

ON THE SLATE

- Thursday, Jan. 27**
COLLEGE BASEBALL
 Eastern vs. MidAmerica Nazarene, Glendale, Arizona, 9 a.m.
PREP BOYS BASKETBALL
 Powder Valley at Griswold, 7:30 p.m.
PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL
 Powder Valley at Griswold, 6 p.m.
- Friday, Jan. 28**
COLLEGE MEN'S BASKETBALL
 Bushnell at Eastern Oregon, 7:30 p.m.
COLLEGE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL
 Bushnell at Eastern Oregon, 5:30 p.m.
COLLEGE BASEBALL
 Eastern Oregon vs. Embury-Riddle, Glendale Arizona, 8:30 a.m.
PREP BOYS BASKETBALL
 Baker at La Grande, 7:30 p.m.
 Union at Pilot Rock, 7:30 p.m.
 Elgin at Joseph, 3:45 p.m.
 Pine Eagle at Powder Valley, 7:30 p.m.
 Imbler at Wallowa, 7:30 p.m.
PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL
 Baker at La Grande, 6 p.m.
 Union at Pilot Rock, 6 p.m.
 Elgin at Joseph, 5:15 p.m.
 Pine Eagle at Powder Valley, 6 p.m.
 Imbler at Wallowa, 6 p.m.
PREP BOYS WRESTLING
 La Grande at Reser's Tournament of Champions, Hillsboro, 11 a.m.
- Saturday, Jan. 29**
COLLEGE MEN'S BASKETBALL
 Corban at Eastern Oregon, 5 p.m.
COLLEGE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL
 Corban at Eastern Oregon, 3 p.m.
COLLEGE WOMEN'S WRESTLING
 Big Bend Community College at Eastern Oregon, noon
COLLEGE BASEBALL
 Eastern Oregon vs. Oklahoma Panhandle State, Glendale, Arizona, 9 a.m.
 Eastern Oregon vs. Benedictine Mesa, Glendale, Arizona, 1 p.m.
PREP BOYS BASKETBALL
 Nixyaawii at Powder Valley, 3:30 p.m.
 Cove at Joseph, 4:45 p.m.
 Enterprise at Union, 5:30 p.m.
 Imbler at Griswold, 5:30 p.m.
 Wallowa at Pine Eagle, 5:30 p.m.
PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL
 Nixyaawii at Powder Valley, 2 p.m.
 Enterprise at Union, 4 p.m.
 Cove at Joseph, 3:15 p.m.
 Imbler at Griswold, 4 p.m.
 Wallowa at Pine Eagle, 4 p.m.
PREP SWIMMING
 La Grande at Madras, TBA
 Cove at Madras, TBA
PREP BOYS WRESTLING
 La Grande at Reser's Tournament of Champions, Hillsboro, 10 a.m.
 Elgin at Monroe Invitational, TBA
PREP GIRLS WRESTLING
 La Grande at HRVHS Tourney, Hood River, 10 a.m.
- Sunday, Jan. 30**
COLLEGE MEN'S WRESTLING
 Eastern Oregon at Clackamas Open, 9 a.m.
COLLEGE WOMEN'S WRESTLING
 Eastern Oregon at Washington State, 3 p.m.
- Tuesday, Feb. 1**
PREP BOYS BASKETBALL
 Powder Valley at Wallowa, 6:30 p.m.
PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL
 Powder Valley at Wallowa, 5 p.m.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Grace Neer, center, gets ready in the dugout during a match between La Grande and Baker softball teams at Sam Marcum Field in La Grande on Thursday, May 6, 2021.

LEVELING UP

La Grande softball player set to continue career in Idaho

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
 The Observer

LA GRANDE — One of La Grande's top athletes is gearing up for the start of her collegiate career next year.

Grace Neer, a multi-sport athlete at La Grande High School, made her commitment to the College of Idaho softball team official during her signing day on Monday, Jan. 10. Neer will join a Yotes team that is coming off a third-place finish at the 2021 NAIA Softball World Series.

"I'm really excited," Neer said. "I'm pretty excited to just get pushed even further at the next

level, see my potential and see how I can grow playing college ball."

Neer has been an anchor for the La Grande softball team, in addition to her contributions to the school's volleyball and basketball teams. The pitcher and infielder is poised to take the leap up to collegiate competition this coming year, joining one of the strongest programs in the NAIA.

