

EOU volleyball coach reaches milestone

By **ANDREW CUTLER**
East Oregonian

LA GRANDE — When the cheers were directed her way and not at the team, Eastern Oregon University head volleyball coach Kaki McLean Morehead was at a loss.

Of course, it was the second of two 3-0 wins over Warner Pacific on March 5 that generated all the cheers. That is when it registered for McLean Morehead, it was her 300th win at EOU.

“I actually had no idea, to be completely honest,” she said. “It’s not something that I keep track of. So when my kids started chanting my name at the end of the game, I was like, ‘You guys, what are you doing?’ My kids did a great job of making the day pretty special. I was completely surprised and shocked.”

McLean Morehead, who is in her 14th season as head coach, said the milestone win is something she’s incredibly proud of, but being in the same athletic department as women’s basketball coach Anji Weissenfluh, who has compiled more than 450 wins in 19-plus seasons at EOU, is a motivator.

“On one hand, 300 is an accomplishment and something I’m incredibly proud of because of



Eastern Oregon University/Contributed Photo
Eastern Oregon University head volleyball coach Kaki McLean Morehead recently recorded her 300th win as a head coach for the Mountaineers.

what we have built here at Eastern Oregon,” she said. “But on the other side of it, you know, I’m just trying to keep up with (Weissenfluh) who has 450 wins and counting.”

The road to 300 has had its challenges, and none bigger than when McLean Morehead had to lead the program after tragedy struck.

A 2004 EOU graduate, McLean Morehead had coached the Mounties for four seasons, from 2006 until 2009. She stepped down after the 2009 campaign in order to move to Idaho. McLean Morehead’s successor, Hailey



The Observer, File
Eastern Oregon University’s Isabelle Statkus, left, and head coach Kaki McLean Morehead talk after a play in 2016. McLean Morehead earned her 300th win as Mountaineers head coach on March 5, 2021.

Pearce, was killed in a car crash just before the start of her second season in La Grande.

McLean Morehead stepped in as the interim head coach for

the 2011 season, posting a 17-11 record and a third-place finish in the Cascade Collegiate Conference. Shortly after the end of the 2011 season, McLean Morehead

IF YOU GO

Effective Friday, March 19, EOU Athletics is allowing spectators at sporting events, but there will be a capacity limit for all venues and events.

signed on permanently.

“During that time, we realized that Eastern Oregon is where we want to be,” she said. “And again, I am incredibly proud of what my kids have worked to build and what we have worked to build. And I think that, that is something special and it’s not something that you find every day.”

McLean Morehead has the Mountaineers off to a 9-0 start and a No. 8 national ranking in a season turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. She said the team has proven to be a resilient and determined bunch, and one not taking anything for granted.

“We’re going to try everything that we can and play our best with the opportunities that we are given,” she said.

The Mountaineers put their undefeated record on the line with a pair of matchups on Friday, March 19, and Saturday, March 20, against Interstate 84 rival College of Idaho (4-6 overall) inside Quinn Coliseum. Match times are set for 4 and 7 p.m., respectively.

EOU’s Sluberski earns coach of the year honor

Wrestler Erin Redford takes second at national competition

By **ALEX WITTWER**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon University’s Carlene Sluberski is the 2020-21 Cascade Collegiate Conference Women’s Wrestling Coach of the Year.

The conference in an announcement Thursday, March 18, reported her fellow head women’s wrestling coaches in the conference voted for her to receive the honor.

The head coach was surprised — she said she didn’t even know she was nominated for the award.

The award came less than a week after Sluberski wrapped up her first year as the program’s head coach and less than a week after she led nine of her players to North Dakota to compete in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Women’s Wrestling National Invitational, where wrestler Erin Redford finished as



Eastern Oregon University/Contributed Photo
Eastern Oregon University women wrestlers Erin Redford, left, and Dempsi Talkington pose during the Women’s Wrestling National Invitational in March 2021 in Jamestown, North Dakota. Redford finished as the runner-up at 143 pounds, and Talkington posted an eighth-place finish at 155 pounds.

the national runner-up at 143 pounds, posting a 4-1 record over the two-day tournament. EOU teammate Dempsi Talkington posted

an eighth-place finish at 155 pounds.

Sluberski took on the position of head coach for the women’s wrestling team

back in November 2020 — the third person to hold the title. Women’s wrestling at EOU is relatively new. The program started in 2016 after the university received \$300,000 from the state, along with \$200,000 from private donations, to reinstate a men’s team and establish a women’s team.

“It’s definitely not traditional,” said Sluberski about the sports’ niche status, “but it’s up and coming.”

Nationwide, Oregon is one of 28 states that have state-sanctioned championships for women’s wrestling.

New York, Sluberski’s home state, isn’t one of them. That fact didn’t deter Sluberski’s passion for the sport.

“I’m from New York, so I wrestled in New York, and I wrestled on the boys’ team,” she said. “They still don’t sanction it in New York — I’m 11 years removed from high school, and they’re still behind.”

Sluberski grappled most of her life, starting in elementary school and throughout college, winning four individual Canadian Interuniversity Sport titles before becoming a head coach at Providence University in Montana. After taking the position at EOU,

she tackled a new problem — leading the team during a pandemic.

“When you have the opportunity to compete taken away from you,” Sluberski said, “it makes it that much more special when you get to go.”

Out of the 13 players that make up the women’s wrestling team at EOU, Redford, Talkington and seven of their teammates — Anjelynn Baron, Krystal Fabricante, Nayeli Flores Roque, Macy Higa, Nayeli Maston, Lisa Megargee and Olivia Robinson — received invites to the NAIA.

