

New faces, new philosophies, new challenges

While preparing stories for the spring sports tab together, I noticed something rather unexpected: how many area teams had new coaches this year.

The Hermiston baseball, track, girls tennis, boys tennis and girls golf teams all have new head coaches. The Umatilla softball team has a new head guy.

Six new head coaches and five at one school. That's probably close to unprecedented in the area and creates some interesting things to keep an eye on as the spring unfolds.

A new head coach presents different dynamics, based on the situation. For instance, new Hermiston baseball coach Lance Hawkins was an assistant at Hermiston for 15 years. He already knows the program, the players, the league and the landscape as a whole. Monty Williams, new Umatilla softball coach, is fresh. He's still learning names, learning the league and learning the landscape.

These things present different challenges for players and coaches.

Sometimes change is a good thing. As I've mentioned before, my high school football team was terrible for two years until we got a head coach who turned things around. He brought a fresh voice, fresh concepts and pure enthusiasm to the team, and we bought into it. We truly felt like the new guy had our backs and would go to war for us. We reciprocated, and it propelled us to the playoffs in his first year. The program has only gotten better since then.

In baseball, a similar thing happened. Our baseball program was in shambles a year before I got there, and, with a new coach and largely the same players, we reached the playoffs in his first year and five years later played for a state championship. He also brought with him a fresh voice, fresh concepts and pure enthusiasm. It was the same situation with the same result.

Sometimes transitioning to a new coaches can be difficult. We got a new basketball coach in my sophomore year, and things did not go so well. I think the previous head coach was politely pushed out because the district implemented new policies: He wasn't a



SAM BARBEE
FROM THE SIDELINES
Sports reporter

teacher and had no desire to be. The guys on the team that year just didn't buy into the new coach. He brought a fresh voice and fresh concepts, but they differed from what we thought R. A. Long basketball was about. The program suffered because of it and still hasn't entirely recovered.

Three sports, three coaching changes, differing results. Coaching changes are unique.

I'm interested in seeing what the new coaches will do. Some, like new Hermiston girls tennis coach Jason Sivey, aren't planning on an overhaul. He said he's continuing the same sort of coaching style and philosophies as the previous regime. New Hermiston track coach Emily Strot is building on Bulldog football coach Mark Hodges' love of acronyms and infusing them into her own program. Her TRAIN like a Bulldog philosophy has gone well. A couple of seniors have fully bought into the Trust, Resilience, Ambition, Intensity, No excuses program and are giving others reason to buy in, too.

Still, it's harder for a new coach to come into a successful program and insert his or her will. It was easy for my new football and baseball coaches to convince us because we were bad. It was hard for the new basketball coach to convince us because we had just gone to state.

Other team's have different experiences. Though, Hermiston baseball was pretty good last year, Hawkins was around. Players already know and respect him. His philosophies are familiar and accepted. He's not a new coach: He's a new head coach, which is a subtle, yet important, distinction. He won't have to work hard to win the players over. He already has.

I'll finish the column like I did my last one: Here's to a good spring, coaches. I hope everything goes well.

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SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Hermiston third baseman Elory Jones slides in under the tag of Post Falls catcher Abi Melton for Hermiston's third run of a 6-4 come-from-behind victory at Rocky Heights Elementary School on Friday. Hermiston swept the Trojans after beating them 10-6 in game 1 of the double header.

HERMISTON SOFTBALL SWEEPS POST FALLS

Second win comes by default

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

Down 4-2 in the bottom of the fourth in the second game of a double header Friday, the Hermiston softball team needed a rally.

Post Falls (ID) starting pitcher Brooke Bowers had kept Hermiston at bay all game, holding the high-powered Bulldogs to just the two runs on two hits.

In the fourth inning, however, the Bulldogs popped for three. Jaime Hinkley singled sharply into left with two outs, plating Elizabeth Weems and Alex Barton, to put Hermiston up for good at 5-4. Post Falls went on its own rally in the top of the sixth to take an 8-5 lead, but the game was called due to darkness, with the score reverting back to that of the completed fifth inning, giving Hermiston the 6-4 default win.

In her second and longest varsity outing, Breyanna Naylor picked up the win after two innings of shutout ball. The junior, who was on the junior varsity squad last spring, struck out one and threw just 26 pitches in her two frames of work.

"It's a good confidence boost for our kids," Hermiston (2-1) head coach Kylee Lete said after the game. "We got some young players on the field right now, and every advantage we can have (we'll take). We had a lot of young kids step up in big ways for us tonight. I see them being excited about that, too."

