

Sports stories topped by Powder Valley's near-title run

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

POWDER VALLEY FOOTBALL MAKES HISTORIC RUN AT TITLE

NORTH POWDER — Powder Valley High School may have the smallest enrollment out of every Union County school, but its football team put North Powder on the map this year.

The Badgers put together a dominant 11-1 season building up to a title clash against rival Adrian on Nov. 27. Quarterback Reece Dixon was the central piece among standouts such as Kaden Krieger, Cole Martin, Clay Martin and Case Olson. The Badgers outscored their opponents 548-294 throughout the season and steamrolled past its playoff opponents en route to the school's first state championship appearance since 2003.

After losing to the Antelopes 38-0 on Oct. 1, Powder Valley gave Adrian a run for their money up until the very last snap. The game went back and forth with the Badgers holding the lead for the majority of the contest as fans from both schools packed Baker Bulldog Memorial Stadium in Baker City. A late momentum swing to Adrian made all the difference as the Badgers came just one touchdown shy of championship glory in a 46-38 loss.

On top of the stellar performances on the gridiron, the Powder Valley football team rallied the town to get behind its prep team. Head Coach Josh Cobb periodically took time late in the season to reflect on how this group of players helped build a renewed football culture in North Powder.

"It kind of gives you goose bumps every day because everyone is buying in," Cobb said prior to the state championship game. "Players, coaches, the school, parents and the community are all behind us. Right now, Powder Valley has a true football family."

UNION/COVE BOYS CROSS-COUNTRY TAKES STATE

EUGENE — The Union/Cove boys cross-country team helped bring home the school's ninth team title in program history, winning the 2A/1A championship with 39 points at Lane Community College on Nov. 9.

The Bobcats leaned on a deep group of core runners from top to bottom, which head coach Steve Sheehy emphasized all season. Union junior Taylor Fox (16:55.7) led the way with a fifth-place finish, while the Bobcats saw six runners finish in the top 25.

Sophomore Eli Williams finished 10th for Union/Cove with a time of 17:34.6. Freshman Nathanael O'Reilly placed 15th at 17:55.4, and senior Skyler Perkins was right behind in 17th with a time of 18:12.2. Junior Noah Platz took 23rd at 18:33.5, and freshman David McDonald came in 24th at 18:37.5.

The Bobcats scored just enough points to edge out second-place Bandon, which scored 43 points. Union/Cove's depth at the lower end of the top group ultimately provided the needed push to bring home championship glory.

Union/Cove is set to continue its reign, with five of the team's top six runners returning next year. With two



Powder Valley's Clay Martin (23) pushes his way through the center against Adrian High School on Saturday, Nov. 27, 2021, on the Baker High School field. The Badgers lost to the Adrian Antelopes 46-38 during the final match for the OSAA 1A State Championship in a heartbreaking finale that saw Adrian come back in the fourth quarter to take the title.

Alex Wittwer/The Observer

freshmen placing in the top 25 and Union's frontrunner Fox leading the way, the Bobcats will look to defend the state title next season.

HISTORY ON THE MATS

LA GRANDE — Fans of wrestling were lucky to enjoy two of the most successful wrestlers in Eastern Oregon at the peaks of their careers this year.

Seniors Garrett Burns of Imbler and Braden Carson of La Grande both earned their second career individual state titles during their junior years in 2021. Burns made Imbler history by becoming the only two-time champion, while a potential three-peat for Carson would rank him at the top the La Grande wrestling program.

Burns defeated Central Linn's Blake Owens by a 6-2 decision to win the 2A/1A 120-pound weight class on June 26 at Sweet Home High School. Carson edged out Stayton's Eli Howard by fall in 3:15 to take the 4A crown in the 138-pound division.

Both wrestlers are leading the way for their teams in the 2021-22 season and looking to end the season on top once again.

Another title for Burns would create a seemingly insurmountable record at Imbler, while Carson has the chance to finish out his career as one of the all-time greats of a

storied La Grande wrestling program.

