



Ronald Bond/The Observer

The La Grande Tigers celebrate during Thursday's match against Baker. La Grande won in four sets to claim its first Greater Oregon League title since 2015.

Back atop the GOL

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

For the first time in three years, the La Grande Tigers volleyball team is back on top of the Greater Oregon League.

And after losing two players to injury in a match the night before, it truly took a team effort.

Jayce Seavert led the way with 19 kills and 35 digs, Presley Justice stepped into a key role to post 15 kills and 21 digs, and the Tigers topped the Baker Bulldogs in four sets, 26-24, 25-23, 22-25, 25-19, Thursday night in La Grande.

"I'm just really proud of how hard my kids battled tonight. All the chips were against us," Head Coach Melinda Becker-Bisenius said. "They played hard. They did what I asked them to do. They played amazing tonight."

The Tigers were without the services of both Claire Hardy and Riana Scott, who were hurt in the previous night's match against Homedale, Idaho.

That forced several players to take on bigger

roles, perhaps none bigger than Justice, who was largely filling in for Hardy, arguably La Grande's top attacker.

And playing a position she wasn't used to, no less.

"I've never played outside (hitter) before. What I normally play is right side, which is the opposite side of the court, so I felt a lot different," the sophomore said. "I was really unfamiliar with it. I had a lot of help from my teammates. They helped tell me where to be and (gave) a lot of encouragement."

Justice appeared to have no issues catching onto the role as she had a strong opening set with seven kills.

"I'm extremely proud of how hard she played," Becker-Bisenius said of Justice. "It was awesome to see her step up, and we needed her to do that in that position."

Despite the strong start from Justice, the Tigers were down 23-20 in a back-and-forth first set after an ace by Baker's Abby Baker, and then 24-21 after an Avery Elms kill.



Ronald Bond/The Observer

Presley Justice had 15 kills and 21 digs for the Tigers Thursday night.

But two errors by the Bulldogs and then two kills by Justice — the first of which tied the score at 24-all after a lengthy rally — gave the Tigers the

lead, and they took the set following a Bulldog error.

That rally to take the opening set was big in the eyes of Becker-Bisenius.

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Badgers close in on perfection

Observer staff

The Powder Valley Badgers volleyball team moved within three wins of a perfect regular season, rallying from a set down to top the Imbler Panthers in four sets, 19-25, 25-12, 25-18, 25-22, Thursday in Old Oregon League play in North Powder.

Caysie McGinness had nine kills, 21 digs and two aces for Imbler. Karrington Troyer added 26 assists and 15 digs, Gracey Smith had 23 digs and Chloe Birkmaier had 18 digs.

Stats were not available for Powder Valley.

The Badgers (25-0 overall, 8-0 OOL) host Cove today, while Imbler (11-10, 7-4) next plays at the

OOL district tournament Oct. 20.

OUTLAWS FALL IN FIVE SETS

The Enterprise Outlaws volleyball team suffered a heartbreaking five-set home loss to the Stanfield Tigers in Blue Mountain Conference play Thursday, 25-16, 25-27, 16-25, 28-26, 15-7.

Shelby Moncrief led the Enterprise offense with 15 kills. Lexie Gassett had 28 digs and Claire Farwell was 26-for-27 from the service line.

The Outlaws (6-12 overall, 1-8 BMC) face both Pilot Rock and Grant Union Saturday in John Day.

BOBCATS SWEEP AT HOME

The Union Bobcats volleyball team suffered a straight-set home

loss to the Weston-McEwen Tiger-Scots in Blue Mountain Conference play Thursday, 25-14, 25-21, 25-16.

Stats were not available.

The Bobcats (11-9 overall, 5-6 BMC) finish the regular season Tuesday at Pilot Rock.

EAGLES SWEEP COUGARS

The Joseph Eagles volleyball team swept the Wallowa Cougars at home in Old Oregon League action Thursday, 25-18, 25-14, 25-18.

Stats were not available.

The Eagles (19-7 overall, 9-1 OOL) wrap up the regular season Saturday at Nixyaawii and Griswold, while Wallowa (10-12, 8-4) finishes the regular season today in Crane.

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Potential excites EOU men's basketball team



Ronald Bond/The Observer

Eastern Oregon's Jordan May, right, drives to the basket against Linton McAllister during practice Wednesday.

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

Eastern Oregon men's basketball team has incredible potential entering the 2018-19 season.

Yes, the team is markedly different with just six players back from last year's 21-8 squad.

But Head Coach Carlito Labarda Jr. comes to his second season leading the Mountaineers reloaded with a large recruiting class — most of whom are junior college transfers who add size, shooting and basketball knowledge to the program.

"I wanted to get an experienced team here who was more mature (and) could help right away. I usually don't go the JC route, but some of these players were too good to pass up," Labarda said of the additions. "I got good references from coaches and people who are around them. I'm happy with how we recruited this year."

Back for EOU are the top two scorers from a year ago in guard Max McCullough, who averaged 22.2 points per game, and guard Jordan May, who put in 16.1 points per contest. Also back is the Mountaineers' top rebounder, forward Peter Eke (6.7 rebounds per game). The two guards were also the team leaders in assists, while Eke was the top shot blocker.

But the biggest visible difference in the new-look team this year is the size, which should help on both the offensive and defensive sides of the ball. A year ago, EOU had just two players on the 13-man team who were 6-foot-3 or taller. This year, eight of the 16 exceed that mark, headlined by 7-foot-0 Treasure Valley Community College transfer Jarek Schetzle.

"I think it's going to help us on defense a lot," May, a sophomore, said of the added size. "It's going to keep teams from wanting to bring the ball inside. We're going to get them shooting (longer shots), and in the second half it'll help. On offense, it'll give us more options going inside-out instead of just outside like last year."

That inside-out philosophy is a piece Labarda believes could give EOU the potential to thrive. He said if opponents don't double-team when

the Mountaineers go into the post, players like Schetzle, Eke or junior college transfer Tommy Miles-Williams could feast down low. If teams do double, then Eastern will have open players on the outside like May, McCullough or newcomers Zane Wright, Landon Jones, Kobi Gardea, Robbie Simpson or Linton McAllister, to name a few.

"If they double-team those guys, we'll just kick it out to shooters," Labarda said.

The coach is also excited about what junior college transfer Joel Anderson, who will run the point, could add to the team, calling him "probably the best passer I've ever coached."

"He has a high IQ for the game," Labarda said of Anderson. "He creates. He knows what's going to happen before it happens. We're relying on him to get a bunch of standstill 3-pointers."

Defensively, the added size gives Eastern more versatility. Schetzle serves as a shot-blocking threat, along with Eke, which will allow the Mountaineers to expand their pack-line defense.

"When you have size down low, you can take more chances on guarding the perimeter," the coach said.

One tough aspect for Labarda will be figuring out rotations and finding available minutes for players, noting there is little drop-off in talent no matter who is on the court.

However, he also said he can trust any members of this year's team to step up when called upon.

"I have confidence in playing anyone at any time without being nervous about them, which I couldn't say last year," he said.

The new players are already buying into Labarda's style.

"I love what he's doing with our team," Jones, also a TVCC transfer, said. "We have a lot of new pieces, but he's drawing up the plays. He knows what he's doing. He's going to put us in the position to succeed."

How will that look on the court? Both May and Jones said the team is hoping to return nationals after missing the NAIA tournament a year ago.

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