

DAVIS CARBAUGH
CARBAUGH'S CORNER

Tigers finding a groove at the right time

In a 44-14 loss to top-ranked Estacada, it looked like the La Grande football team was completely lost.

Since that loss on Sept. 23, the Tigers have flipped the switch and seem to be back on track. Fans and sportswriters alike are not the only ones noticing the major upswing, with head coach Rich McIlmoil noting the same improvements.

“I think we’re turning a corner at this point in the season,” he said after last week’s win over Nyssa/Harper Charter.

With a bye this week, here are some things that have stood out this season from the Tigers.

A big key for La Grande has been playing an old school, ground-and-pound offense that wears opposing defenses down. That was certainly the case in a 35-20 win over Burns on Oct. 1, in which La Grande had to come back from down two scores. With the game knotted up early in the fourth quarter, the Tigers broke loose for several large runs from Brody MacMillan to pull away.

While MacMillan’s return from injury has been key, the overall progression of the team’s offensive unit has been noticeable. McIlmoil emphasized that setting the tone early with a hard-nosed rushing attack allows quarterback Logan Williams to have more time in the pocket to execute his throws.

This was the case in the win over Nyssa/Harper Charter, in which the Tigers scored early and often. La Grande came out running, turning a 35-point first quarter into a 55-16 victory. The win brought La Grande’s record to 4-1 on the year.

Paired with a heavy rushing attack is a sturdy defensive effort led by senior Cole Jorgenson on the defensive line. La Grande is holding opponents to just 18.4 points per game, with no team besides Estacada scoring more than 20 in a single contest.

McIlmoil was clear after the loss to Estacada that the game would be used as a measuring stick. While the loss was a major blow early in the season, the team has found its stride in the following contests. Ranked No. 7 in the OSAA Class 4A rankings, La Grande will likely be a much-improved unit if it matches up with No. 1 Estacada in the playoffs. Although the Tigers still have a long way to go before making a run in the playoffs, things are starting to trend in the right direction late in the season for La Grande.

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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File
Wallowa Valley’s Zac Knapp runs through a water crossing Thursday, Oct. 7, 2021, at the Mustang Invite at Thompson Ranch in Heppner. Knapp finished first in the 5,000 meter with a time of 15:38.9. He has won all his races this fall.

Focus forward
Senior Wallowa Valley runner Zac Knapp turns attention from soccer to cross-country

By JEFF BUDLONG
For The Observer

ENTERPRISE — Focus made a big difference for Zac Knapp.

The senior cross-country runner for Wallowa Valley has always loved to play soccer. It is no surprise, because he is quite good at it. But this spring he had to make a tough decision.

“I started playing soccer competitively about five years ago, and that was my life and all I wanted to do,” he said. “That is actually how I got into running because I got into cross-country as a way to stay in shape for that.

“Last spring, I started feeling that maybe I should just focus on running, and I was curious what I could do if I just focused on running.”

Knapp is leaving no doubt. The decision to commit to running has paid off for Knapp and Wallowa Valley as he has won all five races the team has taken part in this fall. He took the top spot to open his season at the Catherine Creek Scamper in 17 minutes, 22 seconds. He was the lone sub-17 minute runner in winning the Wallowa County Invite in 16:20.2, and went under 16 to win the Stanfield Fun Country in a school-record time of 15:24.9. Knapp also claimed the Baker Invite in 16:15.34 and the Mustang Invite in 15:38.9.

Knapp said eliminating soccer practice in the morning allows him to get more sleep, and it has freed up his weekends to be able to put in a few more miles.



East Oregonian, File
Zac Knapp, shown in a cross-country race earlier this spring, said eliminating soccer practice in the morning allows him to get more sleep, and it has freed up his weekends to be able to put in a few more miles.

“Once he made that decision, he just became a totally different runner,” said Wallowa Valley head coach Dan Moody, who has led the team

since 1989. “He is really conscientious about it and working toward what he can get to.”

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SPORTS BRIEFS

EOU volleyball remains at No. 13 in NAIA rankings

LA GRANDE — The Eastern Oregon University volleyball team came in at No. 13 in the latest NAIA Coaches’ Poll released on Wednesday, Oct. 13.

