

Lofty expectations

Eastern Oregon football team picked to win Frontier Conference in preseason coaches poll

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

GREAT FALLS, Mont. — The Mountaineers' football team is the one to beat this year in the Frontier Conference.

Eastern Oregon University topped the preseason coaches poll, which was announced Tuesday, July 27, during the Frontier Conference's media day in Great Falls, Montana. The Mountaineers finished with 39 points and three of the eight first-place votes. College of Idaho and Montana Western tied for second, and Carroll slotted in at No. 4. Southern Oregon, Montana Tech, Rocky Mountain College and Montana State-Northern rounded out the back half of the poll.

"When we get all these guys back, we have a great opportunity to do something," EOU head coach Tim Camp said. "We're excited to play, but we want to win."

The Mountaineers narrowly edged out the College of Idaho and Montana Western, who both tied for second place with 36 points. Carroll College was voted fourth with 33 points.

EOU tied atop the Frontier during the shortened spring 2020 season with Carroll and College of Idaho after four spring contests, giving the Mountaineers at least a share of a conference title for the first time since 1980 and just the fourth time since 1955.

Camp, who is entering his 14th year as head coach, was named co-coach of the year last season, while quarterback Kai Quinn won conference offensive player of the year and defensive lineman Chase Van Wyck earned conference defensive player of the year. Through a tumultuous season, the Mountaineers finished the 2020 season ranked 21st in the NAIA.

Most coaches started their press conferences at media day by discussing the challenges of the 2020 spring season and expressed their sentiments about returning to a more normal 2021 season in the fall.

"Not being able to coach against all of them in 2020 was a lot different for me," Camp said.

Camp, who has compiled a 74-61 record with



Kathleen Brown/Eastern Oregon University Athletics, File
Eastern Oregon University defensive linemen Chase Van Wyck (41) and Sage DeLong (42) celebrate March 20, 2021, in La Grande en route to the Mountaineers defeating Carroll College 28-0.

the Mountaineers, credited the Frontier Conference for making it through the pandemic and pointed out the importance of Athletic Director Anji Weissenfluh and President Tom Insko in Eastern's efforts to compete last season. Camp said the unique season brought his team closer together, and because of extended eligibility rules, almost his entire roster from last season is returning, including Quinn and Van Wyck.

"We got so much better, not just at football, but at relying on each other," the coach said.

Loaded offense returns for EOU

Quinn, who many consider to be the best at the position in the Frontier Conference, returns after throwing for 811 yards and eight touchdowns last season. Camp noted that a key component for 2021 will be the return of the bulk of the team's offensive line to protect Quinn in the pocket.

"It's important that you're great up front if you want to protect the guy that's supposed to be making the big bucks in the back, which is Kai Quinn," Camp said.

While the Mountaineers are set to return Quinn and the offensive line, there will be a new workhorse in the backfield next fall. John Lesser graduated and left the program following a year in which he rushed for 340 yards over four games. Camp suggested that there will be a running back competition in the offseason between Victor Rosas and Nathan Reed.

Improvements on defense

Camp stressed the importance of strengthening the defense, mentioning the Mountaineers' performance in 2019. Eastern allowed 30.9 points per game and finished the last full season with a 4-7 record.

The Mountaineers followed up those efforts in 2020 by allowing just 22 points per game in the four-game season.

"We're starting to play defense the way I think it should be played," Camp said. "It starts with tackling, but you have to get lined up and have some enthusiasm."

The return of Van Wyck and 2020 first-team linebacker Solo Taylor will be crucial for EOU as the team aims to continue improving on the defensive side of the ball. According to Camp, bringing back numerous upperclassmen will allow the Mountaineers to move players around to different defensive positions.

Eyes set on the regular season

Eastern Oregon begins its summer offseason program on Aug. 5, and the regular season begins on Aug. 28. The Mountaineers open on the road at Montana Tech, followed by the first home game of the year on Sept. 4 against Montana Western. After a season of just four games, Camp is excited to see the rest of the Frontier Conference.

"We're going to do everything we can to make Eastern Oregon University and the community of La Grande proud," Camp said.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer
Bryce Pennington, Shaun Youngblood and Jordan Tucker prepare for the La Grande Junior baseball team's celebratory parade on Tuesday, July 27, 2021. La Grande defeated South Central 14-12 in the championship game on Wednesday, July 21, 2021.

