

NWSL

Thorns ramp back up for home matchup against Kansas City

BY TYLER TACHMAN

The Oregonian

For the better part of the last two weeks, a handful of Portland Thorns players have been in Austin, Texas, training with the U.S. women's national team ahead of the 2021 Summer Olympics. In temperatures nearing triple digits, Sophia Smith, Lindsey Horan, Crystal Dunn, AD Franch and Becky Sauerbrunn have all been competing to earn a spot on the U.S. squad.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Thorns have been practicing in Portland, preparing for Sunday afternoon's matchup against Kansas City in a much more manageable climate. Around noon on Friday, the temperature in Portland was 72 degrees.

During the game on Sunday?

The high in Portland is forecast for the low-90s.

"Half of our team will be ready," defender Meghan Klingenberg said with a smile. "The other half will be taking IVs at halftime."

Sunday's match will be the Thorns' first since June 5. Despite currently sitting in second place in the NWSL standings, the first leg of the Thorns' season hasn't come without its bumps.

After winning the first game of the season, the Thorns lost two consecutive games for the first time in more than a year. It was part of three games in seven days that Thorns coach Mark Parsons called "probably the worst type of scheduling I've seen in nine years."

After flying from Portland to Orlando and then to New Jersey, the Thorns proceeded to rally, gutting out a 1-0 win over Gotham FC and then a 3-0 domination of Racing



Serena Morones/The Oregonian via AP, file

Portland Thorns' Lindsey Horan goes up for a header against NJ/NY Gotham FC's Gina Lewandowski (12) during the NWSL Challenge Cup final at Providence Park in May in Portland.

Louisville as they headed into their two-week layoff.

"This schedule we had was wild," Parsons said. "It was just sprinting to the next game and to the next game and to the next game."

For those not vying for a spot on the national team, the break has offered a chance to recharge.

Parsons gave the team some time off before integrating them back into low-intensity training, where they focused on the fundamentals. Specifically, Klingenberg worked on passes that set up scoring chances.

With the smaller group in Portland, the time off has also given Parsons a chance to work with his players in an individualized setting. Parsons held meetings with players, updating them on their soccer "identity" and reflecting on where they stand as leaders. In the past, Parsons has given them projects to evaluate their intangible qualities on the pitch.

"Hopefully, we've been developing some minds, developing some soccer players," Parsons said. "More importantly, you bond, you connect, you build relationships, you made the relationships even stronger. ... That's what makes our team special, our team unique. We invest in each other."

Mental focus is important as the season continues because the Thorns could lose players for an extended period of time on international duty, leaving an evolving rotation.

Recently, the team has picked up the intensity in practice as Sunday's matchup nears. The squad was set to be back in full Saturday for a training session to rekindle its chemistry.

The Thorns already defeated KC NWSL 2-1 in the preseason Challenge Cup in April behind goals from Rocky Rodriguez and Tyler Lussi. But Sunday's game will come with a recent change in the Thorns' favor as Provi-

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— Mark Parsons, Portland Thorns head coach

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"I think the sport is all about the fans, all about the connection, all about the experience, it's why I fell in love watching this game," Parsons said. "Being able to see stadiums and people, seeing my family, seeing my friends feel like they're on top of the world because the team won."

Up to this point in the season, even with limited attendance, Klingenberg has been trying to soak up her time on the pitch. Now 32, Klingenberg was once one of the young stars on the Olympic stage.

But now she's trying to stay present and help lead the Thorns to another title.

"There's not often times in life where you can get 11 people all on the same page, doing the same thing, pulling all in the same direction at the same pace," Klingenberg said. "When you do get to find an opportunity like that, I like to dive right in because who knows how many other times in life you'll be able to have that."

COLLEGE SPORTS



Sue Ogrocki/AP file

James Madison's Odicci Alexander pitches in a Women's College World Series game against Oklahoma on June 7 in Oklahoma City.

Women's college sports get boost in ratings, visibility

BY CLIFF BRUNT

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Odicci Alexander became an overnight sensation at the Women's College World Series.

James Madison's dynamic, endearingly humble pitcher was well known among die-hard softball fans, but she introduced herself to a national audience by throwing a complete game to help her unseeded squad stun tournament favorite Oklahoma in the opening game earlier this month. She threw another complete game the next day in a victory over Oklahoma State and a star was born.

As her team was being eliminated in the semifinals, Alexander drew a standing ovation when she left the field. Fans watching on TV and streaming devices were sorry to see her go — and so was ESPN, which has been broadcasting the WCWS since 2000.

