



Eastern Oregon wrestlers Macy Higa, left, and Jessica DeHart lock up during practice Tuesday evening. Higa and DeHart have both previously earned all-American status for EOU.

Putting in the hard work

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

The work ethic of the athletes on the Eastern Oregon women's wrestling team is a big part of what drew new head coach Mike Ayala to the program. And as the fourth season of EOU women's wrestling is underway, he still points to hard work as one of the strengths of the program.

"There's a lot of potential," Ayala said. "It's a hardworking group of girls. With the tough girls they had last year and the girls I have now, (the key is) coaching them up and making sure I'm putting them in a position as a coach to win. It's a bright group. The sky's the limit."

Ayala joined the Mountaineers in the spring after spending four seasons at the University of Providence in Montana with both the men's and women's programs. He takes over a women's team that is the largest Eastern has had with 17 wrestlers — including 10 returners — looking to build off of last season, which saw the team place 19th at the WCWA national championship tournament and finish 10th in the NAIA coaches poll.

He sees a lot of potential in the Mountaineers, too.

"We could be in the top five. We could be in the top 15. It just depends on how they compete," he said. "I'm really competitive. They know what my dreams are, I know what their dreams are. We want to be a competitive team in the years to come. We want to be one of the best teams in the country. That's the goal, but we got a lot to work on."

Ayala said last weekend's season opening tournament at Simon Fraser University showed him some of the areas where growth is needed — not only by the athletes, but by him as a coach.

"I realized I have to put the girls in a better position to compete at that high level, but we also have to be willing to go out there and fight and be tough," he said. "We didn't win the toe-to-toe battles, and I think that's a battle we should have won even though we were outskilled. Our toughness is what I saw we need to do better at."

Former all-American Jessica DeHart, who is back after missing the 2018-19 season due to a medical redshirt, said she also saw areas the team can develop after the trip to Simon Fraser.

"From the last tournament we went to, I think we definitely need to work at working harder on our practice partners and going all out so they know exactly what it's going to be like in a match," she said.

The senior, though, is optimistic that the team can get to where it needs to be, and said there is a great chemistry among the athletes.

"I feel like we connect a lot more this year with the team," she said. "We have more talent coming in this year than we've had with the girls. It's great



Eastern Oregon women's head coach Mike Ayala, right, speaks to the team during practice Tuesday.



Amber Pair, left, and Krystal Fabricante are two of 10 returning wrestlers for the Eastern Oregon women's squad.

to have more workout partners in the room and a bigger team."

DeHart is one of three former all-Americans on the EOU roster. Macy Higa enters her sophomore season after earning the highest placing ever for the Mountaineers, taking third at the WCWA tournament a year ago.

Higa said Ayala has brought to the program an ability to push the team to improve both physically and mentally.

"I feel like there's a lot that I can learn from him in wrestling," she said. "A big part is mentally I have to grow, learn how to be more aggressive, have a higher intensity, (and) push as hard in practice as I need to push in a tournament so that it translates over."

Higa is also optimistic about the newcomers to the team, which includes a transfer from Grays Harbor College, Kateri Rowell, who is coming off an all-American season where she placed fourth.

Mountaineers ranked 12th in the nation

The Eastern Oregon women's wrestling team was ranked 12th in the nation in the NAIA preseason coaches' poll.

Eastern was one of four teams from the Cascade Collegiate Conference in the poll, which features a top 16 as opposed to a traditional top 25. No. 2 Menlo (California). No. 6 Providence (Montana) and No. 9 Southern Oregon are also in the poll.

"The recruiting class is really good. They work really hard," Higa said. "It's nice to have a lot of people in the room, the new girls plus the girls from last year who want to be better."

Ayala said that with the increased number of wrestlers, Eastern should be

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Tigers get past North Marion, reach quarters



La Grande's Devin Ingram, shown last week against Madras, had two goals in the Tigers' win over North Marion Wednesday.

Observer staff

The La Grande Tigers reached the Class 4A state quarterfinals, and vanquished a foe that has had their number in the process.

Devin Ingram scored two second-half goals, Westin Blake added a goal in the early stages of the match, and the LHS boys soccer team stopped North Marion, 3-0, in a first-round playoff match Wednesday night at Canby High School.

"The boys did awesome," head coach Sid Rangel said. "They played with heart....The most impor-

tant thing is that they had the will and the desire to take their team one step further into the (playoffs). North Marion is a team that is always fast on the ball and very aggressive. Their speed can be lethal, but we played one of our best games in a really long time."

The victory gave La Grande its first quarter-final berth since the 2016 season. It also stopped a string of victories by North Marion over La Grande on the pitch. The Huskies had eliminated La Grande from the playoffs in three of the

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Volleyball stays in top five nationally

Observer staff

The Eastern Oregon volleyball team remained in the top five in the NAIA coaches' poll despite its loss to Southern Oregon last weekend.

The Mountaineers slipped one spot to No. 4 as they enter their final weekend of regular-season play. The Raiders, who moved into a tie for first with EOU in the Cascade Collegiate Conference with their win

last week, moved from No. 9 to No. 7.

Eastern traded places with Indiana Wesleyan in the poll.

The top five in the nation are undefeated and top-ranked Northwestern (Iowa), Missouri Baptist, Indiana Wesleyan, EOU and Park (Missouri), the defending national champions.

Corban (No. 14) and College of Idaho (No. 25) are the other ranked CCC teams.

Blues rally late to sneak by Eastern Oregon women

Observer staff

The No. 8 Eastern Oregon women's basketball team fell for the first time this season, dropping a 63-60 contest to Whitman College Tuesday night in Walla Walla.

The Mountaineers led most of the night, and had a much as a 10-point advantage in the contest. But Whitman outscored Eastern 37-25 in the second half, eventually taking the lead for good in the fourth

quarter.

Jane Nelson scored 17 points to lead the Mountaineers. Beverly Slater added 11 points and a game-high 12 rebounds for EOU, which was just 4-for-20 from 3-point range and missed eight free throws.

EOU (2-1 overall) travels to the L-C State Classic this weekend, and will face defending NAIA Division I champion Montana Western Friday and Lewis-Clark State Saturday.