

## Senior seeking larger role in 2018

By Steve Mims  
The Register-Guard

EUGENE — For the fourth and final time, a question of what role Taj Griffin will fill at Oregon hovers around fall camp.

The former four-star recruit's most productive season remains his freshman year when Griffin had 732 all-purpose yards, including 570 on the ground to rank second on the Ducks behind Royce Freeman. His past two seasons were shortened by a torn anterior cruciate ligament and complicated by a position change.

For his senior year, Griffin is back in the competition at running back to replace Freeman. Yet he also spends time at receiver and may finally find a role in the return game.

"Taj can do everything and it is impressive watching him go back and forth, that guy makes every single play," Oregon quarterback Justin Herbert said following Tuesday's practice. "We will try to get him the ball as much as we can."

That has often been the refrain around the Ducks this time of year, but Griffin has never averaged more than eight touches per game with that number decreasing each season.

"I've definitely been waiting to play. I have not been used as much as I wanted," the 5-foot-11, 178-pound senior said. "A back like Royce, he deserved all the focus he got, but now I am trying to step up and take whatever role coach Cristobal thinks I can take. I am ready for whatever."

Griffin was practicing Tuesday



Oregon running back Taj Griffin (5) catches a pass for a touchdown against Stanford during the second half of an NCAA college football game in 2015 in Stanford, California.

Tony Avelar/Associated Press file photo

with the second unit at running back, a position lacking experience for the Ducks. That position group is also currently lacking bodies with sophomore Darrian Felix and freshmen C.J. Verdell and Travis Dye still out with injuries that coach Mario Cristobal said are not serious.

Senior Tony Brooks-James is the expected starter at the position, but Griffin is the only other back with more than 30 carries

in his college career.

"A lot of times people mistake Taj for strictly being an outside perimeter runner, a screen-type guy, but he's not," Cristobal said. "He can run between the tackles. He has gotten stronger, and he's explosive; we've seen that before."

Griffin averaged 7.4 yards on 77 carries as a true freshman to go with 10 catches for 162 yards. He was the only player in the Pac-12 who had two 60-yard runs

and a 40-yard reception in 2015.

The following year, Brooks-James and Kani Benoit emerged as Freeman's backups while Griffin ran 37 times for 183 yards before missing the final four games after suffering a torn ACL in practice.

The injury limited him in camp last season as he transitioned to wide receiver due to a lack of depth at that position. Griffin sat

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## Women's soccer is nationally ranked for first time

Observer staff

The Eastern Oregon women's soccer team will enter the 2018 season with a new distinction: nationally ranked.

For the first time in program history, the Mountaineers are in the top 25 in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics coaches poll, coming in at 25th with 78 points. The national poll came out Tuesday.

The Mountaineers have been on the cusp of breaking into the top 25 in the national poll. They vaulted to 27th, the second "others receiving votes" team in the final poll of the regular season a year ago, and moved up to 26th in the postseason poll in December.

EOU is coming off a season that saw it win both the Cascade Collegiate Conference regular season and tournament titles for the first time in program history. Eastern finished 13-4-2, and was 9-1-1 in the CCC.

Eastern was the only ranked CCC team.

Defending national champion Spring Arbor, Michigan, holds the top preseason spot with 405 points and 15 first-place votes. The rest of the top five are Benedictine, Kansas (391 points), Northwestern Ohio (379), William Carey, Mississippi (367) and Martin Methodist, Tennessee (350).

EOU opens the season Aug. 22 against Midland, Nebraska, in a game played in Prescott, Arizona.

### EOU volleyball ranked 15th in nation

The Eastern Oregon women's volleyball team opens the season ranked 15th in the NAIA preseason coaches poll, which was released by the NAIA office Tuesday.

The Mountaineers, who are coming off a 24-11 season, received 193 points in the poll. They were one of five CCC teams ranked in the top 25, joining No. 7 College of Idaho, No. 13 Southern Oregon, No. 19 Corban and No. 24 Northwest.

Eastern has had a consistent presence in the coaches poll in recent years. The ranking marks the 43rd straight time EOU has been in the top 25. The last time EOU was not ranked was the final poll of the 2013 season.

EOU slipped three spots from its ranking at the end of the 2017 season, when it finished 12th in the nation. The Mountaineers were eliminated from the national tournament by eventual champion Lindsey Wilson, Kentucky, which is the preseason No. 1 with 371 points and 11 first-place votes.

The rest of the top five are Dordt, Iowa (364 points, three first-place votes), Missouri Baptist (345), Viterbo, Wisconsin (341) and Park, Missouri (328).

The Mountaineers open their season Friday at the Spokane Valley Tournament.

### Eastern harriers second, seventh

The Eastern Oregon men's cross country team was rated in a tie for second in the 2018 Cascade Collegiate Conference preseason coaches poll, which came out Monday. The women's team was ranked

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## Veteran tight ends will be vital for Beavers

By Steve Gress  
Corvallis Gazette-Times

With redshirt juniors Noah Togiai and Tuli Wily-Matagi set to return, Oregon State had two seasoned veterans to anchor the tight end position for the 2018 football season.

