

PREP BASKETBALL



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

La Grande's Brady Hutchins (22) looks to pass the ball during the first quarter of a game last season against Nixyaawii. Hutchins is one of several returning seniors that will look to lead the way for La Grande in the 2021-22 season.

Looking to make a run

La Grande boys leaning on deep group of upperclassmen to carry the load this season

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — This year's La Grande boys basketball team has high potential, but head coach Mark Carollo's squad is not looking too far ahead.

The Tigers return five rising seniors and four juniors to this year's team and will look to build on a 7-3 spring season. With a large group back for this coming hoops season, La Grande is aiming to make a run at the Greater

Oregon League and Class 4A state title.

"We have high expectations, but we're looking to take things one game at a time," Carollo said. "Winning the league and competing in the playoffs are obviously very high goals, but coming into the season we just have to focus on little things that we need to get better at."

La Grande returns several key contributors from last year's squad, including seniors Devin Bell and Brady Hutchins. Carollo is relying on the duo to provide leadership on and off the court for this year's team.

"Both of them have valuable varsity experience and last year they definitely increased their level and improved," he said. "I can totally see that they're maturing and continue to get better."

The Tigers breezed through league play last season, compiling a 4-0 record. Other contributors from last

year's team who will have a large impact this year include upperclassmen Alex Rodriguez, Cesar Rodriguez, Jarom Huntsman, Sam Tsiatsos, Owen Rinker, Logan Williams and Jace Schow. Even with a plethora of returning talent, the mindset remains the same at La Grande — taking things one day at a time.

"Every year is different, especially in high school," Carollo said. "This early on, we're just worried about how we're competing in each game leading up to the end of the season. There's a long way to go and a lot to learn."

The Tigers get things started with a heavy slate of non-league matchups to begin the season. La Grande opens the year at Umatilla on Thursday, Dec. 2, as part of 11 straight nonleague games to start off.

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Reloading for another run

New-look La Grande aims to find its identity after key departures

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Brian Wright has one thing on his mind heading into the 2021-22 season.

"It's a fresh new start," he said.

The La Grande girls basketball head coach is faced with replacing five seniors from a team that went 10-0 in the regular season last spring. With many new athletes hitting the hardwood this year, the Tigers will look to surprise some folks around the league.

La Grande has some major shoes to fill, primarily its former one-two punch of guard Camryn Collman and forward Ella Dunlap. Collman now plays for the University of Portland and Dunlap is on the Eastern Oregon University team. The duo contributed to La Grande right from the start as freshmen, so their absence will surely be felt after four productive years.

However, the Tigers will still rely on a Dunlap to be a steady force in the paint this year — Ella Dunlap's younger sister, Addison. Now in her junior year,



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

La Grande Junior Makenna Shorts works on her shot during a girls basketball practice on Thursday, Nov. 18, 2021. Shorts will be looking to help fill the void left by five graduating seniors from last year's team.

Addison Dunlap will likely see a spike in playing time as an upperclassman.

"She played a lot for us last year and did really well," Wright said. "When she's on the court we can do some things just because of her size."

As for replacing Collman's efficient ball handling, court vision and scoring abilities, that is the big question coming into this season.

"That's what we're looking for," Wright said. "I think we'll do it more by committee this year."

Junior Makenna Shorts is set to take a big step this

year at the guard position after a quality sophomore season. Seniors Grace Neer, Isabelle Kump and Madielynn Larman also will look to lead the way for this year's younger team.

"We'll be a little more diversified this year," Wright said. "Traditionally, we've pounded the ball into the post or started inside out."

In Wright's fourth year as head coach at La Grande, this group presents a new challenge. While the team has a solid quantity of returners, the Tigers have a large group of incoming freshmen to acclimate to

the program. Wright said he expects a high quantity of freshmen to make the varsity team and see the court in order to gain valuable experience.

"I think this freshman class has potential to be really good," he said.

With a large turnover from one year to the next comes the task of rebuilding team chemistry, which is a focus during the offseason. Wright said the group is coming together well and the team is making a real effort to become more cohesive.

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SWIMMING

Tigers ready to dive in

La Grande swimming sees uptick in numbers, looks for strong season

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The La Grande swim team is anticipating big possibilities this upcoming season.

Coming off a delayed spring season in which both La Grande's girls and boys teams competed admirably at the state championships despite limited swimmers, hopes are high in 2022. Under the leadership of first-year head coach Cheyenne Maszk, the Tigers are looking to utilize a much larger group of swimmers to find success this year.

"We are looking forward to a much more normal season than last year," Maszk said. "We have quite a few returners and kids who have swam club, so we have high expectations for districts and state."

The Tigers are coming off a clean sweep in the Greater Oregon League, taking both the girls and boys titles with just 10 total swimmers. La Grande went on to place sixth at the 4A/3A/2A/1A girls state championship and its two boys qualifiers helped the team place 13th. Now with 25 swimmers on the roster, the team is ready for a big year.

"Last year we didn't expect that we would take a whole lot of people to state, we just didn't know where everyone was," Maszk said of the spring season in which she was an assistant coach. "We ended up taking most of our little team, which was exciting and a good thing to build on."

On the boys side, junior Glenn Ricker leads the way as he pursues his second career individual state championship. Ricker won the 100-yard butterfly as a freshman and placed second in last year's competition. He also finished as the runner-up in the 100 breaststroke after battling an early-season injury.

Next to Ricker is Gabe Zamora, another junior who Maszk expects to lead the way.

"Glenn and Gabe are both quiet leaders. They don't have to be loud or obnoxious — people just naturally follow their example," Maszk said. "The older ones are definitely ready to work and they're ready for a more normal season where we have more time to train and get on track."

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WRESTLING

High expectations for Tiger matmen

Experienced group has La Grande looking for state glory on the mat

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The bar is set high for the La Grande High School wrestling team.

Following a historic state championship in 2019-20, a young group of wrestlers over-achieved and placed second in last year's tournament. With most of those wrestlers returning this year, La Grande is looking to bring home another championship.

"We're building on how they did last year," head coach Klel Carson said. "We only graduated one senior, who we're going to miss a lot this year, but we're super excited for this season."

The Tigers are coming off a second-place finish in the spring season 4A state championship, scoring 167 points and placing behind Sweet Home with 262. La Grande returns nearly the entirety of the roster that dominated the Greater Oregon League district championship.

Leading the way is senior Braden Carson, a 138-pound wrestler who last season earned his second straight individual title. Braden Carson is entering the 2021 season seeking program history — a third state title would be a record at La Grande. The senior is locked in on his personal goals, but is focusing on the team's success first and foremost.

"I'm ready to go," Braden Carson said. "I expect our team to do really well this year. I think we have everyone we need at every weight class to compete well at state."

Joining Braden Carson as another senior leader on the team is Brody MacMillan, who is fresh off a stellar football season in which he was named Greater Oregon League offensive player of the year. MacMillan missed the entirety of last season with a leg injury and is itching to get back on the mat for this year's group.

"I'm ready to get back out there," MacMillan said.

Klel Carson noted the importance of adding MacMillan back into a group that competed well in his absence last year. The coach stated that MacMillan brings invaluable leadership and intensity to La Grande's wrestling room.

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