

LEADING THE WAY

Transfers Phillip Malatare, Xavier Lovelace carry load for injury-plagued Mountaineers

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Two new names have quickly become the focal points for the Eastern Oregon University men's basketball team.

After a season-ending injury just four games into the year, the days of Max McCullough high-lighting the stat sheets with 30 points are no longer feasible this season. Faced with replacing the program's all-time high scorer, Eastern has relied on transfers Phillip Malatare and Xavier Lovelace to lead the way.

"It was tough coming into a new team and trying to figure out how everyone plays, but I think right away (Xavier and I) connected really well on the court," Malatare said. "I think the more games we get under our belts, the more comfortable we'll get with each other. But, we're just trying to get everyone involved — it takes all 10 of us to really make a difference."

New roles

Injuries to McCullough and guard Paul Pennington have had a huge impact on Eastern, and they have also affected each current player's role. Malatare joined the program from North Idaho, where he averaged 10.2 points per game and four assists per contest. Coming into the program, his role was intended to be a primary ball handler in

order to play McCullough off the ball — now Malatare finds himself as the team's leading scorer averaging 19 points per game. He also leads the team with 3.4 assists per game, 22 steals on the season and is second on the Mountaineers with 5.8 rebounds per game.

"This year I've had to pick up the scoring a lot more, as well as with (Xavier)," Malatare said. "I think it's game-by-game, though. Each game might be a different guy that steps up."

Lovelace has also seen an increased role, serving as the team's top rebounder. The sophomore averages a team-high 8.7 rebounds per game and is second on the team with 13 points per game.

Lovelace noted that being thrust into a primary role helped speed up the trust-building process with new teammates.

"I think just leading by example has helped both of us. Whenever you do say something and you tend to do it, everybody else tries to follow that lead," he said. "For us newcomers that was a big step — we had to be able to do it before we could tell anybody to do anything."

The duo has quickly become a key part of the new identity Eastern is working to establish, making the best of injuries and personnel. Lovelace's rebounding prowess along with Malatare's efficient



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File
Phillip Malatare (0) drives to the basket during a match between Eastern Oregon University and Montana Western University at Quinn Coliseum on Saturday, Oct. 30, 2021. Malatare's 15-point performance helped EOU to a 67-61 win in the team's home opener.

ball handling and ability to drive to the basket create a balanced effort for the Mountaineers.

"We've been figuring out how to play with each other," Lovelace said. "I think his strengths and my strengths really complement each other."

Building to success

A more conventional schedule of conference games in the second half of the season offers the chance for Eastern to build consistency. The Mountaineers played nine straight road games in the early part of the season, including two exhibitions against NCAA Division I opponents.

"We're definitely a long way from peaking," Malatare said. "I think once we get games every weekend we'll find a rhythm as the second part of the season goes on. I think we're going to make a big run."

Both Malatare and Lovelace noted that Eastern's difficult non-conference slate of games this year prepared the team well,

mistakes and grows closer as a unit, those tight losses against top competition can easily swing to victories later in the season.

"We try to find little things that we can do better after close losses. If we do that, I think we will win games," Malatare said.

While the duo has quickly become the one-two punch for the Mountaineers this season, the expectations are still to continue improving. Eastern is 8-7 overall and 2-5 in conference play, leaving 15 conference matchups in the season to determine the team's potential.

"It's still very much a work in progress," Lovelace said. "We're still not even close to where we want to be or where we could be, but I think we're on the right track."

The Mountaineers currently stand seventh in the Cascade Collegiate Conference, five games back of first place Oregon Tech. Eastern plays 10 conference games in a jam-packed month of January, which will go a long way toward defining the season.

"I think we're working toward something really special," Lovelace said.

ON THE SLATE

FRIDAY, JAN. 7

PREP BOYS BASKETBALL
La Grande at Crook County, 7 p.m.
Union at Heppner, 7:30 p.m.
Wallowa at Elgin, 7:30 p.m.
Powder Valley at Pine Eagle, 7:30 p.m.
Griswold at Cove, 7:30 p.m.
Nixyaawii at Imbler, 7:30 p.m.
Enterprise at Grant Union, 7:30 p.m.

PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL
La Grande at Crook County, 5 p.m.
Nixyaawii at Imbler, 6 p.m.
Union at Heppner, 6 p.m.
Wallowa at Elgin, 6 p.m.
Powder Valley at Pine Eagle, 6 p.m.
Griswold at Cove, 6 p.m.
Enterprise at Grant Union, 6 p.m.

PREP WRESTLING
La Grande at Mountain View Invite, Meridian, Idaho, TBA
Imbler, Elgin, Enterprise, Union/Cove at JoHi Invitational, Joseph High School, noon

COLLEGE MEN'S BASKETBALL
Warner Pacific at Eastern Oregon, 7:30 p.m.

COLLEGE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL
Warner Pacific at Eastern Oregon, 5:30 p.m.

COLLEGE MEN'S WRESTLING
Eastern Oregon at Arizona Christian, 4 p.m.

SATURDAY, JAN. 8

COLLEGE MEN'S BASKETBALL
Multnomah at Eastern Oregon, 5 p.m.

COLLEGE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL
Multnomah at Eastern Oregon, 3 p.m.

COLLEGE MEN'S WRESTLING
Eastern Oregon at Embury-Riddle, 6 p.m.

PREP BOYS BASKETBALL
La Grande at Madras, 12:30 p.m.
Pilot Rock at Union, 5:30 p.m.
Elgin at Nixyaawii, 5:30 p.m.
Imbler at Powder Valley, 5:30 p.m.
Cove at Wallowa, 5:30 p.m.
Joseph at Pine Eagle, 5:30 p.m.

PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL
La Grande at Madras, 11 a.m.
Pilot Rock at Union, 4 p.m.
Elgin at Nixyaawii, 4 p.m.
Imbler at Powder Valley, 4 p.m.
Cove at Wallowa, 4 p.m.
Joseph at Pine Eagle, 4 p.m.

PREP WRESTLING
La Grande at Mountain View Invite, Meridian, Idaho, TBA
Imbler, Elgin, Enterprise, Union/Cove at JoHi Invitational, Joseph High School, noon

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