

COLLEGE BASEBALL

Oregon State's young nucleus is 'ready to take next step'

BY JOE FREEMAN

The Oregonian
As Mitch Canham gathered the 2021 Oregon State baseball team for one last chat, he gazed around at the departing leaders — the Kevin Abels, Andy Armstrongs, Troy Claunches and Jake Mulhollands — for an emotional farewell.

The Beavers had just endured a crushing 8-5 defeat to Dallas Baptist in the NCAA Regionals and the pain and disappointment were raw. A team with College World Series aspirations had squandered a five-run lead, and the careers of several prominent Beavers ended in heartbreak.

Canham thanked them, empathized with their pain and told them he loved them.

"They fought the good fight," he said. "They're special and we respect the heck out of them for everything that they've done and, as an alumni myself, we look up to him."

Then the OSU coach shifted his eyes to his young, returning players and issued a challenge. Remember this moment — and this regional experience — he said. Use it as fuel for the future.

"Mitch kind of got us fired up," sophomore Matthew Gretler said.

When seasons end, the tendency is to focus on the past. But as the Beavers move beyond the most unique two-year stretch in program history, their focus is on what's ahead.

The backbone of the team is expected to leave, as the Beavers' ace right-hander (Abel), starting catcher (Claunch), starting shortstop (Armstrong), closer (Mulholland) and best power hitter (Ryan Ober) will join a handful of others who have either exhausted their eligibility or plan to depart in the Major League Baseball draft. But the Beavers' roster is littered with young talent. Program insiders are bullish on the Beavers' future.

"I love the younger guys," Canham said. "They're ready to take the next step and I'm excited to see where they take the program."

The pitching staff will not only have to replace Abel and Mulholland, but also Jack Washburn and Mitchell Verburg. Washburn has entered the transfer portal and Verburg



Courtesy Mario Terrana

Oregon State's Kyle Dernedde rips a bases-clearing double against McNeese State in an elimination game in the Fort Worth Regional on Saturday in Fort Worth, Texas. Dernedde, a freshman this year, made the most of his opportunities late in the season.

is expected to move on to professional baseball.

But Cooper Hjerpe and Jake Pfenning will return to anchor the starting rotation and Will Frisch, who made six starts and excelled in a variety of roles, could be in line to join them as the Sunday starter. The Beavers' bullpen limped to the finish line, combining to finish 2-5 in

May. But, on the whole, it was one of the best in the Pac-12 Conference, and will return all but three pieces, including Bryant Salgado, Joey Mundt, Brock Townsend and Chase Watkins.

The lineup will lose two heart-and-soul pieces in Armstrong and Claunch. But Canham started six freshmen/sophomores in the regional, as

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talented up-and-comers Kyle Dernedde, Justin Boyd, Wade Meckler, Garret Forrester, Greg Fuchs and Gretler carried the offense.

Dernedde, the postseason star who played shortstop at Tualatin High School, is the leading contender to replace Armstrong at shortstop, while Cole Hamilton, who batted .318 as a backup before suffering an April injury, is in line to replace Claunch.

The Beavers' offense will receive its biggest boost from the return of Jacob Melton, who emerged as the team's best hitter before suffering a season-ending shoulder injury in late April.

An offense anchored by Meckler, Melton and post-season heroes Forrester and Dernedde should be better and more consistent.

"It was great to see Meckler come into his own," Canham said. "He and Melton are two

peas in a pod. They can sit in the cage and hit for hours. That will be contagious."

The program always has featured plenty of talent. It's typically the intangibles that separate the good teams from the great teams.

Canham repeatedly touted his team's chemistry and cohesion this season, but enhanced safety measures related to the coronavirus pandemic created more isolation than ever and eliminated chances for team-building exercises.

Canham will make it a priority to bring next year's team together in ways that were impossible during the pandemic.

"One of the biggest things for me is always the culture," Canham said. "And we had lots of obstacles with that this year. Being as close as we were and accomplishing what we did with all the limitations was remarkable. I'm excited about what's ahead."

Blazers

Continued from B1

The Celtics hired Udoka. Portland is stuck with Olshay, who now looks woefully unaware of his franchise's own history.

