

Focusing on nationals

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

Eastern Oregon women's soccer Head Coach Jacob Plocher hasn't spent much time, if any, dwelling on the Mountaineers' missed shot at a possible home playoff game after a loss to Northwest in the Cascade Collegiate Conference tournament title match.

"I haven't thought about it too much," he said. "We've processed it (and) moved on."

Rather, the focus has moved ahead to the next task — a first-round National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics playoff match at Grace College in Indiana with a shot at earning the program's first playoff win — and the team knows there are things they can learn from last week's match against the Eagles.

"We just need to be able to connect passes better, have our heads up and see where our options are," Plocher said. "Ultimately, move it around a bit quicker. A lot of things are just small stuff we can control that we lose sight of from time to time."

Eastern and Grace face off Saturday at Winona Lake, Indiana. The Lancers (18-3-0) finished second in the Crossroads League, losing twice — including in the league tournament — to No. 1 seed and defending national champion Spring Arbor, Michigan.

The third loss came early in the season to Embry-Riddle in Arizona, a team Eastern Oregon defeated in August.

"They play in a really tough conference," Plocher said. "They've played some good teams. Some things we've seen and heard is they're a hard-working team. They pressure a lot. They like to get numbers forward. We need to play sound soccer and take care of those counter opportunities."

The Lancers do enter with a slight edge in scoring, averaging 2.86 goals per contest to EOU's 2.42. Grace also has allowed just 0.48 goals per game to EOU's 0.74.

But Eastern has surrendered only three goals in the last 11 games, and five in the last 13, a stretch that has seen the Mountaineers go 11-1-1 and record nine shutouts.

Plocher said the defense and overall team speed will be vital for Eastern Saturday — both areas he feels his squad has an advantage.

"We definitely can use our speed.



Ronald Bond/Observer file photo

Eastern Oregon's MacKinley Gregus, right, is shown earlier this season. The Mountaineers travel to Winona Lake, Indiana, to face Grace College in the first round of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics playoffs.

If we can catch them on a counter our speed will be beneficial," he said. "As a whole, our back line is extremely strong and quick, so we should be able to match that."

The Lancers' two main catalysts on offense are Liz Van Wormer (10 goals, two assists), and Jenni Phillips (seven goals, 11 assists). Another crucial piece is goalkeeper Bethany Blackwood, who has a save percentage of .905.

EOU has been driven offensively by senior Taylor Boyer (15 goals, five assists) and freshman MacKinley Gregus (11 goals, three assists), while keeper Cydni Cottrell has a save percentage of .826.

Boyer said Plocher has spoken to the team about not taking for granted it's among the teams still playing this fall, and also spoke of the challenge ahead.

"It's always hard going into elimination games, especially against teams you don't know a lot about, but we know if we come prepared and play our game, then things will go our way," she said.

Junior defender Josee Bassett added the team has "potential to do great

things" if it brings the intensity Saturday. She also hopes the team can learn from the match against the Eagles.

"Our loss against Northwest was just a bump in the road, and hopefully we're able to use that as motivation for our next game," she said.

One additional challenge for Eastern will be the start time, with the match slated to begin at 1 p.m. in Winona Lake, which is 10 a.m. on the West Coast.

"We're being mindful of what the time frame is, so if we need to be forcing ourselves to be in bed or getting up early just acclimating (to the) short time frame," Plocher said.

EOU is after its first playoff win. The Mountaineers have twice lost 1-0 in the opening round — at home to Biola in 2015 and at Westmont in 2017.

Boyer is hoping the experience from a year ago will help come Saturday as the Mountaineers look to go deeper in the postseason than they have before.

"Maybe we can kick some of those nerves out and be more excited and urgent," she said.

Cougars ready for another shot at Buckaroos

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

It's not often in life you get a second chance.

But the Willowa Cougars will have just that on Saturday, when they square off against St. Paul in the Class 1A semifinals in a rematch of the teams' season opener.

