

## Honoring coach Jeff Rysdam

Elgin Huskies face four teams to memorialize their late coach

By **ALEX WITTWER**  
The Observer

ELGIN — It wasn't a memorial football game. It was a football game to remember.

Spirits were high, aloft, elated and soaring like the balloons released in honor of Elgin High School football coach and athletic director Jeff Rysdam, who died March 9 at the age of 43. Children played atop, beneath and in-between the bleachers at the Monday, March 29, event. They tussled with one another as players on the field hit back against defending lines. Close friends and married folks huddled under shared blankets.

They were there to remember Rysdam.

In the announcer's box by the aluminum stands, North Powder's athletic director, Brad Dunten, who had organized and sponsored the event, read a memo from the Oregon Athletics Coach Association that bellowed through the loud speakers across grass and bundled-up masses — alike in stillness

with anticipation of the first kick.

"What Coach Rysdam taught those he came in contact with over his career becomes eternal as his influence on others will be passed down to future generations," said Dunten, reading from the script. "Jeff continues to live through those he influenced throughout his life."

The Huskies faced off against four teams from neighboring towns — Union, North Powder, Imbler and Joseph — in a marathon of sprints toward the yellow forks backdropped by the Blue Mountains.

"It was great to see the support of Northeast Oregon come together to help a community," Dunten said. "To bring some celebration to an individual who brought a lot of positivity to their community and their athletic program."

The first two matches were shutouts — the Huskies scored 50 points cumulatively against North Powder and Joseph. Referees struggled to match



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Spectators along the track hold balloons, ready to release them at kickoff at the Elgin High School football field Monday, March 29, 2021. Four teams gathered to play in an exhibition match against the Elgin Huskies in remembrance of the late football coach and athletic director Jeff Rysdam, who died March 9.

the pace of breakaway Huskies as they raced down the field like hounds unleashed. Huskies made leaping midair grabs to intercept a number of passes. The opposing team's offensive line was futilely marching against a purple-clad stone wall.

"I just couldn't be prouder of these guys," said Elgin football coach Brock Eckstein, who worked alongside Rysdam for nearly a decade. "They're playing their hearts out for Jeff."

The crowd cheered when the Huskies made big plays, and sirens from an ambulance in the parking lot pierced the air after each Elgin High touchdown, and there were many.

In the late evening, a

thick snowstorm left the now-thinned crowd undeterred and ready to stay until the end. The light stands made a series of halos over the field and snowflakes flew across the field. The Huskies played for nearly three hours against visiting teams on their home turf, defending their field and honoring their coach.

Union was the first to make progress against the weary home team, scoring a touchdown after a strong

defense held the Huskies near their goal line. It would prove to be the only time the Huskies faltered. The team finished the night 94-6, threatening the two-digit scoreboard with rollover.

"Elgin's going to play with this much endurance living with Jeff in mind over the next few football seasons," Dunten said.

The players went home having given Rysdam the best memorial they could, exhausted but undefeated.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Above, Andres Schmittle (15) of the Elgin Huskies pours through an opening in the North Powder Badgers defense. Below, Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen (far right) watches the third quarter between the high school football teams of Imbler and Elgin on Monday, March 29, 2021, at the memorial game for late coach and athletic director Jeff Rysdam. Bowen met Rysdam while working as the school resource officer in La Grande, where Rysdam taught special education.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

The Elgin High Huskies football team exchanges post-game handshakes Monday, March 29, 2021, with the Imbler Panthers. The Huskies played four teams consecutively on their home field in honor of their late coach and athletic director, Jeff Rysdam, who died earlier in the month.

## DISCOVER THE DIFFERENCE



Open your account today

[HZCU.ORG/DISCOVER](https://www.hzcu.org/discover)

Insured by NCUA. Membership fee and restrictions may apply.

**HORIZON**  
CREDIT UNION