

SPORTS

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Old Oregon League named Albee the girls basketball player of the year for the second year in a row.

6. Women dominate in Eagle Cap Extreme Sled Dog Race

JOSEPH — The 16th annual Eagle Cap Extreme Sled Dog Race in Wallowa County in January lived up to its name with a record number of racers. Racers came from across the western U.S. and Europe. Half of the 40 entrants were women. More than half of the finishers were women. And it was the first time in Eagle Cap Extreme history that women claimed the top two spots in the challenging 200-mile race. Gabe Dunham of Darby, Montana, crossed the finish line first in the premier 200-miler. She was third in the race in 2019, but this was her year to take home the top trophy and \$1,700 in prize money. Morgan Anderson of Enterprise finished fifth in a starting field of 12 in the 200-mile race. She competed in the Eagle Cap Extreme three times previously. The sophomore at Montana State University majoring in wildlife biology will have to wait until 2022 to compete again after organizers canceled the 2021 race due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. EOU athletics presses forward with big moves

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon University pushed ahead in 2020 to expand its athletic programs, from hiring coaches to the continued work on the fieldhouse. Back in January when sports seasons were going on as usual, EOU hired Mike McInerney to head up the university’s reborn baseball program and Monica Plut for the new lacrosse program. McInerney, the former Western Oregon University associate head coach and pitching coach said he was looking forward to the challenge and wanted to “dominate” the region, and that started with recruiting players. “I want to get the best players I possibly can in the region,” he said. “That’s really my first focus. That’s who I’ve been talking to the most.”

The first to sign his name and commit to playing baseball for EOU was then La Grande High School senior Justin Frederick. By mid-October, more than 40 others had joined the team.

The city of La Grande and EOU in August struck a three-year deal for the Mountaineers to play baseball games and practice at Pioneer Park’s Optimist Field starting in the spring.

Plut played lacrosse starting as a child, then through high school, and in college shifted to coaching. She coached in Chicago and later Kentucky at the high school level and at Adams State University in Colorado before coming to La Grande.

“We’re going to be playing D-3, club teams, whatever,” Plut said of what year one will look like. “I would just like for us to win a game. That’s my goal, have fun, get closer as a team, work the kinks out so that when it becomes a conference sport we’re ready to play at that high level.”

Sydney Shaughnessy out of Idaho’s Meridian High School was the first recruit for the new program, which now boasts 15 student athletes. The team had an inaugural intrasquad scrimmage in mid-November.

And in December, Carlene Sluberski took the position as the head coach for the Mountaineers women’s wrestling squad.

Sluberski came to EOU from the University of Providence in Great Falls, Montana, where she led the Argos to a top-10 ranking and a third-place conference finish in 2019.

In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic rocking sports seasons just as it had with all facets of life in 2020, Sluberski said coming to Eastern was an exciting move.

“It’s a good place,” she said, “and I think they do things the right way.”

Eastern also pushed ahead with the construction of its \$9 million fieldhouse. The large indoor space will house a partial track and a large turf surface where teams can practice during months when weather makes outdoor practice difficult. The space also could host university events, such as camps, and will house Eastern’s Health and Human Performance and Outdoor Adventure program.



The Observer, file

Lauren Rinker had a memorable junior year playing basketball for La Grande High School during the 2019-20 season. The Tigers reached the 4A state tournament for the first time in four years, before the coronavirus led to the tournament’s cancellation and dashed their hopes of competing for a state title. Rinker earned an honorable mention on the all-Greater Oregon League team.



Ellen Morris Bishop/Wallowa County Chieftain, File

Jane Devlin of Bend tackles the first hill of the 100-mile race at the Eagle Cap Extreme Sled Dog Race in January 2020 in Wallowa County. Devlin, who won the 31x2 mile event (31 miles on each of two days) in 2018, was in no hurry in 2020. She took her time with her young team and won the red lantern award as the last musher in.



Ronald Bond/The Observer, file

La Grande High School wrestler Parker Robinson flexes after winning the 170-pound title Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020, at the 4A state tournament in Portland 5-3 for his second wrestling title. The Tigers took home the state title for the first time in 24 years.

4. Enterprise High School coach hits 500 wins

Mike Crawford’s basketball coaching career at Enterprise High School has spanned 31 seasons and 758 games — and on Feb. 22, in a 40-38 overtime thriller over Heppner at the Blue Mountain Conference tournament, he hit victory 500.

Crawford joined an elite group in the state of Oregon with the latest milestone win, as he is just the seventh girls basketball coach in state history to win 500 games, and the fourth to win that many at one school.

