

Simpson leading as a 'coach' on field

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

The quarterback, in a sense, is a coach on the football field — able to see how the other team is lined up and then discern what play best suits his offense in trying to break through against a defense.

Elgin High School is, perhaps, the Eastern Oregon football team with a player that best fits that description, as the Huskies' quarterback and team leader, senior Tristan Simpson, is always analyzing how to get Elgin's high-powered offense, which averages 58 points per game, in the best position.

"We talk about different strategies, how we play against this (player or team). He's basically one of my assistant coaches," head coach Jeff Rysdam said.

Simpson is constantly in contact with teammates and coaches and studying game film, looking for what Elgin can do to attack its next opponent.

"We text quite a bit talking about football," Rysdam said. "(Wednesday) night we were adding some new things to the offense."

Simpson has also been known to stay up late — very late — talking with some of his teammates or his coach about film. Rysdam said during the preseason he would at times get texts from Simpson as late as 2 a.m.

"I just really like the sport," Simpson said. "A lot of my free time, if I'm not doing anything I'm watching film. I enjoy it. It makes it a lot better when you are actually in the game playing. It helps you read the defense or offense a whole lot better."

The QB said there have been weekends he's been up even later communicating with teammates.

"On the weekends, one night that was the latest was 3 in the morning," he said. "We find it interesting. It's something fun to do, and it helps studying (the other team)."



Ronald Bond/Observer file photo

Elgin quarterback Tristan Simpson, right, is shown in a game earlier this season against Powder Valley. Simpson has accounted for more than 1,600 yards and 26 touchdowns for the Huskies this fall.

The scenario plays out during games too, as the head coach and QB are often discussing what plays to run — each from his own viewpoint.

"I'll say something, we'll look at it and come to a compromise and run it," Rysdam said, adding that if Simpson comes to him with a different idea for a play call, he's likely to consider it. "I gotta believe what they are seeing. The QB is seeing something completely different."

The ability to read the field is just part of what has made Simpson one of the best quarterbacks in Eastern Oregon and among the best players to come through Elgin in Rysdam's time on the coaching staff, both as an assistant and a head coach.

"He's one of the top athletes we've had over the eight years I've been here," Rysdam said. "Gage Little, Gavin Christiansen, Jaydon McKay — (he) ranks right up there with those three."

Simpson has been the Huskies' starting quarterback his entire career, stepping in as a freshman to fill the void, Rysdam said,

when the team was seeking a player to take snaps in 2016.

"We needed someone to play the position. Tristan walked up and said he wanted to try it (and) threw a pass that was on the money," the coach said. "He's taken off and it's been his team ever since."

Simpson has emerged into a tough-to-stop dual-threat quarterback, able to beat teams either with his ability to scramble or when Rysdam calls a running play or a run-pass option, or with his accurate arm and ability to hit receivers in stride or deep down field.

His running ability, which further opened his potential, wasn't known until his sophomore year.

"The first time I realized I could run the ball (well) was our first game against Pilot Rock," he said. "Ever since then I have been improving on my running and passing. This year I'm more of a passer than a runner."

On paper, though, he's still pretty balanced. The senior has accounted for 1,623 yards of offense — 950 passing and 673 rushing

— and 26 total touchdowns in barely more than five games.

Those numbers include a sixth game on Oct. 4, that gave the Huskies a major scare. Simpson went down with what was feared to be a possible season-ending injury to his right thumb midway through the first quarter of the Huskies' loss to Adrian/Jordan Valley. But in the time he had been in, Simpson had already totaled 129 yards and two touchdowns.

"At first I thought it was (broken), just because of the way it felt," Simpson said. "Normally you can tell right off the bat just by (how) your body's reacting."

Simpson, though, didn't leave the Elgin sideline to get his hand x-rayed until after the game in order to encourage his teammates and give them pieces of advice — no longer as the on-field coach but as another coach on the sideline.

It showed the leadership side that Rysdam said has emerged in Simpson's senior year.

"He was trying to come out of his shell last year and

be a vocal leader. He wasn't ready to step up yet. When we had the 8-man football camp (this summer), that is when he stepped up," Rysdam said, citing as an example Simpson's ability to work with players to help get them in position.

The postgame x-ray revealed a bad sprain, and it didn't cause Simpson to miss any extra time. Elgin had a bye week following the injury, and Simpson was able to ease back to form in a win over Pine Eagle last weekend by totaling 300 yards and six touchdowns.

With just a few games remaining in his prep career, Simpson is hoping to lead Elgin on a deep playoff run. The Huskies reached the postseason last fall for the first time in a decade, and — depending on how the season ends — could even be in position this year to host a playoff game and contend for their first playoff victory since 1993.

"I feel like we are capable of going far, he said. "Really proud of our team and how far we (have) come. I'm looking forward to the state playoffs."

Eastern now at No. 3 in nation

Observer staff

The Eastern Oregon University volleyball team continued its historic climb up the NAIA coaches' poll.

The Mountaineers ascended to No. 3 in the nation Wednesday, the second time this season EOU (23-1 overall), which leads the Cascade Collegiate Conference, has reached its highest ranking in program history.

