

Riding upward momentum

Eastern Oregon women's soccer team aims to continue recent success in 2021

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — It's nearly time for Eastern Oregon University to kick off its women's soccer season.

Despite the obstacles of the 2020 season, the Mountaineers managed to qualify for the NAIA tournament for the fourth consecutive year. However, Eastern will be looking to avenge last year's first-round loss as a strong group returns for this women's soccer season.

"With the returning group that we have and our incoming class, we definitely have high expectations," head coach Jacob Plocher said.

Eastern is coming off a shortened season in which the team compiled an 8-2-3 record. As opposed to the normal fall season, men's and women's soccer were played from February to April in 2020. The Mountaineers saw their season end at the hands of Spring Arbor in a 3-2 loss in the first round of the NAIA tournament on April 27.

With sports schedules back to normal in 2021, the Mountaineers face a quick turnaround after last season ended in the spring. With that turnaround brings several pros and cons for Eastern.

"I think it was kind of a blessing and a curse, because we're still fairly in sync and in rhythm," Plocher said. "The training so far has been great in regards to chemistry and the standard that we're trying to play at."

Just over three months since the end of last season, the Mountaineers are back on the field in preparation for a new slate of games. In addition to still being in tempo after a small offseason window, there is a heightened injury risk after little time off.

The women's soccer staff has utilized sports performance trackers to monitor the team's health and prevent injuries.

"We want to be mindful and smart, knowing that we just basically came off a season," Plocher said.

Winning tradition

In Plocher's four seasons as head coach he has compiled a 53-12-11 record, making him the winningest head coach in program history. The Mountaineers have experienced recent success at the national level, making the NAIA tournament every year since 2017.

"I think it's definitely about bringing in the right student-athlete who is going to be a good fit for what we're trying to accomplish," Plocher said. "We bring in competitive young ladies that are willing to put in the work and understand that it's bigger than them, it's about the team."



Tomás Carradero/Contributed Photo
Eastern Oregon's Sarah Mitchell, center, controls the ball as Corban's Hannah Shore approaches during the Mountaineers' win in the 2019 Cascade Collegiate Conference semifinals. Mitchell, a reigning honorable mention NAIA all-American, is one of several key players returning for the Mountaineers in 2021.

The Mountaineers are just three seasons removed from the team's first-ever trip to the NAIA championship site in 2018, when Eastern lost a 3-0 matchup against William Carey in the round of 16. The Mountaineers again made history one year later, ending their 2019 season in the NAIA quarterfinals.

With recent success comes high expectations, but the Mountaineers are handling off-season preparation the same as any other year.

"We're going to try to take it one game at a time," Plocher said.

Key returners

Four returning seniors are using the NAIA's extended-eligibility rule for the 2021 season.

Of that group, 2020 leading goal scorer Morgan Farrington stands out as a crucial piece in Eastern's midfield. Farrington finished the 2019 season tied for most assists on the team with seven, second in points with 29 and second in goals with 11.

Eastern's two 2020 NAIA Honorable Mention All-Americans return to the pitch this year, with Cassidy Quick anchoring the defense and Sarah Mitchell in midfield.

Kaitlyn McLeod adds another veteran presence in the midfield next to Farrington, coming off a year in which she scored three goals and tallied six points. In 2019, McLeod was one of two Mountaineers to

start all 23 games.

Following the departure of goalkeeper Savannah Hutchinson, rising junior Kiara Fontanilla looks poised to be the starter in net this year for Eastern. Fontanilla started six games in 2020 behind seven starts from Hutchinson, but Fontanilla allowed only one goal to Hutchinson's six. In addition, the Mountaineers went 5-0-1 in games with Fontanilla in net during the 2020 season, while the team was 2-2-2 with Hutchinson. The California native tallied 19 saves and five shutouts last season.

"Our players have been able to have success and they've stayed hungry and humble," Plocher said. "They're looking forward to continuing to move the program forward and continue to build their legacy."

New additions

The Mountaineers made moves in recruitment this off-season, bringing in 10 new players. Of those 10, seven are true freshmen and three are transfers from other programs.

One familiar face stands out from the group of newcomers, as redshirt senior Natalie Goeth transferred back to Eastern after playing the past three seasons for Arizona Christian. Goeth started her career with the Mountaineers in 2017 and earned Honorable Mention All-CCC as a freshman.

Senior midfielder Lexi Maslowski joins the program

after spending two seasons with Division I Austin Peay State University. The Mountaineers also added junior defender Alexandria Segeberg from Life Pacific University. Of the seven incoming freshmen, three come from Washington, three hail from Idaho and midfielder Gracie Hoover is from Alaska.

