



First Last/The Observer

The Eastern Oregon University men’s basketball team pauses Monday for a moment of silence before practice to remember NBA legend Kobe Bryant, who was among nine people who died in a helicopter crash Sunday. Bryant was a favorite player and inspiration of many on the team.

Remembering a legend

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

LA GRANDE — An idol. A superhero. An icon. A motivator.

All those words and many more could be used by fans to describe NBA legend Kobe Bryant, the L.A. Lakers superstar who was among nine people who died in a helicopter crash Sunday morning in Calabasas, California.

The mark Bryant — who was this generation’s Michael Jordan — left was shown by the impact of his sudden death at just 41 years old.

Landon Jones, a senior for the Eastern Oregon University men’s basketball team, called Bryant one of his idols growing up.

“Playing on my mini hoop I wanted to be just like (him) — 5 years old, in my driveway,” Jones said. “I think part of the thing I wanted to take from his life was the way he approached the game, all the work he put into it. Most players, they have a switch that they are in a mode where they say ‘OK, I want to play (hard now).’ Kobe had it on all the time.”

Few in Northeast Oregon have a sense of what Bryant meant — especially in Los Angeles, where he starred for 20 years and led the Lakers to five NBA championships — than EOU men’s head coach Carlito Labarda Jr., who is from L.A.

“Having Kobe pass away at the age of 41, he looked like he still could play. Still fresh in our hearts and memories as a player,” Labarda said. “That’s why it’s so devastating. My family grew up watching him, nephew and nieces and siblings.”

Labarda noted when you watch a star such as Bryant for years, you feel as if you know him, even if you never met him or watched him play in person.

“They’re part of your lives,” Labarda said. “When something happens like this, it affects you. Time stops for a little bit. And I think it’s so shocking. A lot of us are still processing it and still can’t believe it, that he’s just gone in an instant.”



Associated Press file photo

Kobe Bryant, the NBA’s fifth all-time leading scorer, was among nine individuals who died Sunday in a helicopter crash.

Jamal Heckard, a junior on the EOU men’s team, grew up in Gardena, California, basically in the shadow of Staples Center, the home stadium of both the Lakers and L.A. Clippers.

“He was that one sports figure from Los Angeles (who) pretty much everyone knew, everyone looked up to, everyone respected,” Heckard said. “So for us to lose him, it’s huge. The whole city would come out for Kobe, no matter where he was. Everyone would stop what they were doing to see what Kobe was doing. It’s hard to deal with. I just pray for his family and everyone else affected by it.”

Heckard, who was born in 1996 — the same year Bryant entered the NBA — attended all five championship parades when Los Angeles won in Bryant’s time with the franchise. He didn’t get to watch Bryant play an NBA game in person but did attend a community show put on by Bryant at Washington Park in L.A. and also played in a showcase at the Mamba Sports Academy, a

joint venture between Bryant and CEO Chad Faulkner.

Kobi Gardea, meanwhile, had a different Bryant story, as the EOU sophomore bears the legend’s name.

“My dad was going to name me Magic actually,” Gardea said, referencing former Laker legend Magic Johnson and calling his dad a huge Laker fan. “It was between Kobe and Magic. My mom was like ‘I like Kobe better, but I get to (choose how to) spell it.’”

Gardea, who is listed on the EOU roster at 5-foot-9, has watched Laker games most of his life and said he’s always drawn inspiration from Bryant’s drive and used that as fuel to counter his own doubters.

“I’m doubted a lot — ‘why is he playing?’ ‘Why is he at the school?’ He’s tiny,” Gardea said. “I don’t listen. I just push myself to be better, and I get that from Kobe. His mentality, there’s nothing like it.”

Jarek Schetzle also was motivated by

See **Bryant** / Page 7A

GOL/EOL hybrid is one step closer to reality

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

WILSONVILLE — The La Grande and Baker football programs’ move to a 4A/3A hybrid league is one step away from becoming a reality.

The OSAA’s football ad hoc committee last week gave its final recommendation for the state’s league realignment for 2020-21, and the proposal of a hybrid between the 4A Greater Oregon League and the 3A Eastern Oregon League — an idea first put forward in mid-December — is still in play.

The special district — which would look very similar to the old GOL of the early 2000s — would consist of La Grande, Baker, Ontario, McLoughlin, Vale, Nyssa and Burns. La Grande, Baker and Ontario would be in the 4A end of the district, with Mac-Hi, Vale, Nyssa and Burns on the 3A side.

Mac-Hi will move down to the 3A level for football as the Pioneers met both the old criteria of having an in-classification winning percentage under 22% in four years, and the proposed new criteria of a 22% winning percentage in two years.

The move will greatly reduce, if not eliminate, the struggles of the schools in both halves of the league to find extra nonleague games, as each team will have six league games instead of just three or four.