Eastern is close to the top two teams as well. The Mountaineers garnered 548 points in the poll, just 16 behind No. 2 Missouri Baptist Northwest (Iowa), the only undefeated team remaining in NAIA volleyball, is first with 591 points and 20 first-place votes.

EOU is joined in the poll by CCC teams Southern Oregon (ninth), Corban (12th) and College of Idaho (21st).

EOU's women's soccer team held steady at No. 11 as it heads into a crucial showdown with CCC-leading Northwest (Washington) tonight. Eastern (6-1-1 CCC), which is currently third in the CCC, is in need of a win to stay with the Eagles (8-0 CCC), as a loss would almost assuredly end its conference title hopes, and a tie would put a damper on them.

The Mountaineers continue to be the lone CCC team in the top 25.

The EOU women's basketball team debuted at No. 8 in the NAIA Division II preseason coaches' poll, up one spot from where it finished the 2018-19 season.

Eastern Oregon is coming off a 29-4 season that saw it reach the second round of the NAIA national tournament.

Joining EOU in the top 25 from the CCC are No. 14 Corban and No. 21 Oregon Tech.

Badgers rally late, hand Pilot Rock first loss

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

The Powder Valley Badgers football team rallied from a 10-point fourth-quarter deficit to pick up their biggest win of the season, scoring the final 22 points to upset previously unbeaten Pilot Rock/Nixyaawii, 48-36, Thursday in a nonleague contest at Community Stadium in La Grande.

"It was really fun," Badgers head coach Josh Cobb said. "We knew we could play with most people, and it finally came together tonight."

The Badgers fell behind 36-26 in the third quarter when Rockets' quarterback Tanner Corwin, who threw for 324 yards and four touchdowns, hit on a 43-yard scoring strike to Logan Weinke with 4:48 to play in the quarter.

But Powder Valley dominated the final quarter. Reece Dixon, who threw for 251 yards and four scores, connected with Roper Bingham for 85-yard touchdown to make a two-point game with 7:03 to play in the game.

The duo hooked up again three minutes later — this time on a 51-yard pass — for Powder Valley's first lead, 40-36, with four minutes to go.

"Once we decided that we were going to get our heads up and play well (and) we got a few things rolling, it just kept going for us," Bingham said.

Cobb said the team having matchups against high-ranked teams in previous weeks benefitted his team in the fourth.

"Three out of the last four weeks, we've played teams ranked in the top 10, and we had to play the entire fourth quarter. We know how to play all the way through the game," he said.

Dixon, who also rushed for 250 yards and three



Ronald Bond/The Observer

Reece Dixon accounted for 501 yards of offense and seven total touchdowns in the Badgers' come-from-behind 48-36 win over Pilot Rock/Nixyaawii Thursday night.

touchdowns, iced the game with 1:28 to play with an 80-yard run for the final margin.

"We knew we had more talent than they did. We had confidence that we knew we could beat them and we played well," Bingham said.

The finish capped not only a 10-point fourth-quarter comeback, but a rally from 14 points down after one quarter for the Badgers. An 83-yard TD pass from Corwin to Tyasin Burns and a 9-yard Corwin to Weinke TD gave the Rockets a 14-0 lead after one.

The Badgers chipped away on the ground, with touchdown runs of 5 and 81 yards by Dixon getting Powder Valley going in the second quarter. He later connected with Bingham for their first TD of the game — this one another big strike of 84 yards — to bring the Badgers within 22-20 late in the second quarter.

"Roper came on strong," Cobb said. "He's fast. I didn't think they could stay with him, and his hands were incredible tonight. Of course, Reece threw pretty good footballs tonight as well, but Roper got open. With Roper running the deep ball, it left the middle open for Reece."

The Badgers trailed at halftime, 28-20, but again got within two, at 28-26, in the third quarter on a 17-yard TD catch by Kaden Krieger.

Bingham finished with the three touchdown receptions and 220 yards through the air. Clay Martin added 83 yards rushing, and Ethan Stephens had 47 yards on the ground. Stephens also intercepted Corwin twice.

Weinke finished with 10 catches for 220 yards for the Rockets. Burns added 167 yards rushing and a touchdown, and 121 yards receiving as the teams combined for more than 1,000 yards of offense.

The Badgers (5-3 overall) face Enterprise in the opening game of the Special District 3 playoffs Nov. 1 at Community Stadium.

Tigers put 7-0 mark on the line

Observer staff

The La Grande Tigers head into Saturday's regular season finale as the No. 2 ranked team in the Class 4A coaches' poll, and have an opportunity to clinch an undefeated regular season and outright Greater Oregon League title when it hosts No. 9 Baker Saturday at Community Stadium in a rematch of their Oct. 4 contest.

La Grande won the first matchup in Baker, 34-21, in what to date has been the closest matchup for the Tigers this season. Baker has been the only team to score more than two touchdowns on La Grande this season, and the only team to stay within two touchdowns of the Tigers. La Grande's other six victories have come by an average score of 50.8-8.3. Overall, the Tigers have the No. 1 ranked offense in class 4A at 48.4 points per game, and the No. 2 ranked defense at 10.1 points allowed per game.

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