It wasn't that long ago that Paul Allen's organization embarrassed itself with dog fighting, drag racing and other law-breaking. The Blazers had a registered sex offender playing small forward, remember? In the end, fans stopped showing up to the arena and sponsors

boycotted. Those things — and not a conscience — forced the basketball organization to shift organizational philosophy.

Allen vowed that character would matter, going forward. Then, his beloved basketball franchise got about drafting and hiring people this city found easy to root for. Paul's gone now.

A question: Does character still matter?

Not if you're hiring Billups to replace Terry Stotts. That move sends a terrible message, particularly to the women in

our state. Never mind that Billups worked as an assistant with the Clippers. Never mind that he and Olshay go way back. Portland isn't L.A. The hire of Billups feels all wrong.

Sex-assault survivor Brenda Tracy is in disbelief today. Maybe you will be, too, after you read the details of the troubling allegations pointed at Billups and a couple of his teammates in November of 1997.

A night out at a comedy club ended with a woman calling police and getting a rape kit at the hospital. The exam re-

vealed "injuries to her throat, cervix, and rectum, along with bruising on her back consistent with someone being dragged across a rug."

Billups initially told investigators his role was consensual. The NBA star claimed at first that he wasn't even present in the teammate's condominium where the alleged assault took place.

That teammate, Antoine Walker, eventually filed a now-sealed lawsuit against Billups. He was never charged with a crime. Billups eventually set-

tled the case out of court in 2000 for an undisclosed sum.

Said Tracy: "Guess I won't be going to any Blazer games. I'm glad the men who raped me didn't amount to much because I can't imagine how hard it is to watch your rapist succeed in life when you're trying to deal with the fallout."

I've already heard from Blazers fans who say they won't bring themselves to support the franchise if Billups is officially hired. One of them said his wife was raped and he won't put her through the trauma

of bringing her to games. Another offered that it's just too sobering to absorb.

Billups might win some games. He might even win over some fans. But at what cost?

This is a franchise that promised us we'd be proud of the employees it brought to town. I'm not sure anyone closely following this hire feels proud.

I doubt Olshay will spend a minute considering how far back he's setting the franchise by hiring Billups. But he should.

Slater

Continued from B1

"It's going to be up to him to decide but he is going to be really susceptible to injury again," Slater said of his friend and protégé.

It seemed Slater's Olympic hopes had been settled in a semifinal in December 2019 at the famed Pipeline on the North Shore, regarded as surfing's ultimate playground.

Slater needed to defeat Brazilian star Italo Ferreira in the Pipe Masters heat to pass Florence, who had compiled enough points despite withdrawing from the world tour after an anterior cruciate ligament tear.

"I literally missed making the Olympics by one wave, by one heat," Slater said. "If I had won one more heat from the whole year I would have made the team."

Greg Cruse, chief executive of USA Surfing, expects Andino to be ready for Tokyo. So it comes down to Florence and Slater again but without waves determining the outcome.

Cruse is confident Florence will be honest about his capability.

"John John at 70% could still medal," Cruse said. "I want him to make the best decision for him."



Erik Kabik Photography/MediaPunch/IPX via AP, file photos

Kelly Slater gets barreled at the 50th Annual Billabong Pipe Masters in Haleiwa, Hawaii, in December.

The meet in Japan would be the first competition in months for both U.S. Olympians if they are healthy enough to surf.

Cruse said the final rosters have to be submitted by July 24.

Slater also has been injured this year with ankle and hip issues. He has competed in only two of six WSL Championship Tour events so far.

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But he looked good in his first competition since the injuries when finishing eighth over the weekend. Slater didn't take any practice runs at the artificial wave pool he developed in the Central Valley. Instead, the surfer arrived 20 minutes before his first heat, advanced to the next round and then spent a day doing promotional work and hanging with friends.

"I hope he decides to come to Japan just in case John John can't surf," USA Surfing's Cruse said. "He needs to be there and be recognized."

The WSL's chief executive Erik Logan said having Slater at the first surfing Olympics would be a fitting tribute "for us to sit back and enjoy the career that he's had and the fact that he is in the top five in the sport today at his age."

