

PREP NEWS AND NOTES

Cove defense steps up in strong outing against Crane

Leopards limit potent Mustangs offense to just 16 points

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

COVE — The Cove football team has not made much noise this season, but a recent matchup with No. 5 Crane has head coach Levi Wiseman excited for the program's future.

The Leopards came into the game as underdogs, but held on to lose by a narrow 16-6 deficit on Oct. 15.

Cove's defense was incredibly stout against a Crane team that entered the contest averaging 57 points per contest over the last four games. The Leopards executed their game plan and heavily limited the Mustangs' offensive production. A goal-line stand on the opening drive set the tone for the remainder of the game.

"We were focused on some of their key plays and got the guys to read those pretty quick," Wiseman said.

Wiseman noted that several drops from Crane kept the Leopards in the game, but the team also had to factor in several injuries. Cove's first- and second-string quarterbacks both were injured during the second half.

"I was extremely impressed with how my players came out, as well as the heart and grit that they came out with," he said.

While the team is losing several key seniors, Wiseman's group will return a large squad next season. He emphasized that strong performances against top teams like Crane provide motivation for the program moving forward.

"It's the kind of momentum that we want to take into next season," Wiseman said. "This is exactly the momentum we're looking for."

Young core for Powder Valley peaking at right time

ewThe Badgers won their three weekend matches, beating Pine Eagle, Wallowa and Union. The wins over Pine Eagle and Wallowa were in three straight sets, while the Badgers topped Union in four frames.

Lind will lean on senior Trinity Nesser and junior Dallece Bingham, two of the few upperclassmen on the roster. Other than that, it will be an effort of underclassmen looking to continue the program's legacy as the post-season approaches.

"These players got thrown into the fire out of the gate," Lind said. "It was tough, and there was a huge learning curve early on, but the main goal was to stay positive and look at everything as a learning opportunity."

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Samantha Flett/Eastern Oregon University Athletics, File
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.

Back to the gridiron

Former EOU star set to further career in professional indoor league

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

PASCO, Wash. — A familiar name in La Grande is continuing his football career at the professional level.

John Lesser, a former standout running back in his days at Eastern Oregon University, recently agreed to play professional indoor football for the Tri-City Rush. Lesser signed his contract on Monday, Oct. 11, ahead of the team's next season in the coming spring.

"I felt like it was the best way to go," Lesser said. "It's just a really cool and unique opportunity."

Lesser found himself at somewhat of a crossroads in his football career, having opted to not play for the Mountaineers this spring. Although he played four seasons at Eastern, the Richland, Washington, native would have been able to play an extra year due to COVID-19 NAIA eligibility rules.

The move to join the Tri-City Rush allows Lesser to stay closer to family, as well as focus on his career outside of football.

"With COVID I could have come back to Eastern, but it just didn't work out," he said. "I started my career and have a great career working at Elite Athletics Training. I just wanted to stay close to my wife and get life started."

Lesser works at a sports performance gym in Kennewick, Washington, when he is not on the gridiron. The gym focuses on high-level athletes, where Lesser runs the weight room and strength and conditioning programs.

The former Mountaineer was a solid runner in his time in La Grande, totaling 340 rushing yards, three rushing touchdowns and one receiving touchdown in a four-game senior season. Lesser was selected second-team all con-



Tri-City Rush/Contributed Photo
Former Eastern Oregon University running back John Lesser signs his contract with the Tri-City Rush on Monday, Oct. 11, 2021. Lesser was named second-team all conference in his final year with the Mountaineers.

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"It's so tough, especially knowing that I could have possibly gone back," Lesser said. "It just wasn't in the plans. Now, I get a chance to keep playing football and be a part of a super-cool organization."

Prior to playing for Eastern, Lesser rushed for 9,019 careers yards at Liberty Christian High School and tallied 1,066 career points.

Lesser joins a Tri-City team that is heading into its second year of indoor competition. The Rush previously played outdoor football, but the team won its division in the first year of indoor competition. Lesser hopes to contribute to the team as much as he can, noting that playing near his home town is an added bonus.

"I'm looking to get on the field as much as possible and play as much as I can, while continuing to play the great game of football," he said.

