

## La Grande seniors preparing for the final match

As the sun sets on their high school careers, players look forward to the future

By **ALEX WITTWER**  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The La Grande High Tigers volleyball team is preparing to fight in its final games of the season in one of the most challenging years for sports. The COVID-19 pandemic, in a sense, has stolen a year of play from the team that had grown up together — a team that challenged life and their rivals with equal ferocity.

As the chapter closes on five girls with the team, they practiced in the gym early in the morning Wednesday, March 23. With graduation around the corner, inevitable goodbyes loomed like a final deadline. But now it was spirit week, and the girls dressed up in colorful tie-dye shirts and wore garish hair for the occasion.

The team made its way to the gym and began setting up the net, donning surgical masks and athletic shoes while making jokes to one another. The chaos of chatter beget a cacophony of balls flying every which way and landing onto the gym floor with thunderous thuds as spikes, sets and serves.

For Jayde Wiggins, who plays for the varsity squad, as well as the high school's basketball and softball teams, there was another challenge she fought. An injury in January 2020 left her unable to play the sports she loved — and COVID-19 made watching sports impossible as well. She recovered in time to play when the season opened, but months of isolation and healing wore down on the

dedicated player.

"We were out of school, and even if we could do sports, I couldn't," Wiggins said. "All I could do was show up."

It was her second injury of her high school career. As a freshman, she suffered a torn ACL in basketball that kept her from playing volleyball.

"It was, honestly, terrible to see all these guys playing and missing that," she said.

Relentlessly, Wiggins recovered both times and her desire to play sports intensified. Obstacles to her seemed more like gasoline than rain. And now that the games have resumed in the midnight hour, it's near time to say goodbye to the players she had grown up with for nearly half a decade.

"Volleyball is like a stress relief," Wiggins said. "We come here, and we just let it all go."

Wiggins plans on



Presley Justice (center) leaps into the air to spike the ball during a practice at La Grande High School on Tuesday, March 23, 2021. The senior will continue playing and learning at Kentucky Christian University.

Alex Wittwer/The Observer

attending Eastern Oregon University to study physical therapy, close to home and family. She said while she wants to focus on academics, sports will remain a passion in her life. With the degree, she would be able to help others through the types of injuries she experienced and remain con-

nected to sports in a fulfilling way.

Other players, such as Presley Justice, are setting their sights elsewhere.

Justice accepted a scholarship to play volleyball at Kentucky Christian University in Grayson, Kentucky, last year prior to the pandemic, and looks forward

to the opportunity — and the stress that comes along with the responsibilities of playing for a college team.

"I have to do the best I can," said Justice. "I have that expectation, for myself, that I'm playing at the next level so I need to act like I am."

Justice admitted the

burden can sometimes reach intolerable levels, and nauseating anxiety can disable her on the worst of days. During those times however, her team, family and coach lift her back up. With the decision to move across the nation, those support structures will be left behind — though the young star viewed it as another avenue for growth.

Three senior players who also are graduating — Hayden Robinson, Madison Hanson and Anna Green — will be attending colleges throughout the Pacific Northwest. There will be new friends and new challenges, and memories of when the pandemic made their friendships and desire to play stronger.

The Tigers have a 6-3 record for the season with five matches remaining.

The team plays a home match against Baker on Tuesday, March 30, then comes an April 1 match against Ontario. The final set of the season is April 6 against Powder Valley in La Grande.

## EOU football cracks NAIA Top-25 poll

The Observer

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics released its second Football FirstDown Playbook Top-25 Poll this week, and Eastern Oregon University jumped into the rankings

The Mountaineers checked in at No. 21 after starting off the spring 2021 season 1-0 with a 28-0 shutout win Saturday, March 20, against the Carroll College Saints inside Community Stadium, La Grande. The win for the Mounties propelled the team from the realm of the unranked into the top-25.

Eastern Oregon University Athletics also reported the Mountaineers picked up a pair of Frontier Conference Player of the Week honors this week for quarterback Kai Quinn as the offensive player of the week and punter Jaiden Machuca as the special teams player of the week. The duo's performances helped get EOU off to a 1-0 start and it was the sixth consecutive win against the Saints, dating back to 2015.

In the Frontier Conference, the only other ranked team is College of Idaho.

The Yotes are in the No. 5 spot overall with a 2-0 record.

The Mountaineers are on the road this weekend in Billings, Montana, to take on the Rocky Mountain College Bocklin' Bears on Saturday, March 27. Kickoff is set for noon.

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