Nick Dawson, ESPN's vice president of programming for college sports, called her emergence and her battles with Oklahoma "the overarching story of the event."

"It just so worked out that she, as a dominant pitcher, ended up paired against arguably the greatest offensive softball team in the history of the sport in the opening game of the Women's College World Series," Dawson said. "To me, a lot of that's luck. It just falls in your lap. The win is that we're positioned based on our commitment to the coverage of the event."

Coverage of Division I women's sports has been in a particularly bright spotlight in 2021 and the record-setting WCWS was just the latest example of growing interest — and growing demands for a more equitable playing field when compared with men's events.

ESPN's has been experimenting in recent years with showing more women's sports on its various platforms, and good numbers have led the network to become more aggressive. Television viewership was up significantly compared to 2019 in the four most popular women's college sports — basketball, softball, gymnastics and volleyball. The network expanded its volleyball coverage this year to include every match of the championship on an ESPN platform.

The Walt Disney Co. owns ABC and ESPN, and Dawson said ESPN is pushing to get more sports programming onto Saturday afternoon spots on ABC. This year, ABC broadcast women's basketball games and a women's softball game for the first time.

The women's gymnastics final on ABC averaged 808,000 viewers, a 510% increase over the 2019 final on ESPN.

Ripples of the increased exposure are being felt. According to the Social Blade social media analytics site, Alexander gained more than 50,000 Instagram followers within a week of her win over Oklahoma. She has since signed a professional contract with the United States Specialty Sports Association Prize.

"There were enough places where that story was told this time around that she's reached a certain critical mass," said Robert Thompson, professor of popular culture. "She's penetrated the culture. That is the important part of that story."

Alexander's story resonated on various levels. She's a Black player in a largely white sport who knocked off the eventual national champion while playing for an upstart school.

"I'm sure there have been great stories filled with all of these great narrative flourishes like hers that have been going on in women's sports for years," Thompson said, "but people who would have loved those stories never hear them because there hasn't been a lot of space given."

The average number of viewers for the three championship final games between Oklahoma and Florida State was a record 1,840,000, up 15% over 2019. The average for the 17-game WCWS was 1,203,000, up 10% over 2019 and numbers comparable to those from the men's College World Series in 2019.

"Finally, there is this recognition that if you show it, people will watch it," Thompson said. "And there's been a lot of resistance to that to women's sports."

Ratings also were high for the women's basketball Final Four. The championship game drew 4,077,000 viewers — the highest total since 2014 and up 9% from 2019. The semifinals averaged 2,850,000 viewers, the best numbers since 2012 and a 20% jump from 2019.

The volleyball championship match between Kentucky and Texas averaged 696,000 viewers, up 28% from 2019. Kentucky's victory was the most-viewed telecast on ESPN2 for the month of April.

Dawson said ESPN will remain aggressive about expanding programming opportunities for women's sports. Thompson said that makes sense.

"For women's sports, there is lots and lots and lots of room for lots and lots and lots of growth," he said. "If I were looking to invest in a genre of futures of American entertainment, women's sports would be close to the top of my list."

U.S. Open

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Oosthuizen made next to nothing until he holed 80 feet worth of putts over the final three holes, a 30-foot birdie on the 16th and his big eagle at the last.

"The only thing you see is ... you can actually putt this in the water," Oosthuizen said.

Woods is recovering from his February car crash that badly injured his legs and is not back at Torrey Pines. In his absence were replays of the eagles he made on the 13th and 18th hole in the third round in 2008 that gave him the 54-hole lead.

It took two players to do that this time, but it was equally spectacular.

"I know Tiger's was further right, but halfway there, I loved it," Hughes said. "The charge that goes through your body when the ball goes in the hole and the crowd erupts is why we play. It gives me goosebumps now thinking about it."

And he'll have plenty of nerves Sunday playing in the final group with Oosthuizen, who has had five runner-up finishes in the majors — two in playoffs — since winning the 2010 British Open at St. Andrews.

Henley holed a bunker shot



Gregory Bull/AP

Louis Oosthuizen plays his shot from the seventh tee during the third round of the U.S. Open on Saturday at Torrey Pines in San Diego.

on the par-3 11th for birdie for a two-shot lead and made a great par save from the cabbage behind the 12th green. But he showed signs of cracking over the last hour, dropping shots on the 15th and having to escape with par on No. 18.

