

La Grande High's football team readies for last game of short season

The Tigers are 3-0, hoping to go undefeated this year

By **BRETT KANE**
For The Observer

LA GRANDE — The La Grande High Tigers are no strangers to success on the football field.

The Tigers are 3-0 on their four-game season and hoping to go undefeated on Friday, April 9, when they'll host Baker in their lone home appearance of the year. A spotless record such as theirs is no small feat considering the mounting challenges the team had to overcome.

La Grande graduated 22 seniors off of their 4A state title-winning team last season, and are starting eight sophomores this year. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has not made it easy to get out on the gridiron and play their season, but the Tigers have proven themselves worthy of any challenge.

Wide receiver and defensive back Joe Barnes, who is one of four seniors on the team, still vividly remembers the weight falling from his shoulders when his team got the go-ahead to play its season.

"There was no better feeling than the day coach Mac (Rich McIlmoil) told us we were approved to go contact," said the 5-foot, 11-inch, 160-pound senior. "It was one of those deals where there was a light at the end of the tunnel. We'd worked so hard all off-season with the hopes of getting to play, so it was very satisfying despite the challenges of rules and sched-

ules constantly changing."

If one thing was certain, it was the Tigers weren't going to have the support of a large senior class of experienced players to help them through the season. For that reason, the team made it a goal to come together as a unit stronger than they ever have before. According to Barnes, their chemistry has been one of the biggest factors in their success this year.

"Due to the inconsistency in setting a schedule for the season, we didn't really get to set our goals like we normally have, but we talked about our goals every day at practice," he said. "Our main goal was to come together and bond as a team, and to give everything we had despite what had happened. A lot of people were expecting us to be in a 'rebuild year,' but we really just felt like it was the passing of the reins from last year's state team."

The Tigers have yet to miss a step coming off of last season's state glory — while their March 19 road victory over Vale was clinched by just one point, they've barely allowed more than one touchdown from their season's other two opponents (a 42-8 Greater Oregon League opening win at Nyssa, and a 54-6 April 2 blowout over Ontario).

"We were slow to start, but the kids picked up their intensity after the first quarter," coach McIlmoil said of the Ontario showing. "We've been fairly consistent that way all season. We're 3-0 — we've been playing well under the circumstances. We've been pleased with how well the kids have responded to the

situation we've all been in. It's been hard on them, but they've really bought into the system and what we're trying to accomplish. They're all in."

It's that sense of camaraderie the Tigers will be counting on Friday when they host their GOL rivals from Baker. The Bulldogs are 2-1 in league action and will be coming off a 49-21 loss to Pendleton.

"Baker's a well-coached

team. They have a lot of success over there," McIlmoil said. "It'll take a lot of understanding the game (to win). It'll take understanding all the little things. The kids know what they have to do."

With April 9 being the Tigers' one and only home game of the regular season, and one that will cap off league play for the year, the team knows it's going to be a bittersweet affair. Barnes

said he recognizes there's a lot expected of himself and his team, but isn't about to fold under any sort of pressure.

"I wouldn't even call it pressure," he said. "I would say it's more motivation for us, as we'll get the chance for all our families and friends to watch us play such an important game to us in our own town. We're ready to give the community a show for all the sup-

port they provide us."

Tigers fans can watch their home team take on the Bulldogs Friday at 7 p.m.

"Of course, at the end of the day, we want to try and go back to state," Barnes said, "but it's been such a weird season with little playing time and lots of talent among these 4A teams, so we're taking it one week at a time and focusing on going 1-0 each week."

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Samantha Flett/Eastern Oregon University Athletics

Eastern Oregon University running back John Lesser carries the ball against the College of Idaho at a game Saturday, April 3, 2021, at Community Stadium, La Grande. Lesser rushed for 52 yards but EOU fell 49-38.

Mountaineers lose 49-38 to Yotes in home finale

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon University football suffered its first loss of the spring season on Saturday, April 3, as the Mountaineers dropped a 10-point lead in the fourth quarter at home and lost 49-38 to the College of Idaho Coyotes.

No. 20 ranked EOU falls to 2-1 overall and 2-1 in Frontier Conference play while the Yotes, No. 6, improve to 3-0, extend their regular-season win streak to 20 and are the lone unbeaten team remaining in the Frontier Conference.

The score was 7-0 for the Yotes at the end of the first quarter. But the second quarter became a scoring bonanza, with the two teams combining for 42 points.

EOU's first score came early in the second quarter when running back John Lesser caught a 10-yard pass from quarterback Kai Quinn to cap a nine-play, 80-yard drive to tie the score at 7.

The Mountaineers' last score of the half came after linebacker Zak Donato intercepted the Yotes late in the second quarter to

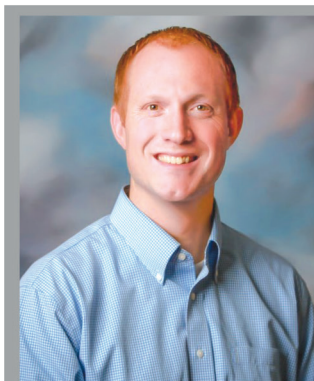
get the ball back at the C of I 21-yard line. A pass interference call against the Yotes helped EOU get down to the 2-yard line, and running back Jordan Eggers punched it in for the touchdown, cutting the score to 28-21 before halftime.

The two teams managed 10 points total in the third quarter, with EOU going up 31-28.

While the Mountaineers outgained the Yotes in total yards, 398-350, EOU lost back-to-back fumbles in the fourth quarter, leading College of Idaho to score two touchdowns and seal the win 49-38.

Quinn totaled 296 yards of offense and scored three touchdowns, including one receiving. He was 21-34 through the air for 206 yards. He rushed for 90 yards on 18 carries. Donato led the defense with 12 total tackles, including seven solo, and one interception.

EOU will close out regular season play on Saturday, April 10, when the team heads back to Montana to face the Montana State-Northern Lights. Kickoff is at 11 a.m.



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