girls' basketball team were recognized on the all-league ballot: Conner Borigo shared player of the year honors with Sutherlin's Miranda Mendenhall; Taylor Sayles and Melissa Thielman were named to the second team, and Hannah Arnold earned honorable mention. Kerry Clawson was voted coach of the year.

"It means a lot to be recognized by the other league coaches," said Borigo, who established a new school record of 34 points in a single game earlier this year. "This has been a goal since my freshman year."

Clawson said Borigo, who totaled 490 points and 190 rebounds, was a very deserving MVP candidate, pointing to all the things opposing coaches did to prepare for her.

The last Cottage Grove player to be awarded league MVP was Reed Levings in 2010.

League champion Sutherlin placed six players on the all-league ballot. Despite winning the conference last year, only three Lions were voted onto teams.

"I was relieved that my kids were recognized," said Clawson.

While the Cottage Grove boys' basketball team struggled to a 1-9 record, three Lions earned all-league distinction: Kory Parent was voted to the second team; Blake Sentman and Chance Hopkins were named honorable mention.

Junction City led the league with three first-team players, including MVP Hayden Martinez.

Additionally, four Cottage Grove winter-sports teams earned OSAA Academic all-State awards. Boys' and girls' basketball, and boys' and girls' swimming each had grade-point averages among the top-10 in the state.

The Lions' football, volleyball and boy's and girls' soccer programs were also recognized as academic all-state teams.



photo by Top Dog Images

Amber Walker blossomed in her first season of sand volleyball. She and her partner earned a featured appearance in the EVP World Finals.

Walker draws her line to the sand

Amber Walker (CGHS '08) is preparing for her second season of professional beach volleyball

BY MATT HOLLANDER
The Cottage Grove Sentinel

Amber Walker (CGHS — '08) has called many places home over the past decade: Juneau, Cottage Grove, Chicago, Portland and now, the Bay Area. But this is not a case of gypsy feet. Her urge to move comes from a love for volleyball. Last year, Walker's desire to excel in the sand was rewarded with a professional endorsement and a featured appearance in the EVP World Finals of Beach Volleyball.

At this juncture, it would be all too easy to connect the dots of fate, but that would underrate some very critical measures on Walker's part.

"With each move I've been driven by opportunity," Walker said. "The chances to pursue a dream are few and far between, and I think that we can make too many assumptions about the opportunities we'll have."

After growing up in Alaska, Walker moved to Cottage Grove for her senior year of high school. While some might have struggled with that transi-

tion, Walker embraced the challenge and recognized the opportunity to play more competitive volleyball. Taking a team bus for games was also a welcome change for Walker, whose Juneau Douglas High School team regularly had to travel by boat or plane.

In her lone season with the Lions, Walker earned all-Sky-Em League honors.

For a long time, Walker had aspired to play in college, but she was unfamiliar with the recruiting game. Walker thought that she could start and finish the process during her senior year. But as she would find out, most players had signed with schools before she had made her first contacts.

But Coley Pawlikowski, who was then the head coach at North Park University, a Division III program in Chicago, saw in Walker the potential for an elite-level player.

"When I watched her film, her athleticism jumped off the screen," Pawlikowski recalled. "I knew that I wanted her in my gym, and the idea of helping her grow and develop was very enticing."

So, Pawlikowski promised to help Walker take her game to the next level, and Walker signed on as an outside-hitter for the Vikings.

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Athlete of the Week



Cottage Grove freshman Kim Smith competed alongside top high-school bowlers from around the state at this past weekend's all-star tournament. By consistently bowling in the 190s, Smith helped her team finish first out of 14 all-star teams. Smith qualified for the tournament by placing fourth at districts.



Kim Smith

Lions seek encore to breakthrough season



file photo

Cottage Grove's Kale'a Galbreath earned second-team all-Sky-Em League recognition as an outfielder last year.

Seven players return from last year's 10-win squad

BY MATT HOLLANDER
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Cottage Grove surpassed any conceivable expectation in 2014 under first-year head coach Cheryl Frieze. With an overall record of 10-11, the Lions equaled their combined win total of the previous five seasons (!).

In spite of that, Cottage Grove couldn't help but walk away with a sense of 'what if.' The Lions entered the month of May at 10-5, but six straight losses left them on the outside looking in on the postseason.

"It was the best season in quite a few years for the program, so

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