Togiai has played in 23 games with 48 career catches for 565 yards and four touchdowns. He led the Beavers with 34 catches for 461 yards last season.

Wily-Matagi added six catches for 54 yards and played a key role as a blocker.

But just a few days into fall camp, Wily-Matagi decided to retire for personal reasons, leaving the Beavers extremely young at the position.

To make matters a little more dire, Togiai (6-foot-4, 241 pounds) has been recovering from a foot injury he suffered in the last season's finale and had been a bit limited the first part of camp.

The only other tight end who has played in a game is redshirt senior Quinn Smith (2-4, 247), who has mainly competed on special teams.

That means tight ends coach Brian Wozniak's job got a little tougher in getting the younger players up to speed quicker than originally anticipated.

All five other tight ends on the roster are either redshirt freshmen — Bryce Bramscher (6-5, 219), Jack Holum (6-5, 254) and Ralph Yaufa'asau (6-4, 216) — or true freshmen —



Oregon State's Noah Togiai catches a pass against Minnesota in 2017.

Timothy Gonzalez/Associated Press file photo

Isaiah Smalls (6-4, 222) and Teagan Quitoriano (6-6, 252). Yaufa'asau has missed all of fall camp with an injury.

"I think we're coming along and those young guys are being forced to play, do some things a little bit earlier in their career than you'd like," offensive coordinator Brian Lindgren said Monday evening. "But I think

they're talented guys. You look at Teagan and Isaiah Smalls, the two freshmen, I've been pretty pleased with (them). Bryce Bramscher has been getting a lot of reps with the group.

"Coach Woz is doing a nice job with them. We've been getting Noah back at times and we're really excited about that and just see

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## Mariners lose Paxton to injury, ground to A's in 3-2 loss in Oakland

The Associated Press

Another solid outing from Mike Fiers and Jed Lowrie's 100th career home run helped the surging Oakland Athletics move a step closer to first place in the AL West.

The Seattle Mariners, who were eight games ahead of Oakland six weeks ago, are just trying to stick around in the wild-card race, a task that got a little tougher following an injury to ace James Paxton's pitching arm.

Jed Lowrie hit a two-run homer after his line drive knocked Paxton out of the game in the first inning, and Oakland beat Seattle 3-2 on Tuesday night to move within one game of the slumping Houston Astros.

Fiers (8-6) gave up two runs on six hits in six innings with five

strikeouts in his second start since being acquired in a trade from Detroit.

Oakland won its fourth straight and improved to 17-6 since the All-Star break. The Astros have been in first since June 14 and led by as many as six games in late July, while the A's haven't had a share of first place this late in a season since Aug. 25, 2014.

"We feel good," Oakland manager Bob Melvin said. "We've got some confidence, obviously, because of the stretch. But I don't think anybody's thinking about that right now. We're just trying to win."

It got a bit easier after Paxton's early exit. He allowed a home run to Marcus Semien and struck out Matt Chapman before Lowrie lined

a 2-1 pitch up the middle that hit the left-hander.

"It got all muscle," Paxton said. "It's just swollen right now. It tightened up right away. By the time I walked off the mound it was starting to puff up."

Mariners manager Scott Servais said Paxton will miss at least one start.

"We'll know more in the next coming days and how the swelling is," Servais said. "It's unfortunate, but looking on the bright side, we probably got a little lucky. It could have been a lot, lot worse."

Felix Hernandez replaced Paxton in the first relief appearance of his career after 398 starts. The former Cy Young Award winner, who has struggled all year and was demoted

to the bullpen last week, allowed two runs in 5-2/3 innings.

"It was weird," Hernandez said. "I just grabbed the ball and tried to throw as many pitches as I could, trying to get loose. I know my body, I know my arm. I was ready to go."

Hernandez's stay in the bullpen might not last long. He's expected to take Paxton's turn in the rotation until the left-hander returns.

"Paxton has been a horse for us all year. He's had a great season," Servais said. "But there's nothing you can do. It was a comebacker that was hit really hard. I knew right away when I went out there it wasn't going to be good."

Robinson Cano returned to Seattle's lineup after serving an 80-game suspension for using a di-

uretic that can mask performance-enhancing drugs. The eight-time All-Star batted second and played first base, going 1 for 4.

Four Oakland relievers combined to pitch three scoreless innings. Blake Treinen worked the ninth for his 32nd save in 36 opportunities.

Hernandez (8-11) walked Khris Davis but pitched out of the jam in the first. He ran into trouble in the third after a two-out walk to Chapman. Lowrie followed with his 19th homer this season.

"It was a pretty curveball. I think he was sitting on it," Hernandez said. "I just have to attack the hitters, attack the strike zone and make good pitches."

Cameron Maybin homered for Seattle.