Thirteen players remained under par going into the final round. Eight players were separated by three shots on a tough course that might not be as accessible as it was Saturday, when all three par 5s were set up to be reachable in two.

McIlroy started the day six shots behind and did his best

work to save bogey. He ran off three birdies in four holes to start the back nine, only to pull his tee shot into a ravine. He took a penalty drop instead of going into the ravine — a smart decision considering television showed a large rattlesnake in the area — and limited the damage to a bogey.

A birdie on the 18th for a 67, matching the low score of the week, gave him a chance to win a major for the first time since the 2014 PGA Championship. McIlroy hasn't had many of those opportunities lately.

"This is the only tourna-

ment in the world where you fist-pump a bogey," McIlroy said. "Only losing one there was a big deal, and getting it up-and-down out of the bunker on 16 and making that birdie on 18 just to get that shot back that I lost, really big."

DeChambeau played it big, too, going with driver just about everywhere and missing some fairways by such a wide margin that he had good lies in fan-trampled grass. It led to his first time in 67 rounds at the majors without a bogey on his card, and his 68 gave him a chance to join Koepka and Curtis Strange as the only back-to-back Open winners in the last 50 years.

Koepka, meanwhile, was among those who lost a good opportunity. He shot 71 and was only five shots behind, but with 13 players ahead of him.

Jon Rahm, slowed by a double bogey on No. 14 and not nearly enough birdies, had a 72 and was in the group at 2-under 211 along with Scottie Scheffler (70) and Matthew Wolff (73).

Dustin Johnson shot a 68 and was among those at 1-under 212, four behind and very much in the game in this major and on this golf course.

"It's a golf course where anything can happen," Oosthuizen said.

Shiffrin

Continued from B1

She also carries around a festive holiday gnome, who has a big beard. It was a present she got for him (along with a matching one with braids for her mom, Eileen) on their last Christmas before his death.

The 2020-21 World Cup season was emotionally exhausting for the 26-year-old Shiffrin. There were good days (three World Cup wins) and plenty of sad days that had nothing to do with racing. Like after that January event in Zagreb, Croatia, when she finished fourth in the slalom.

"People thought it was because I got fourth and they were like, 'I'm so sorry. You'll do better next time,'" Shiffrin recounted. "I didn't care about

that. But I didn't want to be like, 'No, it's because of my dad. It's not because I got fourth.'"

Focus.

That's the word she hears on days she's feeling blue or having rough training sessions.

Focus.

It was always his way of getting her back to herself. Back in the zone of being the ski racer who has won 69 World Cup events, three overall titles and six world championships.

"I kind of yell at myself and he used to say, 'You know, I wonder if when you yell that's actually adding more of a distraction than just staying focused,'" Shiffrin said.

Music was part of their bond. Her dad loved the Beach Boys, Fleetwood Mac, Buffett and Simon. But he also appreciated the newer artists like



Nathan Bilow/AP file

First-place finisher Mikaela Shiffrin, left, poses with her father Jeff Shiffrin after a women's World Cup slalom ski race in Aspen, Colorado, in 2015. Olympic gold medalist Shiffrin constantly thinks of her dad, who died in February 2020 after an accident at his home in Colorado.

Taylor Swift. He would drum along to the beat on the steering wheel before turning and

asking the name of the song. "Sometimes, I download music because I think that he

would like it even more than I might like it," Shiffrin said.

Shiffrin recently finished a giant slalom and slalom training session on snow at Copper Mountain in Colorado. After all, it's a big upcoming season with the Winter Olympics in Beijing around the corner. She's thinking big, too — possibly competing in four or five events. The one up for discussion may be the downhill.

"I just want to see how things are going as we get closer, because the last thing I want to do is compete just for the sake of competing when I know that I have teammates who are dying for that spot," said Shiffrin, who captured slalom gold at the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the giant slalom title during the 2018 Pyeongchang Games along with silver

in the Alpine combined.

This will be an Olympics, though, without dad. Her parents groomed her and her brother, Taylor, to be skiers — to have fun on the slopes. The gold medals for Mikaela Shiffrin just followed.

The fund set up in his honor could pave the way for more golds, by other athletes.

Through the money raised on behalf of Jeff Shiffrin — and support from the Shelby Cullom Davis Charitable Fund — the organization was able to make a COVID-19 hardship payment of \$1,300 each to its '20-21 national team members.

"My dad loved all sports," Shiffrin said. "He just loved to see the work that athletes put into it, and the success they have from that work. He found it inspiring."