

# Elks' 'whirlwind' season one of learning and growing

BY JON STINNETT

With a team short on experience, and with a drastically shortened season (not to mention offseason) in which to gain more, progress in the fundamentals of softball shaped the spring for the Elkton Elks.

Describing this season as a "whirlwind" even before its official end, Elkton Manager Katie DeBonis pointed out that much of her team had never played the game before

this year. Which is not to say that success was nowhere to be found. Elkton can count wins against Glendale, Oakland and Riddle to its favor this year, and the Elks fought hard even in their losses.

But according to DeBonis, the scoreboard certainly can't tell the entire tale of the Elks' season.

"As you can expect with a team that is looking at softball with fresh eyes, we had so many successes to celebrate: laying a bunt down (perfect-

ly) for the very first time in a game and making in on base; catching a pop fly in the outfield for the first time at a really key moment, stealing a base for the first time," she said, adding that "their excitement and celebrations were very sweet and incredibly inspiring to be part of."

In fact, the camaraderie among players helped the Elks weather their challenges.

"We have a few girls with some experience, and they were really great about teach-

ing and lending insight to the less experienced players," she said. "I am super thankful that they all were incredibly supportive of one another."

Last week, Elkton found itself on the wrong end of tough losses against the North Douglas juggernaut and a talented Bandon team. And yet, DeBonis said she feels that more time to prepare in the preseason could have helped them be more competitive against such quality competition.

"I think our biggest chal-

lenge was the limited timeframe prior to games starting, particularly with newer players," she said. "We had a lot of girls that were just scared of the ball, and as the season progressed, it lessened. I just wish we would have had a little more time leading into the season to work on basics."

The Elks were led by pitcher Avree Block and catcher Bailey Peacock, who DeBonis called the "driving force" of the team. But with solid fundamentals to draw from, it

seems certain that Elkton will be a force to be reckoned with in future years.

"All of these girls have put in a lot of hard work, and I'm so very proud of the progress they've made," DeBonis said. "I think the work they've put in this year gives us a really solid footing to begin again for next year."

Elkton was scheduled to finish its 2021 softball season by hosting a doubleheader against Yoncalla last night (after press deadlines).

## LION from B1

errors responsible for several Falcon runs. The Lions would need two more runs to avoid the 10-run rule in the fifth inning, and they did manage to score three. But these all came as the result of the wildness of Elmira's pitchers, who walked the bases loaded.

Cottage Grove sophomore Deegan Hutchins grounded out to bring in one run, and another walk and flyout by JJ Thornton accounted for the other two. Elmira struck back, though, with a three-run double that ended the game. Cottage Grove suffered another game where they did not produce a base-hit.

Berry noted the impressive performance of Lion pitcher Braden Buckland, who continued to battle throughout the game and often stymied Falcon hitters with a lively curveball.

Needing to find a way to rattle the bats in Saturday's finale, the Lions sure came out swinging. Christian Spear and Thornton led off the game with singles. Hutchins flew out to right to bring in a run, and then cleanup hitter Tristan Kane socked a standup double. Later freshman Peyton Glenn also singled. The Lions left one runner on but scored three runs on four hits to take the early lead. Things looked even brighter as Spear, a freshman, blanked the Falcons in the bottom of the first.

After the opening frame, however, Cottage Grove's bats again went quiet. Elmira lefty Aiden Wolgamott settled



**Junior Braden Buckland loops a curveball around an Elmira hitter** (JON STINNETT/FOR THE SENTINEL)

down, eventually striking out seven Lions and not allowing another run. By contrast, the Falcons scored four runs in the second inning, three in the fourth and three in the sixth to seal a 10-3 win.

Despite a challenging year, Berry said he's encouraged by progress the Lions made during their six-week season.

Up and down, there's been

improvement this year without question," he said. "We've played decent baseball down the stretch. There have just been too many hiccups here and there."

With four juniors and several freshmen and sophomores on this year's team, it's a pretty safe bet that the Lions will improve on the foundation laid this year in 2022.

## SOFTBALL from B1

would get no closer. The Challburgs were hired to helm the Lion softball squad last year, though the Covid lockdown put the 2020 season on ice. Danielle Challburg said that an early highlight to the 2021 campaign came with the Lions notching their first softball win in six years.

"That said it all; everything else is gravy," she said. "All in all, we're happy with our season."

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