

Increased numbers and high expectations for Elgin wrestlers

By **JEFF BUDLONG**
For The Observer

ELGIN — Lee Fincher has had a hand in building the Elgin wrestling team to this moment.

The fourth-year head coach spent many long hours helping each step of the way as young boys first learned how to get in a wrestling stance all the way to this season. One that comes with hopes and expectations.

The Huskies return a strong core of wrestlers led by junior state runner-up Joe Lathrop and two other returning state qualifiers in junior Gabe Hasbell and Reece McConnell, the lone

senior on the team.

"I coached the middle school for two years and the club team for 10," Fincher said. "I have state title aspirations for all of those guys. They feed off each other and work hard every single day. I think it is completely reasonable for them to be in the mix."

The Huskies had just six wrestlers take the mat last year, but Elgin is experiencing a bit of a rebirth of wrestling popularity with 19 wrestlers this season, including five female wrestlers.

"That is a huge number, and I don't know if we have ever had a team that big," Fincher said.

The Huskies will be without junior Bruce Morehead, a fourth-place state finisher a year ago, because of a shoulder injury.

Fincher is not trying to dampen expectations for his most experience wrestlers, beginning with Lathrop.

"He is going to be pushing for a state title this year and he is hungry," said Fincher of his 170-pounder. "He is the captain of the team and a great student."

Lathrop is a two-time district champion who brings a pace and intensity on his feet that is hard for opponents to deal with. Lathrop, like his teammates, is focusing on his conditioning in the pre-

season as well as his ability to score in scramble positions.

Hasbell, McConnell, Gen Wintersteen and sophomore Ty McLaughlin round out the nucleus for the Huskies. Hasbell and Wintersteen will wrestle at 160 while McLaughlin and McConnell are at 152 and 145, respectively. It makes for an intense environment in the wrestling room.

"Iron sharpens iron and our room is very competitive," said Fincher. "They are really grinding it out every day in the room and that is awesome."

Elgin has had numerous state champions over the years, but it has been more

than a decade since a Husky had his hand raised in the final match of a season.

Fincher has coached several wrestlers since they were 7 on the club Team Xtreme squad. It has brought a closeness to the team and helped several of the younger wrestlers transition faster by seeing the standard that is being set.

The Huskies hope to have nearly a full lineup by district time and will have good depth at most weights. Phoenix Schultze and Aiden Johnson are two new faces that could make an impact at 106 and 138, respectively.

"The number of kids is huge because the first year I took over I had three

kids," Fincher said. "A big part of the growth is that the core guys are good guys, and other kids just want to be around that and involved. We have a family atmosphere."

The Huskies are aiming for a team district title after taking third a year ago. To do that they will likely have to go through traditional power Culver, the defending 2A state champion.

The Huskies begin the season Dec. 3 at the Perry Burlison Tournament at Cascade High School. The tournament has its own girls division, something Fincher will continue to pursue as interest grows on his team.

BOYS

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"I think it will definitely help them in the long run," head coach Kevin Johnson said. "We've always had upperclassmen who could teach the process, but now they're going to have to learn themselves."

A big challenge for Elgin will be a lack of depth, with just six players listed on the varsity roster. The Huskies' roster is built of one junior and five freshmen, all of whom have limited experience. For Johnson, improving on tough losses and gaining experience are going to be a large part of the season.

"Keep their chins up, retain as much as you can, learn from mistakes — that's going to be big," Johnson said.

The Huskies are two years removed from a 2019 team that posted a 15-11 record and earned a berth into the 1A state tournament. However, that season's entire roster has since graduated and Elgin's new



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Enterprise JV player Ethan Lyon (15) drives toward the basket as Elgin's Collin Smith (11) defends and EHS teammate Parker Siebe, right, steps in to help during a matchup at Elgin High School on Tuesday, Dec. 7, 2021. The Elgin boys basketball team fell to Enterprise 57-10.

crop of players will be looking to make names for themselves on the hardwood.

"We're left with an opportunity to make the best of it," Johnson said.

The Huskies are off to a tough start to the season, losing their opening three contests to the La Grande junior varsity team and Grant Union at the Elgin Lions Tournament, and the

Enterprise JV. Elgin has seven nonleague contests before Old Oregon League action starts up for the Huskies on Tuesday, Jan. 4 against Imbler. The team will play a modified JV schedule this year, which Johnson hopes will help his young team improve over the course of the season.

"They'll improve," he said. "It's a group of kids that's 100% committed."

GIRLS

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Evans and Adams were part of an Elgin team that went 20-6 two seasons ago, but their most important contribution — at least early on — may be leadership.

"I need them to keep the underclassmen motivated and coming every day with a positive attitude," said Brian Evans. "I have told the girls it is going to be a bit of a struggle getting used to playing varsity ball from essentially junior high."

Evans knows that a faster, more physical game awaits several of his players, but he hopes to counteract some of that by using his team's athleticism and speed. Offensively, the Huskies are going to push the pace as they look to make up for a lack of size, while pressure will be the name of the game on the defensive end.

"With the number of players we have, I am looking to be able to rotate



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Elgin's Chelsie McKay (22) drives for a layup during the Huskies' 49-19 loss to Enterprise at Elgin High School on Tuesday, Dec. 7, 2021. McKay scored two points in the loss.

in and out to keep the tempo where we want it," Evans said.

Evans said he is pleased with what he has seen in practice from his young players who have proven to be coachable and pick up on new skills quickly.

The Huskies opened their season with losses to the La Grande and Baker junior varsities and Enter-

prise, but will look to get the season on track when league play begins on Jan. 4 against Imbler.

Evans knows there will be growing pains early, but remaining positive will be key to growing throughout the season.

"Once we get these first couple of games under our belt, we will be just fine," he said.

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