

Eastern Oregon University to host first track meet in La Grande in six years Saturday



Ronald Bond/The Observer

The Eastern Oregon track and field team will host a home meet in La Grande for the first time in six years with the EOU Team Challenge set to take place on Saturday. EOU's last meet in La Grande was the Blue and Gold Meet in 2013, nearly six years ago to the day. The broken-down state of the track facility on the Eastern Oregon campus had resulted in the program's home meets the last five years being held in Hermiston, but the new track was completed in the fall. Some of the field events will take place just up the road at the La Grande High School track. It will be the first of two meets hosted by EOU in La Grande this spring, with the Mountaineers also hosting the Cascade Collegiate Conference's Combined events championships in late April. A ribbon cutting to officially open the track will take place at 11 a.m. Saturday.

ENTERPRISE

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According to Rule 8.6.6 of the OSAA handbook, a mid-year transfer is "a student who transfers during the school year without a move of the student's parents." Under the guidelines, a student in this case is "ineligible for one calendar year."

Wells made the determination of Even's mid-year transfer within a day of learning of his return to Enterprise based on discussions with OSAA officials about the rule and his understanding of it.

"There was never a question that it was a mid-year transfer. That was established right away based on the facts we had," Wells said. "The question was whether there was a hardship."

A hardship is, in part, described as a circumstance "beyond the control of each of the student and the student's parent(s)" in Rule 8.6.8 of the OSAA handbook.

Wells did additional research into the case and concluded about three weeks later a hardship request by the student did not have enough merit to put forward to the Blue Mountain Conference's District Athletic Committee, of which the fourth-year athletic director was the chair.

"There were no circumstances beyond the control of the athlete," Wells said.

Several events, though, took place in the months following Wells' ruling on the hardship request and his resignation, though it's unclear if there is a direct correlation between them. Wells said the board and superintendent attempted to circumvent his conclusion, apparently in an effort to help the student gain his sought-for eligibility; Even's attendance records were tampered with; Wells' access to the school's attendance and grade database was reduced; and the school board held several executive sessions discussing Even's eligibility and wrote a letter to Even claiming his case had been mishandled by both Wells and Principal Carlsen. Wells said the school board has yet to tell him how he allegedly mishandled the case.

Carlsen did not respond to multiple requests to speak to The Observer. The Even family has been advised by their legal counsel not to comment at this time.

The initial move

Even started preparing for the 2018 football season with the Enterprise Outlaws by attending the first week of practice, which began Aug. 13. It was a short stay with the team, though. According to documents obtained by The Observer from Wells, Even enrolled at Long Beach Polytechnic in California and attended the first day of school there on Aug. 29. Wells, in his personal notes on the case, which he shared with The

Observer, remarked that the student had "informed friends he was leaving to Long Beach to live (with) his uncle," in mid-July.

Even's father, Mac Even, wrote in a letter of support supplementing Justus' hardship request that he backed the move.

"I was in support of this idea (to move to California) and thought it would give him a chance to experience some independence," Mac Even wrote in the letter, which The Observer obtained from Wells.

Prior to the start of the football season, Justus Even was cited for a minor in possession of alcohol on Aug. 4 at the Union County Fairgrounds in La Grande along with a 17-year-old Wallowa County youth, according to the police log on the incident. According to a previous interview with Enterprise School District officials, the school's MIP policy brings with it a three-week suspension from athletics, among other penalties, but the policy takes effect only if the infraction is during the OSAA participation year. The policy did not apply in this case.

Even was at Long Beach Poly three days before being transferred to Jordan High School, another school within the Long Beach Unified School District, due to overcrowding. A second transfer from Jordan to Renaissance High took place later in the week.

There's uncertainty in the reason for the move to Renaissance. While letters obtained by The Observer from Wells claim there was overcrowding at Jordan High School and concern about its location, Wells asserted that, from his interviews with the school district, Jordan High had the resources and space for Even. The DAC later reached a similar conclusion, writing in its conclusion letter on the hardship request, which Wells shared with The Observer, that there was a lack of documentation to support overcrowding as a reason for Even's second transfer.

The student claimed he was the victim of an assault that took place on or around Sept. 9, writing in his hardship request letter, which The Observer obtained from Wells, "I was also attacked and mugged and robbed in California and threatened to be killed." He wrote in the letter that he boarded a flight and returned home immediately after the attack.

Mac Even described the assault in his supplemental letter: "While riding his bike down 7th Street (Justus) was stopped by four men, forced into an alley and had all of his cash stolen and (was) threatened with a gun."