"He's a really hard worker and a good leader," La Grande coach Klel Carson said. "It's good to have that in the room, pushing the other guys."

ZAC KNAPP, EMILY TUBBS INDIVIDUAL STATE CHAMPS IN CROSS-COUNTRY

EUGENE — Two standout runners put together dominant cross-country seasons in 2021 and took home individual state championships.

Enterprise senior Zac Knapp and La Grande sophomore Emily Tubbs won every race they competed in during the 2021 fall season and crushed the field at the state championship races.

Knapp ran a time of 15:52.3 to win the 3A race by more than 30 seconds, while Tubbs clocked a 19:04.6 in the 4A girls race to beat the next finisher by 14 seconds. Both standouts got stronger as the year went on and never looked back, placing first overall in a combined 16 races this season.

Tubbs is the lead runner of a core of four strong underclassmen for La Grande. The group of Tubbs, freshman Cecilia Villagomez, sophomore Kiah Carlson and sophomore Faith Calhoun are expected to continue to be the pillars of what could be a powerhouse cross-country team.

Knapp was the anchor to the Wallowa Valley cross-country team that cruised to its third straight team state championship. His personal-record time of 15:14.7 at the 3A/2A/1A District 3 Championships on Oct. 29 set a program record.

UPDIKE AND RIBICH COME UP JUST SHY OF OLYMPICS

EUGENE — Two local track and field standouts came up just short of a trip to the Tokyo Olympics this summer.

Former Eastern Oregon University runner Isaac Updike and Enterprise native David Ribich both made it to the finals in their respective events, but finished just out of reach of Olympic qualification in June.

Updike, a 2015 graduate of EOU, took first place out of 29 runners in the first round men's 3,000-meter steeplechase with a time of 8:21.01. The 29-year-old put together a gutsy performance in the midst of 90-degree weather in Eugene. In the final, Updike led the field going into the final lap but ultimately ran out of steam and fell to fifth place, finishing just two spots away from a place on the Olympic team.

Beyond the track, Updike's journey in 2021 was a memorable one. After qualifying for the final round in 2016, he worked odd jobs such as a teacher and Dick's Sporting Goods employee while training in New York for this year's trials. After taking the top time in the country early in the year and placing first in the opening round at the trials, Updike earned a three-year sponsorship from Nike that will endure through the 2024 Olympic Trials.

Ribich had a great run in the men's 1,500-meter race to make the final heat against some of the best mile runners in the world. He ran a 3:45.71 to earn a spot in the first round before placing 12th with a 3:44.43 in the finals.

LA GRANDE BASEBALL ENDS SEASON ONE OUT AWAY FROM STATE TITLE

LA GRANDE — It was a heartbreaking finish, but the La Grande High School baseball team put together another strong season.

Leading 2-1 with two outs and the bases loaded in the bottom of the seventh inning, Hidden Valley's Isaak Hill hit a walk-off grand slam to win the game for the Mustangs on May 22 in Aurora.

The Tigers had a stellar season, going 14-2 overall and riding a 12-game winning streak into the championship matchup. La Grande beat Gladstone handily and narrowly defeated Banks to earn their spot in the title game.

La Grande was led by a deep roster from top to bottom with a solid pitching rotation. Devin Bell hit .462 on the year and knocked in 15 RBIs and 35 runs over the course of the season. Riley Miller was stellar on the mound, going 5-1 on the year with a .483 ERA and 46 strikeouts over 29 innings.

The Tigers came just shy of state glory, but will return a number of key players for next season's team. The 2021 season marked yet another successful season in a long lineage of strong baseball teams at La Grande.