Lesser is making the best

of his opportunity, while being able to focus on his personal life and career goals. He expressed his feelings of nostalgia watching Eastern football from afar this year and was adamant about the impact of his days in La Grande.

"Coach (Tim) Camp gets you prepared for anything," he said. "I've been coached by great coaches over the years I was there, which got me ready for life and better at football."

Although the 2020 spring season was shortened to just four games, Lesser noted that the slate of games was arguably his favorite memory at Eastern. Lesser helped guide the Mountaineers to a 3-1 record and the program's first share of the conference regular season title.

"I learned a lot from all my teammates and all my coaches, especially in that last year," he said. "It was one of the best times of my life. We were a great team that played great team football. I think I took a

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ON CAMPUS

Eastern women's soccer suffers historic loss

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Home losses are a rarity for the Eastern Oregon University women's soccer team, much less two in a row. This weekend, the Mountaineers were swept by Oregon Tech and Southern Oregon in back-to-back shutout losses.

Prior to the loss to Oregon Tech, the women's soccer team had never been shut out at Community Stadium. The Mountaineers were left looking for answers this weekend, as the team was held scoreless in both home outings.

Eastern's offensive production stalled throughout the weekend, which was very evident in the 2-0 loss to Oregon Tech on Friday, Oct. 15. The Owls outshot the Mountaineers 15-5 and scored two second half goals to blank Eastern.

The loss was only the second ever home loss for head coach Jacob Plocher in his five-year tenure. A 1-0 loss to Southern Oregon on the following day marked the first time the Mountaineers lost-back-to-back matches under Plocher.

Eastern was able to drum up some offense in the loss to Southern Oregon, outshooting the Raiders 11-8. However, the Mountaineers could not get the ball past opposing goalkeeper Ashlynn Hernandez in the defeat.

It was a rare off weekend for a Mountaineers team that had been dominant in Cascade Collegiate Conference play leading up to this point. The home losses dropped the team's record to 6-3-0 in conference play, which resulted in a drop from second in the conference standings to fifth place.

McMurtrey anchors back line for Eastern

LA GRANDE — A familiar name is thriving on the back line for the Eastern Oregon University volleyball team.

Alexis McMurtrey, the younger sister of the program's all-time great libero Kiley McMurtrey, is making a name for herself during her second year with the program.

The Mountaineers picked up two more road wins this weekend, defeating Lewis-Clark State in four sets on Oct. 15 and sweeping Walla Walla in straight sets on Oct. 16.

McMurtrey tallied a team-high 57 assists across the two contests. She added six aces and 17 digs to help secure Eastern its third straight win. The freshman is leading the team with 598 total assists this season, which is good for fourth in the Cascade Collegiate Con-

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SPORTS SHORT

EOU men's wrestling comes in at No. 5 in preseason poll

East Oregonian

LA GRANDE — The Cascade Collegiate Conference released its 2021-22 preseason men's wrestling coaches' poll. Eastern Oregon found itself near the middle of the rankings in the 12-team conference.

The Mountaineers checked in at No. 5 with 98 points and were just three points away from being tied for fourth with Vanguard University. EOU also is the highest-ranked full-time member of the CCC in the preseason poll.

Taking the top spot in the poll is Menlo College with 131 points

and seven first-place votes. Slotted second is Embry-Riddle with 120 points and two first-place votes.

Rounding out the top three is Montana State-Northern with two first-place votes and 114 points.

Eastern will have an experienced squad going into the 2021-22 campaign with all five National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics national qualifiers returning from last season, including All-Americans Keegan Mulhill (174 pounds) and Noel Orozco (285), who are both seniors.

Also back are Luciano Fasulo (125), Kyle Knudtson (184), Marco Retano (197) and John Bittinger

(165).

All returning athletes will look to lead the Mountaineers this season after finishing the 2020-21 season ranked No. 18 in the NAIA.

The Mountaineers will strive to make the most of what is expected to be a full regular season. They have 12 duals on deck and seven tournaments.

Eastern will get things officially started Nov. 3 when they take on Western Wyoming Community College in American Falls, Idaho.



Eastern Oregon University Athletics/Contributed Photo, File
Eastern Oregon University senior Noel Orozco, right, an All-American at 285 pounds, returns for the Mountaineers this season. A preseason poll has Eastern in the No. 5 spot.