"I'm looking forward to the opportunity, that we get a second chance to play St. Paul again," Cougars' Head Coach Matt Brockamp said. "I know our kids want the opportunity to play them again."

The first contest did not at all go the Cougars way — a 54-20 loss back in August that saw them down by more than 40 points in the second half.

But a change on the defensive side of the ball made during that game — from a 4-2 set the Cougars had implemented at the start of the season back

to a 3-3 that has been the team's bread and butter the last few years — and the team's improvement in general, has Brockamp optimistic about what Willowa can do in the rematch.

"We just felt static when we were in a four-(man front)," Brockamp said.

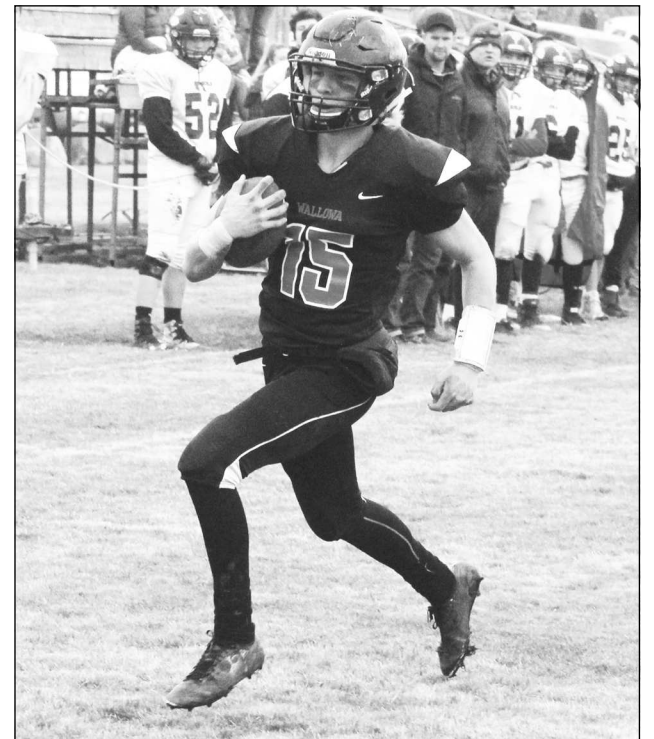
"Out of a 3-3 we are a lot more active, we can change gap responsibilities (and) it's a lot more deceptive. We've always been a physical, attack style defense."

Brockamp added since the change, "We haven't looked back since. We've been getting better on defense every week."

Brockamp said one of the keys for the Cougars on Saturday will be nose tackle Joe Robb, who he said "has give people fits all year long."

"Joe (needs) to continue dominating (the

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Ronald Bond/Observer file photo

Wallowa's Gus Ramsden is shown during last week's quarterfinal game against Lowell. The Cougars meet St. Paul in the state semifinals Saturday.

Corsini named top player



Ronald Bond/Observer file photo

La Grande's Aaron Corsini, left, was named Greater Oregon League player of the year.

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

Pleasantly surprised would likely be the best phrase to describe La Grande Head Coach Wade Wright's reaction to the number of Tiger boys soccer players who were named to the Greater Oregon League all-league team. Surprised in part due to the Tigers not winning the league title.

But the coach noted the selection process goes beyond just the league results.

"The way the voting process works is the coaches consider the individual players from the other teams, and we have

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Seavert leads eight in all-GOL

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

A season that saw the La Grande Tigers volleyball team garner its first Greater Oregon League title in three years and first trip to the state quarterfinals in five years also brought with it a bevy of all-league awards.

Eight players in all were recognized by the coaches of the GOL, with junior Jayce Seavert headlining five first-team players as the league's co-player of the year and Head Coach Melinda Becker-Bisenius being named coach of the year.

"I was really excited," Becker-Bisenius said. "I felt we got a lot of kids recognized. I was proud of my kids,

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Karen Howton photo

La Grande's Jayce Seavert, right, was selected as the Greater Oregon League co-player of the year.

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