

PREP NEWS AND NOTES

Tiger matmen hit road bump

COVID-19 surge cancels Sierra Nevada Classic in Reno, Nevada

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — After a strong showing at one of the largest regional tournaments, the La Grande wrestling team saw its momentum stalled when the 2021 Sierra Nevada Classic in Reno, Nevada, was canceled in the wake of rising COVID-19 numbers.

The recent nationwide surge of COVID-19 and concerns about the omicron variant led to the tournament's cancellation, and the pause may prove detrimental on the mats for La Grande.

The Tigers sere up against elite wrestlers from Idaho, Washington and Oregon at the Tri-State Tournament in Couer d'Alene, Idaho, on the weekend of Friday, Dec. 17. Nearly 50 teams competed at the tournament, and La Grande placed fourth overall — the Tigers scored 159.5 points and had a pair of wrestlers earn individual first-place finishes.

The Carson brothers each placed first in his respective weight class, with sophomore Kai Carson taking first at the 126-pound weight class and senior Braden Carson winning the 138-pound division. Four other La Grande wrestlers placed in the top seven of their weight class. Mason Walcott, Brysen Penaloza, Joshua Collins and Brody MacMillan all placed in their weight classes, helping La Grande earn top placement among some of the region's top teams.

Head coach Klel Carson noted that the tournament was a major success. La Grande had its best finish as a team at the Tri-State Tournament in recent memory. Roughly a month into the season, the Tigers gained a heavy dose of momentum with a strong showing at the regional tournament. With a number of rising upperclassmen on the roster, La Grande saw the pieces falling into place after a second-place finish at the 4A state tournament last season. However, the cancellation of the Sierra Nevada Classic is a road bump for La Grande, ending 2021 with misfortune.

With momentum stalled, the future remains in the air for a La Grande team with high potential. As seen in previous years, the pandemic has caused major shifts in traditional sports schedules. As the Tigers look to take home another state title, the wrestlers will be hoping that the season continues without any additional cancellations.

Football powerhouses seeing success on the hardwood

NORTH POWDER — The Powder Valley boys basketball team faced off with its 1A football state championship counterpart, the Adrian Antelopes, in a hardwood showdown on Dec.

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

La Grande's Joshua Collins wrestles with Scappoose's Maverick Heimback at the Muilenburg Tournament hosted at La Grande High School on Saturday, Dec. 10, 2021. The Tigers look to compete at the state tournament again this year, which will be held in a new venue.

ON THE MOVE

State wrestling finals will not be held at Memorial Coliseum for first time since 2007

By JERRY ULMER
OSAAtoday

WILSONVILLE — The OSAA wrestling championships will have a much different look this season. Instead of taking place at Veterans Memorial Coliseum, its longtime home, the tournaments will be split into separate high school venues: Sandy (6A), Ridgeview (5A), Cascade (4A), La Pine (3A) and Culver (2A/1A, girls).

The OSAA executive board decided to make the change due to the Coliseum enforcing COVID-19 restrictions for spectators and participants.

"It's a bummer, but at the same time, I think it can be a quality experience for kids," OSAA Assistant Executive Director Brad Garrett said. "You're really highlighted at a single venue like that, on four mats."

The executive board opted for separate tournaments after reviewing information provided by the OSAA staff. Garrett worked closely with Culver coach J.D. Alley — the wrestling representative from the Oregon Athletic Coaches Association — to formulate the alternative plan.

All of the boys tournaments will be single-day events on Feb. 26, except for 6A, which will be a two-day event either Feb. 25-26 or Feb. 26-27. The girls tournament is set for Feb. 24.

It will mark the first time the state tournaments will be at a venue other than the Coliseum since 2007, the end of a three-year run at the State Fairgrounds Pavilion in Salem.

The revised state tournament format is a reflection on the COVID-19-shortened schedule of last season, when Newberg (6A), Cottage Grove (5A, girls), Cascade (4A), Redmond (3A) and Sweet Home (2A/1A) played host to separate culminating week championship events.