'We had a great season'

La Grande Junior Little League team fights through elimination bracket to win Oregon state championship

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — After a first-round loss, the La Grande Junior baseball team knew it would have to play its best baseball to bring a state trophy to Union County.

It did just that. La Grande defeated South Central 14-12 in the championship game of the Oregon Little League Junior Baseball Tournament on Wednesday, July 21, in Turner.

"The kids went into the game knowing that we were going to fight hard and give it all we got," La Grande head coach Kirk Fenley said.

La Grande earned its spot in the state tournament after defeating Walla Walla 19-8 in the District 3 tournament last month in Baker City. The juniors, whose ages range from 12 to 14, competed against Baker and Wallowa in a double-elimination district tournament before traveling to Turner's Cascade Sports Complex for the state tournament.

Things got off to a rough start for La Grande in a first-round matchup against South Central Little League from District 5. While most little league games are high scoring, South Central shut out La Grande by a narrow margin of 2-0. South Central cruised by West Salem Little League 30-6 and secured its spot in the final.

"It was a really good pitching duel, but our kids just had the state nerves,"

Fenley said. "They were just a little flat on the bats and faced some tough pitching."

Following the loss, the La Grande players and coaching staff attended a Salem-Keizer Volcanoes minor league game to take some pressure off from the tournament. According to La Grande player Nolan Needham, seeing professionals at the game make errors and bounce back to win inspired the team.

"We got to stay as a family for six straight days," Fenley said. "It was a lot of time for the kids to bond and grow, which I think really helped in taking it to the end."

Bouncing back after an early loss

In a do-or-die matchup with Raleigh Hills of District 4, La Grande dominated in a 21-9 victory, keeping the team's hopes alive. In the next round, La Grande knocked off West Salem Little League 21-10 to secure a chance at redemption in the winner's bracket.

"We got the nerves out of us and had a lot of good leadership from the 14-year-olds," Fenley said. "We just took that momentum and went with it and got a couple solid wins to carry us to the final."

In a rematch with South Central, La Grande avenged its first-round loss with a 12-6 victory. Shaun Youngblood started for La Grande and allowed four runs on just four hits and

earned the win. Jordan Tucker pitched in relief and earned the save, ensuring La Grande's spot in the championship final later that day.

"We had a lot of momentum going since we had just beat them," pitcher Bryce Pennington said.

With all the momentum on the side of La Grande, the local little leaguers jumped out to a 14-2 lead. However, South Central scored eight runs in the fifth inning to tighten up the game.

Behind a strong outing from Pennington on the mound and Riley Krantz's 3-for-5 performance at the plate, La Grande held on to win and claim the state championship.

"It was a feeling that I never thought I'd have," Needham said.

Needham led the team with nine hits and 12 runs during the entirety of the state competition. Carter Sequist tallied seven hits and Sovann Chab recorded five. Needham also pitched in the first game against South Central, allowing no hits over five innings and striking out 13 opposing batters.

Similar to the Union County Junior Softball All-Stars who won a state title, there will be no further regional or national competitions for the La Grande Junior team. Little League Baseball and Softball canceled the regional tournaments and national World Series at the junior level due to the pandemic.

"We had a great season," Needham said.

SPORTS SHORT

Ducks picked to win 3rd straight Pac-12 title

The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — After taking an unusual route to its second straight Pac-12 title last season, Oregon is the preseason favorite to make it three in a row.

The Ducks received 27 of 40 first-place votes in the annual poll of media members released Tuesday, July 27, before the start of Pac-12 media day.

Southern California got 10 votes, and Utah received three. Oregon beat the Trojans 31-24

in the conference title game last December, representing the Pac-12 North after Washington could not participate because of a COVID-19 outbreak among its players.

It was the second conference title in three seasons under coach Mario Cristobal, rewarding his emphasis on recruiting that has seen Oregon bring in the likes of junior edge rusher Kayvon Thibodeaux, who could be the first player selected in the next NFL draft.

Although the teams did not play each other in the shortened conference-only season last year, Oregon got the nod over the Pacific Northwest rival Huskies to represent the North. The Ducks received 38 first-place votes in the division, with Washington getting two.

California, Stanford, Oregon State and Washington State rounded out the voting in the North, which has won nine of 10 title games since the Pac-12 expanded in 2011.



Sean Meagher/The Oregonian, File
Oregon wide receiver Devon Williams (2) tries to avoid a tackle during a game against UCLA in November 2020.

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