

# Buie: 'Armenta is the best QB in the state'

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Armenta spent a few frantic weeks during June bouncing from one high-profile camp to the next, sometimes on a consecutive days, from SMU to TCU to Oklahoma State to Texas Tech, then later to UNM and Northern Arizona and UNLV.

These proved to be perhaps the most instructive days in Armenta's offseason.

"I've been going to these camps since I was in the seventh grade," he said. "I think I can throw the ball with anyone in the country, and I think I proved that this summer. I threw it well at every camp I went to."

"But it's also being consistent. You see all this talent from around the country, and every single guy can sling it. How you separate yourself is how consistent you are every single play."

Marcelli echoed that point emphatically.

"He's better at everything, to be honest," Marcelli said, comparing the 2021 Armenta to the 2022 model. "The most shocking thing is how well he knows things and how fast the ball is out of his hands. It's almost a shock when he doesn't hit a receiver at this point."

This La Cueva offense is returning virtually all its key components and is expected to be among the most prolific in Class 6A.

However, the Bears did suffer a recent setback when top receiver Exodus Ayers announced he was transferring to a prep school in New Hampshire, where he is expected to reclassify as a junior. He caught 15 TD passes last year for the Bears.

There is a substantial void without Ayers, but Back said the Bears have the receiving depth to overcome it. La Cueva has most of its offensive line returning, and running back Gabriel Buie (a first-team all-state selection last fall) was tremendous for the Bears a season ago.

"Aidan is the best quarterback in the state," Buie said. "No doubt about it. He makes sure everything gets done right and well and makes sure we execute perfectly."

Slots Ian Sanchez and Jackson Hix, plus tight end Cruz Markham and Mason Crowell — the player expected to fill Ayers' spot on the perimeter — give Armenta options, Back said.

"You have to choose which monster you want to get after," Back said, talking about La Cueva's balance of run and pass.

Given Armenta's skill set, and his confidence and familiarity with the offense, expectations are extremely high for him and the Bears as a whole.

"We don't think anyone can stop us," Armenta said. "We're just going into every game trying to score on every single drive. Manage the game, keep our defense off the field."

La Cueva returns just a couple of standouts on that defense, and Armenta admitted La Cueva's offense could benefit them by being efficient and high functioning.

Much for La Cueva will depend on the lesser-known receivers, whose roles are increasing in stature with the departure of Ayers.

"They're talented, but they didn't get to (be more well known) because we were so focused (on Ayers). But I think a lot of the guys will have a chance to step up and have bigger numbers," Armenta said.

Armenta's talent is, in part, DNA-related; his father, Jonas, was once a standout multi-sport athlete at Bloomfield High who was drafted by the San Diego Padres out of high school.

Aidan Armenta said La Cueva's reputation and on-field results made it the right call to be a Bear.

"I wanted to play at a program that was, historically, one of the best in New Mexico," he said. "Coach Back and all the staff, they were so impressive at every single thing they do."

Marcelli, in turn, said no situation would be too big for Armenta to handle. He and the Bears open Aug. 19 at Rio Rancho, the team that ended their season last November.

"I'm never gonna worry about personal statistics and goals," Armenta said. "As long as I can be a good teammate and get wins for this team and make everyone better around me, I'll be doing my job."

## ALBUQUERQUE, LET'S RIDE



ADOLPHE PIERRE-LOUIS/JOURNAL

The four-day USA Cycling Masters Road Championships in Albuquerque concluded with the Criterium Race at Balloon Fiesta Park on Sunday. This is the second straight year that Albuquerque has hosted the national cycling championship. This year's USAC Masters Road Championship attracted more than 500 riders from across the nation and will pump approximately \$800,000-\$1,000,000 into the local economy, said Dave Simon, the City of Albuquerque Parks & Recreation director. "Albuquerque is ideal for bike racing and cycling in general," Simon said in a press release. "Our success in attracting these activities is building our outdoor recreation economy."

### WNBA

# Aces spoil Bird's retirement party at home

*Sky set franchise record for wins in a season after beating Sun*

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE — A'ja Wilson scored 29 points, Kelsey Plum added 16 including a key 3-pointer in the final minute, and the Las Vegas Aces spoiled the final regular-season home game for Sue Bird, beating the Seattle Storm 89-81 on Sunday.

The largest crowd in Storm history packed Climate Pledge Arena to thank Bird for her two decades as the face of the franchise and one of the best women's basketball players ever.