The Yotes set a program record for wins in 2021, going 44-19 and making their way through the NAIA World Series opening rounds. The College of Idaho lost in the World Series to Southern Oregon, but the season cemented

the team's legacy near the top of the softball landscape.

For Neer, the step up to playing with a top college team represents a chance to learn from elite athletes at the college level as she works toward earning her spot with the team.

Neer noted that the College of Idaho is expecting back a large senior class this upcoming year, with many players having the opportunity to return due to COVID-19 extended eligibility.

"I'm excited to play with that many high-level athletes to kind of set the standard for when they eventually leave and I can take my role and go for it," she said.

Neer said the College of Idaho felt like a natural fit during the recruiting process, noting that Yotes head coach Al Mendiola made her feel at home. She ended up signing for one of the top NAIA programs in the country, but the COVID-19 pandemic could have derailed Neer's plans.

"Usually your junior year is really your year to get recruited, but that kind of got taken away from me," Neer said. "That was a bit of a tough process for me personally."

Before setting off to Caldwell, Idaho, Neer is looking to anchor

See, Neer/Page A10

Nine-man football is back on the table

Support growing to sponsor championship for six-man football

By **RONALD BOND**
 Wallowa County Chieftain

WILSONVILLE — Nine-man football appears to be back in the discussion — at least at the 2A level — in a move that would have a major impact locally if put in place.

But it's a move Greg Grant, Heppner athletic director and football coach, and a member of the Oregon School Activities Association's Football Ad Hoc Committee, believes is necessary to help build programs back up.

"It's to help everyone. The impetus behind this is that with roster sizes, schools are making decisions and foregoing JV foot-



Ronald Bond/Wallowa County Chieftain, File

ball at a higher rate," he said. "If you don't play JV football, your program is dying, and sub-varsity football is the lifeblood of your program."

The outcome of the latest meeting on Wednesday, Jan. 19, was that the committee is again considering the addition of nine-man football.

In fact, the committee recommends nine-man for all 2A schools — schools that play 11-man currently. It continues to back the idea of eight-man football for larger 1A schools and six-man for the smaller schools.

"The idea behind this amongst a lot of the schools is we could play JV games if we had a few more kids available," Grant explained. "If you play nine on a Friday night (varsity game), then you can play nine or eight on a Monday (JV game). ... Let's say (with) a roster of 20-30 kids, you could sustain JV football. And that's the goal."

Considered, dropped, then brought back
 Nine-man football was considered early on by the ad hoc

See, Football/Page A10

SPORTS SHORT

Eastern Oregon hauls in three CCC athletes of the week

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
 The Observer

LA GRANDE — The Cascade Collegiate Conference revealed its players of the week on Monday, Jan. 24, rewarding three Eastern Oregon University athletes.

The Mountaineers' men's and women's track teams had a very productive showing at the Lauren McCluskey Memorial Open at the University of Idaho this past weekend, with two standouts earning conference recognition after their performances.

Senior thrower Maggie Ledbetter was in top form, taking third place in the women's shot

put. Ledbetter tossed a score of 13.45 meters, a score that qualifies her for the NAIA Indoor National Championships. Ledbetter also placed seventh in the women's weight throw with a distance of 14.69 meters.

In the men's high jump, freshman Tyler Jones came out of nowhere to tie for second overall with a height of 2.02 meters. The score earned Jones a provisional qualifier for the NAIA Indoor National Championships, while ranking him 13th in the NAIA.

On the hardwood, junior Sailor Liefke led the way once again for Eastern as the Mountaineers kept up an impressive winning streak.

EOU's women's basket ball

team earned crucial conference victories over Southern Oregon and Oregon Tech. Liefke hit clutch buckets in the win over the Owls, which went to overtime, and she finished the game with 20 points. The junior guard went off for 32 points in a 68-65 victory over the Raiders just one day later.

Liefke is averaging a team-high 16 points per game, which has helped the Mountaineers climb to first place in the Cascade Collegiate Conference standings.

Eastern is also a perfect 7-0 at home this season. The Mountaineers are back at home for a weekend series, facing Bushnell on Jan. 28 and Corban on Jan. 29.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Sailor Liefke (22) looks to pass at Quinn Coliseum at Eastern Oregon University on Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. The Eastern Oregon University women's basketball team beat out visiting Oregon Institute of Technology Hustlin' Owls 79-75 in the first home game of 2022.