The GOL last year had just three teams in the league after Mac-Hi made a late move to play an independent schedule, and the league has had only four teams since the OSAA’s major state reclassification from four classes to six back in 2006-07. As a result, both Baker and La Grande had to take lengthy road trips — Baker’s longest was more than 400 miles one way and La Grande logged 388 miles on one of its trips — just to fill the nonleague portion of the schedule.

The EOL a year ago had five teams, but Umatilla and Irrigon are set to drop to 2A, and even with Mac-Hi’s move to 3A it still would have been a four-team league.

Under the proposed change, both the 4A and 3A

ends of the league would qualify two teams for the playoffs in their respective classifications.

The ad hoc committee’s final recommendation does not include a prior proposal to implement 9-man football for Class 2A, though the committee, according to the update from the OSAA, is looking to make a change for 2A by 2022 and will make its recommendation prior to the start of the 2020 campaign. Nine-man football is still under consideration for 2A, and — if selected — would mean 2A schools desiring to play 11-man football would need to move to 3A to do so. It would also take all 2A schools currently playing at the 1A 8-man level and move them back to 2A.

A second model being considered, described as “Big 8 — Little 8,” would make two separate 8-man divisions between 1A and 2A schools based on the OSAA’s adjusted enrollment numbers. Like the 9-man proposal, 2A schools wishing to play 11-man would have the option to play up to 3A.

Six-man football also will remain in place for two more years, but like the first two years of the pilot, no state championship will be awarded by the OSAA. The committee update states a desire to have at least 25 schools finish the 6-man season before considering a championship for the level.

Last year, 15 teams played 6-man football, but two had to forfeit or cancel games at the end of the season due to a lack of players.

There are 19 schools that would play 6-man football in 2020. That includes Joseph — who reached 6-man’s de-facto title game two years in a row — Huntington and Prairie City/Burnt River. Pine Eagle also is slated to drop down to 6-man football. The rest of the tri-county region’s schools will remain unchanged, with 1A schools Cove, Elgin, Imbler, Powder Valley and Wallowa staying in Special District 3, and 2A schools Enterprise and Union playing down to the 1A level, also in SD3.

The OSAA’s executive board will review the proposal for possible adoption Feb. 10.



Photo by Ellen Morris Bishop/EO Media Group

Joseph’s Madelyn Nelson puts up a shot after a steal Tuesday during the Eagles’ 37-25 win over Elgin.

Eagles clip Huskies in OOL showdown

Observer staff

ENTERPRISE — Sabrina Albee scored a game-high 20 points Tuesday, and the Joseph girls defense shut down Elgin offensively to win a battle of the final two undefeated teams in the Old Oregon League, 37-25.

Joseph, playing in its new home away from home in Enterprise for the first time since the Jan. 16 fire that burned its gymnasium, held Elgin to just three first-half field goals and eight points to take an 18-8 lead at the half. Albee had nine first-half points for Joseph and Madelyn Nelson, who finished with 11 points, scored seven in the first half.

“It was a good win,” Joseph head coach Lance Homan said. “With everything happening in our community and a new home gym I was proud of how hard our girls played. Elgin is a good team and so it was good to come out with a win.”

Joseph extended the lead to 25-15

after three quarters and held on in the fourth to finish off its fourth win in a row.

The Huskies, who saw their nine-game winning streak end, were led by Tymra Anderson, who scored 10 points, and Jocelyn Palmer, who added seven points.

Joseph (11-5 overall, 4-0 OOL) hosts Wallowa Wednesday in Enterprise, while Elgin (13-3, 5-1) visits Wallowa Friday.

Also Tuesday

Baker 51, Powder Valley 27: Baker freshman Jozie Ramos scored a game-high 20 points Tuesday as the Bulldogs pulled away in the second half for a nonleague road win over Powder Valley in a rare 4A vs. 1A matchup.

“They’re a really good basketball team,” Badgers’ head coach Allen Bingham said of Baker, adding he felt “if we could improve in a few areas regardless of the outcome, we’d be good. We felt like it was positive for us.”

The Bulldogs saw an 11-point

first-quarter lead trimmed to 19-12 at halftime before distancing themselves in the second half.

Belle Blair had 11 points and seven rebounds for Powder Valley, and Dallee Jo Bingham added six points and seven boards.

Powder Valley (8-8 overall) visits Imbler Friday.

Boys

Pendleton 64, La Grande 57: The Tigers cut a double-digit deficit down to just a single point late in the fourth quarter Tuesday, but saw its rally against Pendleton fall short in a nonleague road loss which ended the Tigers’ three-game winning streak.

Kaleb Myer’s 3-pointer brought La Grande to within 54-53 with 2:32 to play, but Pendleton responded by pushing the lead back to four and eventually taking the win.

See **Roundup** / Page 7A