"We kind of got a preview to this, a prequel," Alley said. "In terms of running the tournaments smoothly with separate



Ronald Bond/The Observer, File

La Grande High School wrestler Parker Robinson flexes after winning the 170-pound title Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020, at the 4A state tournament in Portland 5-3 for his second wrestling title.

tournament directors, we did that last year without the help of the OSAA. I feel real confident about that. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, we wouldn't be having this conversation if the wrestling community hadn't accomplished that feat last season."

Garrett said he and Alley were contacted by schools offering to play host to the tournaments.

"We didn't have to go very far," Garrett said. "Those places that were chosen, every one of them has an infrastructure, not only a building but a wrestling community that's involved and understands what kind of things need to be done, and why."

A change in National Federation of State High School Associations rules last year that allows for wrestlers to compete in a sixth match in one day — provided it is a qualifying or postseason championship event — was helpful in scheduling single-day state tournaments. But the 6A tournament, with brackets of 24, requires two days to complete.

The OSAA is ironing out details on operating the tournaments within the limited venue capacity. At the Coliseum, a 200,000-square foot, 10,000-seat arena, the OSAA did not have to enforce limits on the number of team personnel and spectators.

That will change this season.

"In 6A, before you ever start, you have 500 people in the gym, just wrestlers and coaches," Garrett said. "It's likely our ticketing system is going to have to look differently. Potentially something like each wrestler would be allotted a certain number of tickets that they can distribute as they choose. But it's not going to be a free-for-all."

With that challenge in mind, the 6A tournament could be scheduled for Saturday-Sunday instead of Friday-Saturday to avoid conflicting with Sandy's school day.

"That would allow us to at least get more people in," Garrett said.

Alley, for one, is relishing the atmosphere of a capacity crowd.

"Wrestling or playing a guitar, it's much better to play in a packed house with 900 people, packed to the rafters, than having 2,000 people in a facility of 6,000," Alley said. "That coliseum is a big, old place. This will give it much more of a Hoosier, packed-house kind of feel."

"On the flip side, it is the state championship, it's our Super Bowl, and it should be in our biggest, grandest city and its grandest venue. So it's sad."

The OSAA cheer and dance/drill championships also will move from the Coliseum. Both will go to Oregon City High School, with cheer on Feb. 12 and dance/drill on March 18-19.

SPORTS SHORT

Mountaineers wrestling remains inside NAIA top 20 entering new year

The Observer

LA GRANDE — The 2021 calendar year has drawn to a close and with it comes a new set of NAIA Women's Wrestling Coaches' Top-20 poll and Eastern Oregon University enters 2022 still ranked inside the top-20.

The Mountaineers check in at No. 16, one spot lower than their previous ranking of No. 15.

Along with remaining in the top 20, Eastern also has eight wrestlers individually ranked. Earning national recognition for EOU is Stephanie Blankenship at 109 pounds (17th), Macy Higa at 123 pounds (13th), Morgan Shines at 130 pounds (9th), Kaylee Moore at 136 pounds (17th), Erin Redford at 143 pounds (5th), Dempsey Talkington at 155 pounds (6th), Tenley Swope at 155

pounds (19th), and Olivia Robinson at 170 pounds (5th).

Eastern last competed back in early December at the Patriot Duals hosted by University of the Cumberland. The Mountaineers went 4-3 over a two-days span to help improve the team's dual record to 4-4.

Out of the Cascade Collegiate Conference, five teams are ranked, led by Southern Oregon at

No. 3. Next up is Menlo College (California) at No. 6, followed by Providence at No. 13. EOU sits 16th, with Corban rounding out the group at No. 18. Simpson (California) is in the receiving votes category.

EOU will be back in action on Jan. 14 and 15. The team will take on Grays Harbor College on Jan. 14 and then will compete at the Oregon Wrestling Classic on Jan. 15.



Andrew Cutler/The Observer, File

Eastern Oregon University's Morgan Shines fights for position against Southern Oregon's Jordan Robson. Shines is ranked ninth at 130 pounds in the latest NAIA Women's Wrestling Coaches' Top-20 poll.