But the Aces weren't willing to play their part in ensuring Bird's finale was a win. Wilson dominated the first three quarters, Chelsea Gray and Jackie Young both scored 15 and the Aces never trailed the final 28 minutes.

Breanna Stewart finished with a season-high 35 points and Tina Charles added 19. Bird finished with nine points, six assists and four rebounds, but the result was much like the first game she played in Seattle 20 years ago — a defeat.

"I'm not going to lie, it kind of sucks to lose my last game. But you know what, I lost my first game too. So it's OK," Bird joked with the crowd after the final buzzer.

The outcome mattered and didn't in the same breath.

Both Seattle and Las Vegas were jockeying for playoff positioning, and for the Storm the loss was a knock to their chances of having home-court advantage in the first-round of the WNBA playoffs. The Aces kept alive their hopes of catching Chicago for the No. 1 seed going into the final week.

But playoff position was



DEAN RUTZ/THE SEATTLE TIMES VIA AP

Seattle's Sue Bird greets Las Vegas' A'ja Wilson (22) prior to the game. The largest crowd in Storm history packed Climate Pledge Arena to thank Bird for her two decades of play.

entirely secondary to the focus of the day.

Bird is the WNBA record holder for assists and games played.

Whenever this season ends, Bird will retire with five Olympic gold medals and at least four WNBA titles, to go with the two championships she won at UConn.

"To be so good for so long," said Las Vegas coach Becky Hammon, who was an opponent of Bird's in her first WNBA game on May 30, 2002. "A lot of people, you have nine to 10 years of being amazing. She's been amazing for decades which is to me, remarkable."

Bird was uncertain how her emotions would be prior to the game when all the festivities were taking place. She seemed surprised when leaving the locker room to take the court for pregame warmups and members of her family lined the hallway with fiancée Megan Rapinoe the final one in the receiving line.

The overwhelming wave seemed to hit her during a

video tribute just before tipoff that included messages from Rapinoe, LeBron James, Russell Wilson, Chloe Kim, Lauren Jackson and Bird's college coach Geno Auriemma, and roaring cheers from the 18,100 in attendance, the largest crowd ever for a Storm home game.

For now, Bird's next act is trying to make sure the Storm play again on their home floor.

Seattle is currently fourth in the standings and with the WNBA's new playoff format, Seattle would end up hosting the first two games of its opening round series in the playoffs if it can hang on to that spot.

Seattle was without head coach Noelle Quinn after she tested positive for COVID-19 and was in the league's health and safety protocols.

**LYNX 81, DREAM 71:** In Minneapolis, Napheesa Collier made her season debut for Minnesota, Kayla McBride scored 20 points and the Lynx used a fourth-quarter run to keep their playoff hopes alive.

Collier, Minnesota's leading scorer (16.2 per game) last sea-

son, played for the first time since she gave birth to her daughter, Mila, in late May. The 2019 WNBA Rookie of the Year finished with six points in 21 minutes.

Atlanta (14-19) fell into a tie with the Phoenix Mercury for the eighth, and final, playoff spot with a week remaining in the regular season — a half-game ahead of the New York Liberty (13-19) and a game in front of Minnesota (13-20) and the Los Angeles Sparks (13-20).

**SKY 94, SUN 91:** In Chicago, Candace Parker scored 18 points, grabbed 12 rebounds and tipped a pass to Emma Meesseman for a 3-pointer in the closing seconds to help the Sky beat the Sun to set the franchise record for wins in a season.

Courtney Vandersloot had 20 points, five assists and four steals for Chicago (25-8). Meesseman and Allie Quigley added 15 points apiece and Kahleah Copper scored 11.

Jonquel Jones had 17 points and 10 rebounds for Connecticut (22-11), which was missing head coach Curt Miller, who was spending time with his family after his mother, Bev, died earlier this week.

**SPARKS 79, MYSTICS 76:** In Washington: Brittney Sykes scored 21 points, including a driving layup in the closing seconds, and the Sparks kept their slim playoff hopes alive with a win over the Mystics.

Los Angeles (13-20), which snapped a six-game losing streak, are one of five teams within two games of each other vying for the final two postseason berths.

The Sparks are 1½ games back of seventh-place Atlanta (14-18) and a game behind Phoenix (14-19) for the final playoff spot with a week left in the regular season.

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