Hinkley was 1-for-3 with the single and two RBIs, and Abi Drotzmann



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Hermiston junior Breyanna Naylor comes to the plate with a pitch during Hermiston's 6-4 victory over the Post Falls (ID) Trojans on Friday at Rocky Heights Elementary Schools. Naylor went two scoreless innings in her second varsity appearance.

was 2-for-3, Mikayla Kopacz had an RBI single and five other Bulldogs notched hits.

It was a group effort to produce the six runs, which

included bunts, sacrifice fly balls and RBI knocks.

"The bottom part of our lineup was really young today," Drotzmann said. "That showed them that

they're capable of doing the same thing."

That bottom of the order, largely made up of ju-

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Saturday, March 21

Baseball
Umatilla @ Dufur, 11 a.m.
Umatilla vs. Kennedy @ Dufur, 1 p.m.
Stanfield vs. Cascade (Leavenworth) @ Cascade (WA), 1:30 p.m.
Stanfield @ Cashmere, 1:30 p.m.

Sunday, March 22

Lacrosse
Hermiston vs. Canby, 2 p.m.

Monday, March 23

Golf
Hermiston @ Grandview Invite, 9 a.m.
Baseball
Hermiston vs. Redmond (DH), 11 a.m.
Softball
Hermiston vs. Oregon City @ Spring Break Invitational, 12 p.m.
Hermiston vs. Franklin @ Spring Break Invitational, 4 p.m.

Tuesday, March 24

Softball
Hermiston vs. Milwaukie @ Spring Break Invitational, 10 a.m.
Hermiston vs. Clackamas @ Spring Break Invitational, 2 p.m.

Wednesday, March 25

Lacrosse
Hermiston vs. Richland 5 p.m.
Baseball
Hermiston vs. Kamiakin, 4 p.m.

Bulldog softball team has high hopes this season

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

After reaching the state finals two years ago, the Hermiston softball team didn't have the season it was hoping for in 2014. Inconsistency plagued the Bulldogs' season, forcing them into fourth place in the Columbia River Conference with a 2-10 record, 6-18 overall, and they lost their last nine games of the year.

The Columbia River Conference is a traditionally strong softball league. Last year, Pendleton won the state championship, and Hood River Valley reached the semi-finals. The year before, in 2013, Hermiston was the state runner-up in a 1-0 heartbreaker to Sandy. In 2012, Pendleton again won the state championship, but it was The Dalles that reached the Semis.

In three years, all four CRC teams have reached at least the semi-final round, three times a CRC team made the finals and two state championships came of those three appearances.

With that tough league comes talented players, and Hermiston plans to show off its fair share heading into this season.

"We have a lot of athleticism," third-year head coach Kylee Lete said. "If we can overcome some of the knowledge of the game and we can grow in that area, we're going to be a competitive ball club. We just have to grow to understand the game and deepen our knowledge of the game."

The Bulldogs expect quite a bit out of at least three players.

Senior outfielder Abi Drotzmann has committed to play softball at Linfield College next spring. Mikayla Kopacz scored two runs without getting a hit out of the three hole in Hermiston's opening day loss to Ridgeview earlier in the week, and Ashley Moser, batting second, went 2-for-4 and also scored two runs. Hermiston lost that game 12-7, but it was a good first start, Lete said, and a good indication of

what is coming.

The softball team lost some key hurlers from the past two years, however, and will have to find a way to replace them. Freshman Julissa Almaguer threw six solid innings in the opening-game loss, and Lete has some others who will get a look in the circle, too.

"We saw (Almaguer) work all off season (and) work last year as an eighth-grader," Lete said. "We gave her an opportunity, and she impressed (Tuesday). She kept her composure really well, and as far as our ace goes, I don't know. We have some pretty competitive candidates for that spot, but I definitely think she's going to be an asset to our pitching staff this year."

Offensively, the Bulldogs have a number of left-handed slap hitters who can run, switch hitters and power throughout the lineup. Drotzmann put up sparkling numbers last spring, batting .459 and an impressive slugging percentage of .838. To put that number in

context, Babe Ruth slugged .847 in 1920, a record that stood for nearly a century.

This balance, plus Drotzmann, Lete said, is going to be something Hermiston will rely on this season, and the seven runs earlier in the week is proof of that.

"All of (our hitters) have power," Lete said. "The lefties have speed. It's nice. We have options this year as far as our order goes. It's not just power. It's speed (and) power."

Lete said what will certainly help Hermiston this season is a desire to reverse last year's fortunes. The Bulldogs have had a taste of championship-level softball and want to get there again.

"The girls (were) really eager to start this year," Lete said. "In the off season, they did a lot of work on their own working out, and that showed (Tuesday in a 12-7 loss). Just as far as the beginning of the year goes, they have a lot of things that they are eager to accomplish and wipe it clean from last year."