“What does it really mean? It means that I’ve been doing this a long time, but I’ve also been very blessed with the players I’ve had over all these years,”

son, Kyle, is now coaching the boys program.

3. Joseph Charter School fire brings communities together

Joseph Charter School students were enjoying a leisurely lunch Jan. 16 when they found their world turned upside down. A fire broke out in the school’s gym.

The fire started in the mechanical room and sped to the ceiling, leaving destruction in its path.

Firefighters got the upper hand on the blaze after 45 minutes and prevented the flames from spreading into classroom territory. However, as Wallowa County Emergency Services Manager Paul Karvoski said, every sprinkler in the school worked properly, which helped stop the spread of the fire but also filled the school with water. The gymnasium sustained extensive damage, and the school had to gut the place and rebuild, including the basketball court and bleachers on the ground floor and the weight room and wrestling facilities on the upper floor.

Joseph boys coach Olan Fulfer said seniors took the destruction hard.

“They lost their home gym and won’t be able to play in there,” he said.

Local communities rallied to support the Joseph Eagles, who went on to play the remainder of their home games in Enterprise or Wallowa. Imbler donated the gate from its Jan. 17 game against Griswold to Joseph and passed a hat to collect donations from fans. The Elgin School District donated the gate of their home game of Jan. 18 against Imbler, as well as any donations from attendees and funds from a blanket toss. The two basketball games raised more than \$2,600.

Nine months later and the gym had a shiny new floor after repairs and restoration, including new graphics that showcase the

Wallowa Mountains as well as the Eagle’s emblem.

2. La Grande High boys wrestlers take state

On the last Saturday in November 2019, La Grande ended a 45-year championship drought in football.

On Saturday March 2, 2020, the Tigers ended a stretch of 24 years between titles in wrestling. “They’re state champions, man!” La Grande head coach Klel Carson exclaimed after the tournament.

Boosted by four individual championships, three second-place performances and several important wins throughout the lineup, the Tigers won their first state wrestling crown since 1996, edging runner-up Sweet Home by just 6.5 points — 261 to 254.5 — for the 4A title.

Parker Robinson and Christopher Woodworth repeated as state champions, with Woodworth’s victory at 195 pounds giving La Grande the points to pull ahead of Sweet Home for good. Braden Carson and Gabe Shukle also won state championships, as the sophomore and senior each brought home his first individual title.

The Tigers entered the championship round actually trailing the Huskies by a mere point-and-a-half. It wasn’t the first time they had been looking up at Sweet Home on the leaderboard.

Sweet Home held a lead of more than 30 points after the first day, and at one juncture during the semifinal round was up on La Grande by more than 40 points.

“It was definitely kind of nerve-racking to see Sweet Home go up 30-40 points on us, and then we would catch up close, and then it would kind of go back and forth,” Woodworth said. “I think that was an expectation of ours, just definitely a more nerve-racking state tournament.”

Assistant coach Walt Anderson said the team put in the work — in season and out — to elevate itself to championship level.

“Just a great group of athletes,” he said. “All the guys have done the extra stuff throughout the year. That’s what makes the difference.”

1. COVID-19 runs over sports seasons

This was going to be the year the La Grande softball team left its legacy.

The Tigers had met two goals in the last two seasons, La Grande High School senior pitcher Allie Brock said, starting with an accomplishment in 2018 never before achieved by an LHS girls sports team — winning a state crown.

“The second year was about proving ourselves as a team,” Brock said, which La Grande did when it repeated as state champs in 2019. “As the seniors, we would have liked to leave our legacy with a third shot at state.”

The Tigers were heavy favorites to earn a three-peat, especially with their senior ace back for one final run.

Instead, the hope of joining a small group of schools to ever win three state softball championships in a row crashed before the Tigers got an opportunity to take the field because of closures due to the coronavirus.

But Brock’s softball career is not over — in August she joined the University of Montana softball team.

Parker Robinson was a vital piece of La Grande’s state-title winning football team and championship wrestling team, and would have been a key part of a baseball team in the spring that he believes would have been a title contender. Instead, he, like all spring athletes, went from anticipating what could be to being forced inside by stay-at-home orders.

Student athletes, parents, coaches and fans hoped high school sports would resume in the fall. But organizing bodies for school and collegiate sports pushed fall seasons to start in February 2021.

Eastern Oregon University pitcher Ashton Kazmierski and the Mountaineers softball team seemingly reached a turning point in its season in early March after sweeping a series against University of British Columbia, doubling its win total and moving to 5-4 in the Cascade Collegiate Conference. By March 16, the season was done.

“We were finally coming together as a team, especially as pitchers,” said Kazmierski, a senior. “We were starting to figure out how to work together. It was hard to lose all of that.”