“It was a great event, and it was really exciting that we got the opportunity,” said the head coach about the invitational in Jamestown, North Dakota. “I mean, all year, it’s been kind of like, ‘Oh, are we going to be able to do it, are we not?’”

Redford crushed the first day of the competition, scoring a 3-0 lead. In her first match, she pinned Julia Mata of Missouri Valley in 23 seconds. She followed up with two more pins, against Emma Walker of Campbellsville and Akina Yamada of Waldorf, securing her place in the semifinals the following day.

In the semifinals, Redford pulled out a sudden victory, 3-2, over Sydney Freund of Oklahoma City to punch her ticket to the championship match. In the final match of the season, Redford battled from start to finish before falling 4-3 to Waipuilani Estrella-Beauchamp of Midland.

Talkington posted a 3-3 record in two days for the Mountaineers. She fell in her first match before bouncing back to win her next three matches to end the day at 3-1. Talkington closed her tournament run with a loss in the seventh-place match.

Higa at 130 pounds went 2-2 on the first day and narrowly missed advancing to the second day. Robinson also posted a 2-2 record on the first day at 191 pounds.

In the end, the EOU women’s wrestling team scored 35.5 points at the invitational and placed 17th overall in the two-day competition.

For now, Sluberski said she was happy the girls were competing again.

“I think it’s been a big year for growth,” she said. “We have a smaller team and they have quite a bit of talent. There’s a lot of good things that could happen.”

‘We’re owed a March’: Hoop fans flock to bet on NCAA tourney

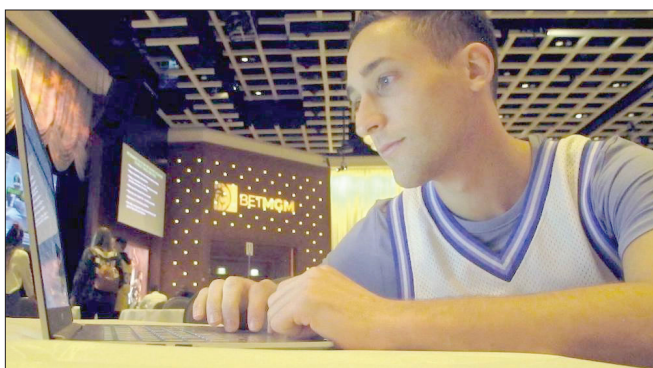
By **WAYNE PARRY**
Associated Press

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — Jonathan Price was all set: He got tickets to the Elite Eight round of the NCAA basketball tournament at Madison Square Garden, where he, his two brothers and his dad would revel in hours of college basketball bliss.

But that was last March, just before the coronavirus wiped out the March Madness tournament — and the boatloads of money that would have been bet on it. But this year, it’s back.

On Friday, March 19, the 25-year-old from Staten Island, New York, was at a casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey, with a wad of cash and picks that he was too superstitious to reveal to a reporter. (He was wearing a North Carolina jersey, though.)

“We’re owed a March,”



Wayne Parry/Associated Press
Jonathan Price of New York researches picks for the March Madness college basketball championship tournament on Friday March 19, 2021 at the Borgata casino in Atlantic City, N.J.

said Price. “Last year got canceled, and it was pretty devastating. March Madness is something I look forward to all year.”

It’s also something sportsbooks at casinos and racetracks, and particularly online operations, look forward to as well. Spread out over several weeks, the NCAA tournament is col-

lectively the biggest sports betting event of the year. And though the amount that sportsbooks keep after paying out winning bets and other expenses is relatively small, the tournament is essential to their business, particularly in gaining customers they hope will stick with them throughout the year and

bet on other sports.

“In terms of betting interest, this year should prove to be a bit of a perfect storm for online wagering and shatter previous records,” said Jay Croucher, head of trading at PointsBet USA. “In combining factors like pent up demand after last year’s cancellation, the growth of U.S. sports betting and how many more states are now online versus two years ago, it should come as no surprise that U.S. sportsbook operators are expecting huge numbers.”

Because many offices remain closed because of the pandemic, eliminating many office pools, fewer Americans expect to fill out brackets for the tournament this year. But the overall number of people making bets on March Madness should remain about the same as the last

time the tournament was held, in 2019, according to the American Gaming Association, the gambling industry’s national trade association.

Kevin Hennessy, a spokesperson for FanDuel, said legal sports betting “continues to surpass our expectations.” His company paid out more than \$17 million to customers on a March Madness betting promotion Thursday night.

“We’re gearing up for the greatest amount of engagement we’ve seen on the tournament thus far,” added Johnny Avello, who’s in charge of the race and sports books at DraftKings.

Melonie Johnson, the Borgata’s president, said it was exciting to see crowds return to the casino for the tournament.

“The human race was meant to be entertained, not

bored,” she said. “Coronavirus has taken a real toll on everyone. But now there’s hope; we can see it.”

Tom Gable the casino’s director of sports and racing betting, said he expects the level of bets on the first day of this year’s tournament to exceed that of 2019, the last year it was held.

“We went from preparing for the biggest event of the year in terms of sports betting, to preparing to shut down, all within the span of a few days,” he said.

Price was to meet with a group of friends on Saturday to watch more basketball in between a round of golf.

His betting budget for the weekend was between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

“We’re going to get drunk, watch the games and chill out with the boys,” he said. “Doesn’t get much better than that, does it?”