"Our recruiting class that we've brought in is probably the strongest from top to bottom that we've had," Plocher said. "I definitely see the possibility of all of them contributing and allowing us to be as deep as we usually are in the past."

Ready to play

Eastern opens its season on Tuesday, Aug. 10, in a scrimmage against Columbia Basin College in Pasco, Washington.

The regular season begins with a matchup on the road at Embry-Riddle against Spring Arbor, a team that has made the NAIA semifinals two out of the last three years.

The Mountaineers play their first home game against Westmont on Monday, Sept. 13.

The Cascade Collegiate Conference announced its commitment to plan for the 2021-22 sports season on July 2. However, the recent COVID-19 spike brings the possibility of alterations to sports schedules as well as fan attendance policies. As of now, the Mountaineers are set to play six home games at Community Stadium in La Grande.



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COVID-19 spike raises concerns

Just when it looked like sports would be fully back to normal in 2021, the delta variant and a spike in COVID-19 numbers have thrown a wrench in those plans.

Following the July 29 announcement by Oregon Gov. Kate Brown mandating masks in schools this fall, OSAA followed suit in mandating mask usage for indoor athletics. Volleyball is the only indoor fall sport in Union County, but the mandate will also have an impact on training and congregating indoors for the other three outdoor sports.

Ultimately, the decision changes the status very little from where OSAA left off in the spring season. However, the end of the 2021 spring season appeared to be a step toward normalcy in the sports world. Fans were allowed on larger scales for district wrestling matches and vaccinated players and fans took off their face coverings toward the end of basketball season.

Most athletic directors seem to be rolling with the punches, keeping in mind the ultimate goal of giving student-athletes a safe sports season. Powder Valley AD Brad Dunten even noted that the constant fluctuation in mandates and scheduling prepared his coaches and athletes to expect the unexpected.

The recent mask mandates for schools have drawn criticism from some in the community, with a large crowd demonstrating their frustration at the La Grande School Board meeting on Wednesday, Aug. 4. With that being said, sports could face challenges if athletes, coaches or families voice disagreements. It remains to be ruled officially, but there seems to be a possibility that limits could be put in place again for fan attendance at events.

In La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza's letter regarding Gov. Brown's mandate, a major detail was included involving sports eligibility.

Student-athletes who participate in online, in-person or the school district's homeschool program will be eligible to participate in sports and clubs.

The unfortunate swing of events has led to a step backward in terms of sports participation and attendance. With that being said, the mandates and precautions still outdo a completely canceled season. As coaches, athletes and staff prepare for the fall seasons, we are left crossing our fingers for lower numbers and a return to normal.

SPORTS SHORT

Ducks defensive backs facing charges for alleged shooting

By **JAMES CREPEA**
The Oregonian

EUGENE — Two of Oregon's starting defensive backs are facing charges following their alleged shooting of three people with an airsoft gun late Tuesday, Aug. 3.

Ducks nickel safety Jamal Hill and boundary cornerback DJ James are each facing three charges of reckless endangering, assault, unlawful discharge of a firearm, and disorderly conduct, according to Eugene police.

Police said a man reported being shot in the face with a "realistic-looking airsoft gun at 14th

and Willamette by someone in a sedan that had driven past him," at 11:44 p.m. Aug. 3. Two other people reported similar incidents in a close time and proximity, including one riding an electric scooter who claimed he was "almost hit by the vehicle as it left the area," police said.

The vehicle was spotted by responding officers near 11th and Willamette and Hill and James were cooperative, said police, who cited them for the aforementioned charges in lieu of arrest.

"We have high standards and expectations for the student-athletes in our program," Oregon coach Mario Cristobal said via

a spokesman. "We were made aware of the situation and are in process of gathering all of the related information, after which we will take appropriate action."

Under Oregon law, reckless endangering is a Class A misdemeanor, disorderly conduct is a Class B misdemeanor, unlawful use of a weapon is a Class C felony and assault can be either a misdemeanor or felony depending on charges.

Class A misdemeanors are subject to a \$6,250 fine and/or one year in jail, Class B misdemeanors are subject to a \$2,500 fine and/or six months in jail and Class C felonies can result in up to five years in prison and/or a \$125,000 fine.



Ashley Landis/The Associated Press, File
Oregon safety Jamal Hill (19) celebrates during the Pac-12 Conference championship against USC on Dec 18, 2020, in Los Angeles.