

SPORTS

# Hoopsters bring home medals from Special Olympics regional tourney

BY SAM BARBEE  
HERMISTON HERALD

The Hermiston/Pendleton Special Olympics team sent 27 athletes to Hillsboro Sunday for the regional basketball tournament, and all 27 returned with medals.

Of the 27, four were members of an individual skills team, called the Live Wires, nine were members of three different 3-on-3 teams called the Thunder, Lightning and Currents, and the rest were members of the 5-on-5 Shockers.

The Thunder took home the gold medal after four games and earned a small slice of revenge after beating a team to which it had previously lost. The Currents took silver, and

the Lightning and Thunder each earned bronze medals. The Thunder were given the sportsmanship award.

Juan Peterson and Vivian McEachran each won gold medals in the individual skills competition, Lyall Arey won silver and Misty Larsen took home bronze in her first ISC competition.

A major challenge for the 27 athletes was getting enough gym time before the competition. They only practice once a week at Sandstone Middle School, and fitting that many athletes into one gym for an hour can be a struggle, coach Kristi Smalley said Friday.

"It was really like a three-ring circus in the gym to try and get the athletes good practice and ready for the competi-

tion," she said.

In the final, every player on the Thunder made at least two baskets, and, Smalley said, one player was "making a conscious effort" to feed teammates the ball who hadn't yet scored.

"He wanted to give them a chance to shine," Smalley said. "Our athletes, they want to support each other."

The players weren't just focused on their own team, however. When opponents scored, they clapped and cheered like they were teammates.

"The one thing that always shines through with our athletes that they demonstrate over and over again is their sportsmanship," Smalley said.

## COUGARS:

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Bailey said he needs those four girls to contribute and, more importantly, lead.

Bailey called Parks, a junior, "the glue" of last year's team, and her role behind the plate could make or break Echo's season.

"She is going to be a huge part of this team," Bailey said. "She knows what it takes to be a leader."

Last season was a disappointing year for Echo. Now, Bailey said, with the majority of the roster returning, the Cougars are primed to have a breakout year in the EOL.

Echo softball, like its baseball team counterpart in Stanfield, is in an unusual situation; girls from two schools come together to play on the same team.

While Echo and Stan-

field are in different classifications on their own, the schools often compete against each in other sports. Echo and Stanfield played twice this winter in girls basketball games. Bailey acknowledged it has been difficult in past years to bring two separate groups of girls together for a common cause.

"We break that wall down immediately," Bailey said. "We're now one team. We're called Cougar softball. We're Echo Cougar softball. We break that wall down first, and they seem to understand it and work through it."

But there's another aspect of the winter sports season also directly impacts Echo softball: success.

Both the Echo and Stanfield girls basketball teams were successful by their own standards. Echo split the league championship, won the district tournament and hosted a

playoff game for the first time in decades. Stanfield increased its win total 10 fold this season and got a taste of playoff basketball.

To Bailey, that success is just as important as good softball skills. The girls are starting the season with positive attitudes and are ready to compete.

"It breeds confidence," Bailey said. "The one I really see it in is Bailey Strofe. Last year, she took on the role of being our shortstop, and she struggled at it. She just didn't have the confidence, and this year, with the success of basketball, she rolled right into softball practice and you could just see the confidence ... Echo softball for years was a laughingstock, but a little success here and there, and it starts clicking."

The Cougars will play their season opener at 4 p.m. Monday at Heppner.

## RUNNERS:

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have people that you know as your teammates there, it's not gonna feel like that much of a difference."

It was important to Lemus-Cisneros, Zitterkob and Chavez that they run together. They have been teammates for as long as they can remember, and they said it would be special if they could remain so at the next level.

Eastern Oregon boasts a successful NAIA program that features a national champion and a number

of top performers. Umatilla cross country coach and assistant track coach Josh Ego also ran at EOU, and he gave the three sprinters insight into the program.

"He really enjoyed it, how close the team was, and it was something I wanted to be a part of," Chavez said.

Eastern wasn't alone in its pursuit of the three Vikings. Southern Oregon came calling, as well as Western Oregon and some colleges in Washington.

Lemus-Cisneros said she knew all along she wanted to stay in the area and go to Eastern.

"I think we kind of all convinced each other to go together," Chavez said. "I would see them going to look at other colleges, and I would say, 'Are you sure you don't want to go to Eastern?' And they would just slowly start convincing each other they wanted to go to Eastern. I think we all wanted to go there because it offered (the) academics we wanted and for sports and everything."

Zitterkob said she wants to study nursing. Lemus-Cisneros plans on studying health, and Chavez wants to pursue photo journalism.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Amie Zitterkob (left), Andrea Lemus-Cisneros (center) and Berenice Chavez sign their National Letters of Intent to run track at Eastern Oregon University Thursday.

## RESILIENCE:

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a fantastic coaching job to keep the girls positive and excited.

It's really not a surprise they played in the state championship game, and that never seemed out of the realm of possibility. But it was close.

After the play-in round win over Crescent Valley, Hoffert said then that the season was a success, that they already achieved great things. They came out of the

insanely strong field in Lake Oswego with a good showing, and they beat the No. 1-ranked team on its home floor and then continued its dominance over the CRC.

So, in his mind, Friday's result wasn't make or break for him.

The Bulldogs already proved their mettle as a team. And for a coach, that's a team of

champions.  
—Sam Barbee is the sports reporter for the Hermiston Herald and can be reached at (541) 564-4542 or sbarbee@hermistonherald.com

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