

Ashland booters to face the best

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For seven Ashland-area youth soccer players, there is no off-season.

In fact, during the time that prep soccer players typically spend conditioning or participating in other sports, Katherine Cowger, Chelsie O'Neill, Scott Marlow, Steven Fisher, Christopher Mendoza, Mathew Mendoza and Charlie Sebrell kick things up a notch or two.

The players are seven of the 250 who play on the 10 Olympic Development Program soccer teams in Oregon.

"The competition's great," said ODP coordinator Erik Lyslo. "You're not going to find better competition anywhere."

The 10 teams that represent Oregon play against squads from around the country in a best-of-the-best showcase each spring and summer. Players try out in August to participate in the year-long program, though conditioning doesn't pick up until prep seasons end in November.

"You have elite players from each state play in tournaments," Lyslo said. "Eventually what happens is national coaches, college coaches select the top players to play on the national teams."

Comparable to the minor leagues of baseball, the national teams give young soccer players a place to hone their skills in preparation for college soccer and during the collegiate off-season.

ODP teams are divided by age and sex, with one squad for boys and one for girls per year for athletes ages 14-18. The majority of the players - as much as 90 percent, Lyslo estimates - on Oregon's teams hail from the Portland area.

However, interest in the program has been growing, as soccer players from Eastern and Southern Oregon have decided to make the commitment of time and money to play with Oregon's best against the top players in the country.

"It's nice to have kids from all over the state," Lyslo said, noting how much soccer's popularity has grown in recent years. "But it's a weekend thing and it's tough. We train twice a day over a weekend maybe once a month and then you have tournament play."

But the effort pays off. Oregon teams generally finish middle of the pack in tournaments against other teams from the western U.S. At the last tournament, held in Las Vegas, one Oregon team played in the finals.

"We do very well," Lyslo said. "I would say most of our kids would get college scholarships who are in this program. They're so much better because they play for ODP."