The Mountaineers weathered the storm against two of their toughest competitors in the Cascade Collegiate Conference this past weekend. Eastern lost a five-set thriller to No. 6 Corban on Oct. 8, followed by a four-set victory over Bushnell on the following day.

Eastern lost to Corban 26-24, 19-25, 25-18, 25-27 and 12-15. In the win over the Beacons, the Mountaineers took the four sets 25-22, 25-21, 12-25 and 25-20.

The Mountaineers are currently second in the conference with an 11-2 record in conference play and 16-5 record overall.

Eastern has two road matchups upcoming this weekend, against Lewis-Clark State and Walla Walla.

EOU women’s soccer moves up two spots in NAIA rankings

LA GRANDE — The Eastern Oregon University women’s soccer team climbed up the national rankings, improving two spots to No. 18 in the NAIA.

The Mountaineers earned a solid victory over Rocky Mountain College this weekend, bouncing back from a difficult 3-1 road loss to the College of Idaho in the week prior.

The Mountaineers set the tone early, scoring two goals in the first half from Erika Skindlov and Kaitlyn McLeod. Lindsay Balkenbush added a late goal in the second half to give Eastern a 3-0 road victory against the Battlin’ Bears.

Eastern is currently tied with the College of Idaho at the top of the Cascade Collegiate Conference. Both teams have a 6-1 conference record, but the Mountaineers find themselves with the highest NAIA ranking.

Up next for Eastern, the team will host three consecutive home games, against Oregon Tech, Southern Oregon and Carroll College.

— The Observer

SPORTS SHORT

Oregon 2nd, Oregon State tied for 4th in preseason hoops poll

By CHRIS HANSEN
Eugene Register-Guard

SAN FRANCISCO — Pac-12 media members have clearly caught onto Oregon coach Dana Altman’s knack for rebuilding on the fly.

Despite the return of just two starters from last season’s conference championship team and only three others who saw playing time, the Ducks were picked to finish second in the preseason Pac-12 media poll released Tuesday, Oct. 12, during the conference’s annual men’s basketball media day in San Francisco.

UCLA, coming off a Final Four appearance in 2021, was

ranked No. 1 and received 32 of the 34 first-place votes and 404 points overall.

The Ducks received the other two first-place votes and 373 points. Southern California (320) was picked to finish third and Oregon State and Arizona, with 245 points each, were tied for fourth.

“I think if we keep working at it we have a chance to be OK,” said Altman, whose team went 21-7 overall and 14-4 in the Pac-12 to win its second-straight regular-season conference title. The Ducks advanced to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament where it lost to the Trojans.

But per usual, Altman and his staff have restocked the

roster with seven new players, including transfers Quincy Guerrier, a junior forward from Syracuse, De’Vion Harmon, a junior guard from Oklahoma, Jacob Young, a redshirt senior guard from Rutgers, and Rivaldo Soares, a junior guard and junior college all-American.

Will Richardson, Guerrier and Harmon were all named to the media’s preseason all-conference team.

“I hope we play hard, I hope we play well,” Altman said. “We got good players.”

Oregon State had a first-team selection in 2021 Pac-12 Tournament most outstanding player Warith Alatishe. Jarod Lucas was named to the second team.

The Beavers surpassed any and all expectations in winning the Pac-12 tournament last March before reaching the NCAA Elite Eight.

So the team, with seven new scholarship players, heads into the coming season realizing that historic experience is in the past and knowing it will take work to accomplish something like that again.

“We have brought in some talent. We’ve got some guys that really understood what put us in position to make that run back, but are they going to feeling content or are they going to thirst for more?” Oregon State coach Wayne Tinkle said “Now you’ve got some transfers that are

hungry to come be a part of it. So there’s been a little marking your territory, you know what I mean.”

The season begins for Oregon on Nov. 9 with a 4 p.m. home game against Texas Southern and the non-conference schedule also includes a game against defending national champion Baylor in Matthew Knight Arena on Dec. 18.

Oregon State opens its schedule with a Nov. 4 home exhibition against St. Martin’s, while the first regular-season game is Nov. 9 versus Portland State, also at Gill Coliseum.

— Corvallis Gazette-Times reporter Jesse Sowa contributed to this report.