

La Grande High senior finds his way on the cross-country course

Cristian Mendoza sets new record, readies to run for Eastern Oregon U

By **COREY KIRK**
For The Observer

LA GRANDE — Four years ago, if you would have looked for La Grande High senior Cristian Mendoza, you would have found him on the hardwood, dribbling a basketball and shooting some free throws.

Fast forward to present day and Mendoza still plays basketball, but he has found a newfound passion in running, playing a huge role for both the Tigers cross-country and track and field teams.

"I never necessarily thought I had a future in running," Mendoza said.

Moving to La Grande after living in the Tri-Cities area in Washington most of his life, Mendoza had his sights set on playing basketball in high school. Leaning on running as a way to remain in shape, Mendoza joined La Grande's cross-country team in the fall of 2017.

"I started really late compared to many kids. I didn't start running until my freshman year. I wasn't focused really on running, I was just so fixated on basketball," Mendoza said.

The more he competed, the more he fell in love with running. Moving to track and field in the spring, he was able to post strong times at 1,500 meters.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Cristian Mendoza, a senior at La Grande High School and member of the varsity cross-country and track and field teams, poses for a portrait on the racetrack at the high school on Sunday, April 4, 2021. In March, he became the school's new record holder in cross-country.

"At that point I knew I kind of had to change my direction, and start fixating more on running," Mendoza said.

Mendoza continued to improve on the track and the cross-country course. Although he has lettered all four years at the varsity level of basketball, cross-country head coach Alma Crow has seen Mendoza blossom into someone who is passionate about running. "He's always had a tre-

mendous work ethic, it's never been a problem. That kid has always gone on and beyond from his freshman year to now," Crow said. "He's done everything that I've asked him and more sometimes."

Consistently running between the 17 and 18 minute mark in cross-country and averaging anywhere around the 4 to 5 minute mark consistently in the 1,500 on the track, Mendoza started to divert

all his attention to his running. Though this was a newfound passion in recent years, his parents, Kristi and George Mendoza, the superintendent of the La Grande School District, have been steadfast in their support.

"They have been nothing but the best when it comes to running and have been proud of all the accomplishments I've made," Mendoza said.

After missing out on running in the fall because of COVID-19, Mendoza was excited his senior year of sports was condensed within his last remaining months at La Grande High. He was able to beat 17 minutes, getting a 16:45.90 time at the meet at Baker High School on March 12.

Three days later, Mendoza partook in the Tour de Willowcreek in Vale. Prior to this event, the best run he ever had was 16:29.80 his sophomore year, so Mendoza has been eyeing to surpass it. He also was eyeing to beat La Grande High's record of 16:29.00 from 2002.

"Since time was coming really short with our whole season, the record of course didn't mean everything to me. It's more about progressing and being the best runner possible," Mendoza said.

What Crow remembers most about that day was the weather, how intense the wind was, and how focused Mendoza was on the course in front of him.

"It was extremely impressive. It was so windy that day, I could feel the

sand of the fields hitting my face. The way he started and he took off, he was flying, it was crazy, and I saw him go," Crow said.

At the halfway point, Crow saw the lead group from the distance but didn't see Mendoza among the pack.

"I was like, 'Holy cow, where did Cristian go?'" Crow said. "Little did I know he was ahead of everybody by so much. I was looking where the pack is usually, and he was way, way in front."

From start to finish, Mendoza felt comfortable with how he was doing and his pace of the entire course.

"I didn't have anyone to run with, so I knew I just had to fixate on form and fixate on different things to allow me to run such a good race," Mendoza said.

When Mendoza crossed the line and saw his time, it confirmed what he believed all throughout the course.

Coming in at 16:20.90, Mendoza broke La Grande High School's record.

"I was pleased with winning the race. I was just pleased with giving my best effort, and knowing when I crossed that line, I was a school record holder," he said.

Mendoza now is focusing on the remaining part of his senior year as he ends his cross-country season in the coming weeks, competes in track and field during the month of April, and finishes off in basketball heading into the summer.

"Since it's my senior

year it's just more about happiness, and going out with the idea that I gave everything. It's just a happy time overall, and I'm trying to make the most out of it," Mendoza said.

The senior will follow his father's footsteps and compete for Eastern Oregon University starting in the fall on a partial scholarship. His dad was a Mountaineer 1992-97.

"It feels so good. It's one of those cool things, even though it's totally different sports," Mendoza said of competing for the same school as his father. "We have always talked about it."

Crow knows EOU's cross-country program is gaining a valuable asset in Mendoza that will make the Mountaineers even more competitive in the future.

"I'm actually really excited that he stayed here in Eastern Oregon so I can watch him race. It's going to be fun. I think he's going to be very successful," Crow said.

Mendoza is ready for what may lie ahead in his future.

"I'm just excited for what's in store. I'm excited to go to EOU," Mendoza said. "There are so many good runners, Coach Ben (Welch) is such a good coach, and that whole staff is such a good team. Knowing that I'll be going there and being coached by the best is just a blessing in itself."

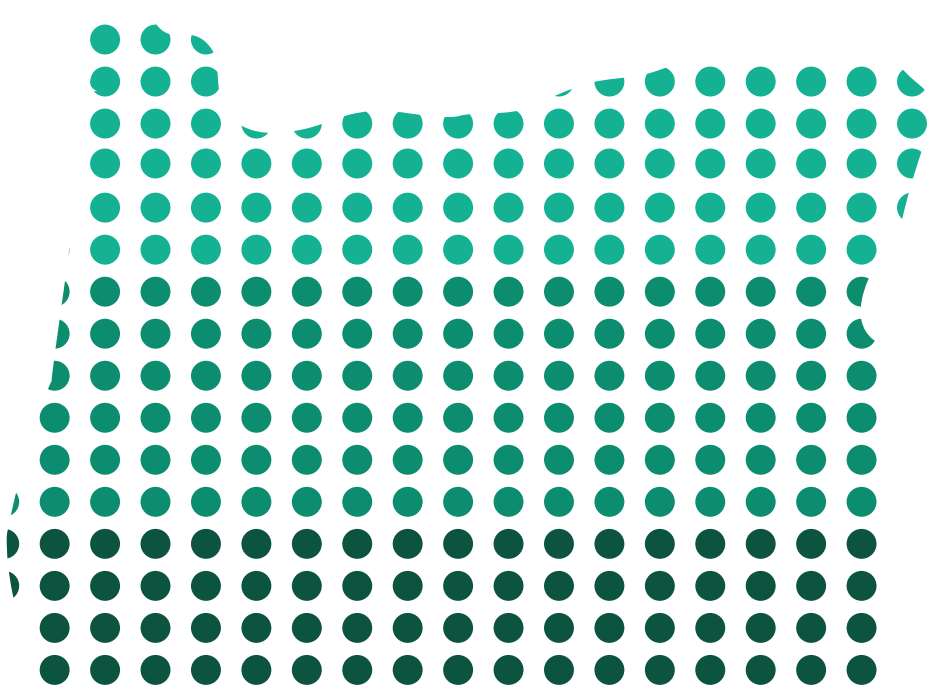
Mendoza intends to study education when he begins his undergrad work in the fall.

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