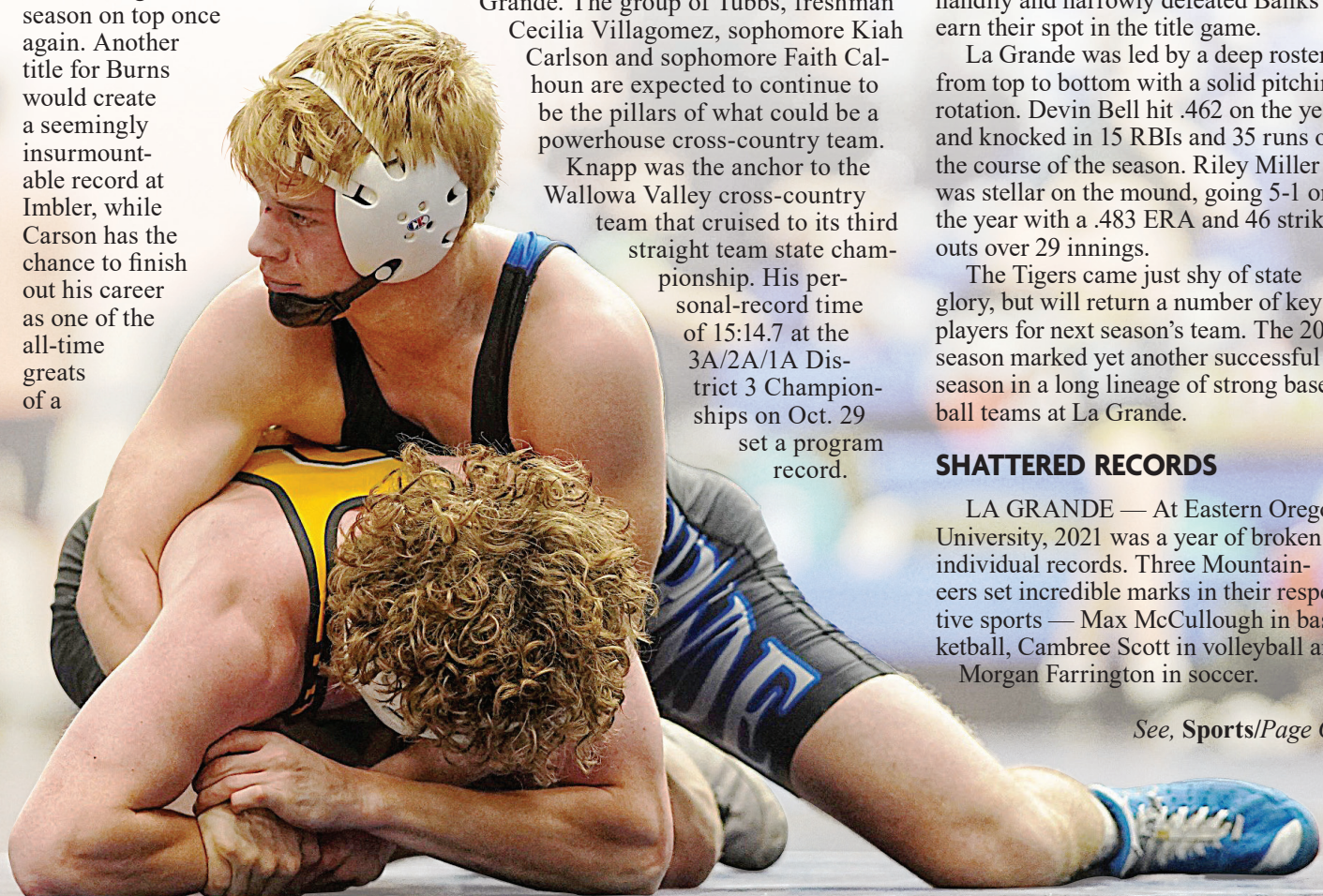
SHATTERED RECORDS

LA GRANDE — At Eastern Oregon University, 2021 was a year of broken individual records. Three Mountaineers set incredible marks in their respective sports — Max McCullough in basketball, Cambree Scott in volleyball and Morgan Farrington in soccer.

See, Sports/Page C7

La Grande's Braden Carson, top, wrestles Bishop Kelly's Derek Doiron in the 145-pound semifinal during the 2021 Muilenburg Tournament at La Grande High School on Saturday, Dec. 11, 2021. Carson won the 145-pound division to help the Tigers take the team title at this year's tournament.

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