The Observer contacted Long Beach Police Department in regard to the incident, which replied in an email that it "was unable to locate a report that matched

the description of the incident during that period of time on 7th Street."

The return to Enterprise

By Sept. 10, Even had moved back to Wallowa County and was looking at re-enrolling at EHS. The student met with Principal Carlsen that day, according to documents obtained by The Observer from Wells, and attended his first day of school on Sept. 11.

Wells said he spoke with OSAA Assistant Executive Director Kris Welch on Sept. 10 after learning of Even's return, and he told the student he would speak with Brad Garrett, another assistant executive director at OSAA, on the 11th.

“

I couldn't figure out why this case was so important with this athlete when the case was so clear."

— Larry Wells, former Enterprise High School athletic director

Wells said in an interview with The Observer he was advised by Garrett to get more details to see if Even would have a chance at an appeal.

Wells said he advised the student, though, that he would be considered a mid-year transfer and ineligible to rejoin the football team unless he learned otherwise.

On the 11th, however, Wells said he received a call from EHS football coaches Rusty Eschler and Randy Garnett who said Even had attended practice, and that Even claimed he was eligible to play. Wells told the coaches that wasn't the case, and instructed them Even needed to write a letter of circumstances to the AD by the next day that could be used in a potential hardship request.

Wells said the coaches told him in a follow-up conversation on the 12th they had instructed Even to write the letter. Wells didn't receive the letter, though, until Sept. 20.

In the meantime, Even proceeded to miss the next 4-1/2 days of school, which are marked as "UA," or unexcused absence, from the 12th through the lunch period on the 19th, according to redacted attendance records obtained by The Observer from Wells. Even attended the rest of the 19th and the next two school days — the 20th and 24th — before missing the next 10 days of school, through Oct. 10.

After 10 consecutive unexcused absences, a student at EHS is automatically withdrawn.

By this point, Wells had concluded the hardship request didn't have the merit to pass onto the DAC for a vote. Wells said he inter-

► On-field impact?

Had Justus Even been granted his hardship request, how much of an impact would he have had on the teams he played for EHS, which dropped to 1A for football prior to the 2018 season, had already played two games and was 1-1 on the way to a 4-4 season without Even. The previous year in 2A, with him on the team, the Outlaws went 3-4. In basketball, the team went 9-13 a year ago with him on the team, and this year was 9-15 without him. In track, he ran a leg on EHS's 4-by-400 relay team that won a 2A state championship last spring. ■

viewed administrators at the Long Beach district to gather information on the student's time in Southern California.

Wells submitted his letter denying the hardship on Oct. 4, writing in part, "After a thorough review of submitted letters by petitioners

tive unexcused absence up to Sept. 27. The record has since been corrected.

An internal investigation by the school showed who altered the record, but Wells and Superintendent Pinkerton refused to tell The Observer who did the alteration. Wells, though, said the

kids were coming to school," he told The Observer.

In his position as AD, part of the use for the database was to make sure students weren't skipping school and then coming to practice. He would also use it late in the season to check GPA and see if students could gain recognition as a scholar athlete.

For a week, though, he was unable to do that part of his job due to the limited access, likening it to showing up to work one day to find the locks had been changed and your key no longer fits.

He finally regained "read only" access, crediting Principal Carlsen with helping him gain the access, and found there had been students who had skipped class

and information provided by Long Beach Unified School District, it is determined that the ruling (of the mid-year transfer) stands. No Hardship Request will be forwarded to the District Athletic Committee under Rule 8.6.8."

An altered record

The tampering with Even's attendance record was found on Oct. 8. The record, which was obtained by The Observer from Wells, showed the 2-1/2 days Even had attended school — Sept. 19, 20 and 24 — had been altered to show "UA." That moved what would have been Even's 10th consecu-

person who adjusted the record "had a personal investment with the family."

Wells also suggested the alteration was done to set him up.

"For one, it happened right after my (Oct. 4) letter," he said. "I think there was an attempt to show bias in the attendance record and suggest it was (done by) me."

In late November, Wells' access to Schoolmaster, a database used by the Enterprise School District to record attendance, grades, class schedules and more, was "reduced."

"I used Schoolmaster in my job as AD to make sure

and later gone to practice.

"By the time I got my access back, a lot of those concerns were too late (to address)," he said.

Wells said he was told by Carlsen that Superintendent Pinkerton had authorized the reduction of his Schoolmaster account.

Pinkerton confirmed to The Observer that two individuals had their Schoolmaster access changed following the record tampering, adding only a main secretary should have full access.

"Everyone else should have a 'read only' access," she said.

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