Slater is the caretaker of professional surfing, having ushered the sport into the 21st century as its popularity exploded. The Olympics provides the sport with a big stage beyond the ocean, which causes Slater some concern. "Surfing has gotten more

mainstream but there is an importance in keeping the DNA on the right side," he said of the counterculture lifestyle.

Slater proposed building a wave system in Japan for the Olympics to ensure a good showing. But he said Tokyo organizers wanted to use their beaches instead of an artificially produced wave.

That leaves the surfing competition at the mercy of weather gods.

Another issue is the competitive field. Each country was allotted two Olympic spots, which is standard for many sports. The problem is most of the world's best surfers hail from Australia, Brazil and the United States.

If he winds up competing, Slater isn't interested in winning medals for his country as much as meeting athletes to share cultures. It is something he has done for 35 years while on an endless summer.

"I'm from Florida but I don't necessarily feel like an American," Slater said. "I feel like I came from the Earth."

From the ocean is more like it.

MLB

Continued from B1

Spin rates may be down a bit but little else seems to have changed other than the side show that unfolds every time an umpire approaches a pitcher to make sure nothing is being hidden.

Hitters are still swinging and missing. And, so far at least, no one has been decapitated by a pitch that got away.

Apparently the old standby of sweat and rosin works pretty well, too. Either that or pitchers have found a way to apply the sticky stuff and still manage to avoid detection.

Whatever, the crackdown on sticky substances isn't the game changer pitchers claimed it would be — or, it seems, the quick fix Manfred was after.

Conversely, it also doesn't seem to be doing much to make the game any more watchable, though Manfred quickly claimed credit for what he said were positive trends in the analytics department.

But do give the commissioner credit for doing something — anything, really — to save a game that is in undeniable decline.

Lost in the theatrics — and semi-hysterics — over the shakedown pitchers must now endure is a simple calculation about major league baseball that has become apparent as the midpoint of the season nears.

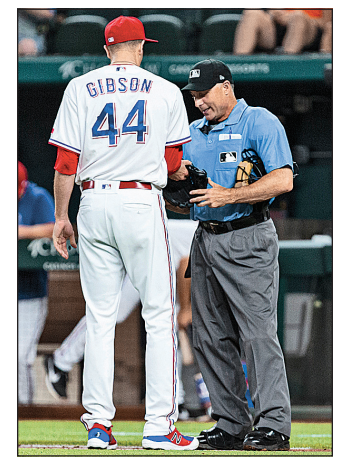
Fewer things are happening in baseball games. And it's taking them longer to happen.

That's a losing recipe for any sport fighting for the eyeballs in today's fractured media world. But for baseball it's becoming a crisis that threatens the game itself.

The newly implemented enforcement of the ban on sticky stuff on baseballs won't suddenly make things more interesting. MLB has let things go for too long to get the game back in one fell swoop.

But it just might prompt other changes to save the game we all love.

Manfred seems to understand that, even if he has presided over a degradation of baseball that began in earnest on Bud Selig's watch. America's national pastime is on its way to becoming a niche sport, and those running it ignore the slide



Sam Hodde/AP

Home plate umpire Dan Iasogna, right, inspects the glove of Texas Rangers starting pitcher Kyle Gibson (44) Monday in Arlington, Texas.

in popularity at their own risk.

That there are more strikeouts than hits is only one part of a bigger problem. Baseball has turned into a home run derby, with pitchers throwing as hard as they can, hitters swinging even harder, and little else happening otherwise.

Meanwhile, those who love the game for its strategy and nuances have watched, baffled that it could go this far.

That Manfred decided his first line of attack will be against cheaters who load up baseballs with sticky substances is, of course, loaded with irony. This is the same commissioner who refused to punish Houston players after they cheated their way to a World Series title in 2017, and he follows a commissioner who did little about steroid cheaters who helped get us where we are today.

But this is more about trying to correct an imbalance in the game than it is to ferret out cheaters. It's doing something proactive to boost baseball other than simply trotting out some hideous new All-Star uniforms.

It's also sending a message in advance of talks on a new collective bargaining agreement with players this postseason that if they don't agree to changes in the game, the commissioner has the power to do some things on his own.

The bottom line is baseball has been trending in the wrong direction for a long time now.

And even a small step toward reversing that beats doing nothing at all.



Kelly Slater at Pipe Masters in December.