

EOU attacks upcoming season

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

Eastern Oregon men’s wrestling coach Dustyn Azure is looking for physicality, speed and an “attacking” attitude from his team this season.

If that happens, the Mountaineers should best their strong finish to the 2018-19 season when Eastern placed 16th at nationals and came away with two all-Americans.

“We’re going to fight from start to finish,” Azure said of the Mountaineers, who are preparing to begin year four of the program. “If we get punched in the face, we’re going to punch back harder. That’s what it comes down to: coming out there, knowing how to battle, and going from whistle to whistle. We don’t want to get punched in the face and cower down to anybody. We want to be out there doing the punching.”

The Mountaineers peaked at the right time last season, winning four of their final six dual matches before taking five athletes to nationals and seeing Drake Randall and Harley DiLulo finish their careers as all-Americans.

Two of the athletes who got a taste of nationals, Blake McNall and Ryan Redford, return for EOU. McNall, who is the only senior of the 28 wrestlers on the roster, believes the program is headed in the right direction.

“We’ve been doing the right things. Everyone has bought into the program,” he said. “The next step is putting in the work. Good things will come out if we continue to work. We’re doing all the right things.”

Azure said he also likes the direction the program is moving.

“We are getting out there, we’re attacking,” he said. “I think we’re a little further ahead than we were last year at this time. (We’re) really focusing on being more physical and pushing the pace a lot more. That’s something we’ve been lacking. Last year’s group is starting to set the tone. They realize what it takes.”

The coach said he would like to see the team have a better dual record this season and be more than just a solid tournament team. EOU carried an 11-9 record in duals a year ago.

“I feel like we have more consistency throughout the lineup this year,” he said. “With that comes continuing to develop each weekend (and) each day being that 1% better. They have to have short memories, forget about the mistakes. It’s not the wins and the losses, it’s winning and learning. We have to take each (loss) as a learning experience.”

The coach noted that unlike years past, when the team had multiple freshmen in the lineup in duals, this year only one weight class is being filled by athletes who are new to collegiate wrestling.

The 133 weight class has the only “true freshman” in the mix, he said.

That weight class will be split between Monte Zufelt and Payton Keough, who Azure said have been battling during team competitions.



Ronald Bond/The Observer

Monte Zufelt, left, and Nathaniel Rodriguez both look for an advantage during a drill in practice Tuesday. The Mountaineers have 28 wrestlers out for the fourth year of the Eastern Oregon University wrestling program.



Ronald Bond/The Observer

Jesse Camacho, left, and John Bittinger lock up during practice Tuesday afternoon.

“I just want to be able to add (to the team). Coach put me in the lineup. I just want to go out and grind and show everybody I can wrestle,” Zufelt said.

The success of the program in a short amount of time, in fact, was part of what drew Zufelt to EOU.

“Just seeing how they were nationally ranked made me want to come here,” he said. “For only being up and going about three years, they are doing something right.”

The other weight classes will be filled by returning Mountaineers with at least a year under their belt or by transfers. McNall, Jesse Camacho, Hunter Nees, Keegan Mulhill, Jared Brant, Marco Retano, Justin Hill and Noel Orozco are among the returners who could make the biggest impact.

“This year I believe we have a lot more depth,” McNall said. “Last year we had injuries. If any guy gets

hurt, there’s someone there (this year). It’s next man up.”

McNall, as the lone senior, said it’s “different” taking on the role of being one of the team leaders, but he is trying to lead by example.

“It’s a little more pressure. It’s one of those things where you have to dig deep and keep going. Others look up to you. I’m excited. I like the opportunity.... People can talk all they want, but if you’re not in there busting your butt, they’re not going to listen to you.”

Azure believes the team is capable of not only sending more athletes to the national tournament this fall, but placing higher.

“With the consistency throughout the lineup, I think we have a shot at getting seven guys into the national tournament, and (then) I think we’d have a shot at the top 10,” he said. “(But) everyone has to do their part. Everyone’s gotta score points.”

There is optimism about

the potential, too, from freshman to senior.

“I think we could do it,” Zufelt said of being a top-10 team. “We’re going to have to battle. (We) have to get more physical over the year.”

The team’s senior, meanwhile, wants to end his career on a high note.

“This will be my 19th season wrestling. It’s my last hurrah,” McNall said. “I’m excited to end on a good note and (will) let it fly this year.

Don’t hold anything back.”

The Mountaineers begin the season Saturday at the Simpson Duals in Redding, California. EOU has five home duals on the slate this season and also will host the first annual Mountaineer Open Feb. 2.

The season concludes with the Cascade Collegiate Conference championships Feb. 21-22, and the national tournament is set for March 6-7.

PREP VOLLEYBALL
ROUNDUP

Tigers
finish
perfect
in GOL

Observer staff

The La Grande Tigers finished undefeated in Greater Oregon League play with a road sweep of the Ontario Tigers Tuesday, 25-10, 25-14, 25-9.

“I’m proud of my kids. We reached one of our season goals,” head coach Melinda Becker-Bisenius said. “We talked about winning the league this year (and) we did that. We’re looking forward to seeing who we get to play in the playoffs.”

Kenzie Williams and Jacie Howton had matching stat lines, both finishing with 12 assists, two kills, two aces and four digs.

Presley Justice had 11 kills and 12 digs to lead in both categories. Jayce Seavert added four kills and eight digs, and Renna Martinez had six digs.

The Tigers (19-5 overall, 6-0 GOL) will host a playoff game Nov. 2, and can punch a ticket to the state tournament with a win.

“We’re going to simulate a lot of game-like stuff in

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FOOTBALL
CONTEST
WINNERS!
Week 7

1ST - JOHN HAYS,
LA GRANDE (5 misses, Closest tiebreaker)

2ND - BILL MCCALL,
LA GRANDE (5 misses, 2nd closest)

3RD - SHARON JENSEN,
LA GRANDE (5 misses, 3rd closest)

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