

COVID-19 IMPACT ON OIT ATHLETICS

The competition year explained from the student-athlete perspective.

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The nature of the unprecedented 2020-2021 competition year for collegiate athletics can best be described as a roller coaster of unpredictability. While it is no secret that every sport has been impacted by the emergence of COVID-19, each activity has been affected in very different ways; some sports have faced repeated delays to their season, others have seen a significant reduction in the number of competitions they are allowed to participate in and one sport may not even be able to have a season this year at all.

For softball, the team's practice formats have changed dramatically. Most of their practices during the week involve working out in groups of three or four while wearing face masks and social distancing. A few teams that the Lady Owls compete against during the regular season have also opted out — as a result, the team has been limited this year with gameplay and have had to adapt to a fair amount of schedule changes. Fans of the OIT softball squad will also be unable to cheer the team on inside the park, being asked instead to watch from outside the fence.

Senior outfielder Olivia Lethlean gave some details on how the year has gone for the team thus far, "The biggest obstacle we've had to overcome is not being able to build team camaraderie on and off the field, which is a key component to team success. I think our team has responded well to things that aren't in our control, and we're just ready to step onto the field and compete again." Softball has just started their preseason and began conference play in Great Falls, Montana, on March 5 against the University of Providence.

The Cascade Collegiate Conference (CCC) has been split into two separate groups for both of the Oregon Tech soccer teams, meaning the Owls will only play against half of the teams they normally do during the season. A beneficial aspect of a split conference is that it will reduce the amount of travel and will therefore decrease the risk of potential COVID-19 spread.

Senior goalkeeper Mitchell Jillson noted, "Playing outside during the winter is going to come with new challenges. Injuries are likely to be more frequent." Both soccer squads normally compete during the fall and play in warmer temperatures, but due to several postponements to the start of their seasons, the teams are essentially a spring sport this year. The men's and women's soccer teams started their regular seasons on March 7 against

Warner Pacific University.

COVID-19 didn't change how golf practices were previously structured besides the enforcement of social distancing. For competitions, the Owls will not physically play at the same site as other schools and will only play against their own teammates. This change was tough for the golf teams, with sophomore Maiya Baker commenting on the subject, "Playing against our own teammates really took away the competitive aspect that most of our team thrives on to do well." The teams were only allowed to compete in one preseason competition during the fall, but the athletes were able to get a feeling for how the season would play out. The golf squads kicked off CCC play on March 8 in Eagle Point, Oregon.

Delani Dietrich, a junior on OIT's cross-country team, explained how the group has been impacted by COVID-19 — the men's and women's teams used to train together, but now practice separately and masks must be worn by the runners at all times. For races, there is a new start in place. Dietrich explained, "The official calls out, 'Runners drop your masks, on your marks, go!' and this has become the new race-start norm." The cross-country teams have raced in two invites this year and participated in just one CCC race on March 26 in Lewiston, Idaho, hosted by Lewis-Clark State College.

The athletes of Oregon Tech have demonstrated conscientious behavior and unwavering resilience during the times of COVID-19. Every interviewed athlete expressed the same grateful attitude for being able to compete during the 2020-2021 competition year. The common theme among these athletes was the motivation to compete in a full season without it being canceled. Oregon Tech athletes are doing their part to lower the spread of COVID-19 and will do whatever it takes to have a season. **E**