

ON THE SLATE

Saturday, Feb. 19

COLLEGE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Eastern Oregon at Warner Pacific, 5 p.m.

COLLEGE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Eastern Oregon at Warner Pacific, 3 p.m.

COLLEGE MEN'S WRESTLING

Eastern Oregon at Cascade Collegiate Conference Championships, Havre, Montana, TBA

COLLEGE BASEBALL

Eastern Oregon at Western Oregon, noon
Eastern Oregon at Western Oregon, 3 p.m.

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

Eastern Oregon at Clackamas Community College, 1 p.m.
Eastern Oregon at Clackamas Community College, 3 p.m.

COLLEGE WOMEN'S LACROSSE

Willamette at Eastern Oregon, 1 p.m.

PREP BOYS BASKETBALL

Old Oregon League third-place game, Baker High School, 10:30 a.m.

Old Oregon League championship, Baker High School, 2:30 p.m.

La Grande at Baker, 6:30 p.m.

PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL

Old Oregon League third-place game, Baker High School, 9 a.m.

Old Oregon League championship game, Baker High School, 1 p.m.

Union vs. Stanfield/Enterprise, Pendleton Convention Center, 7:45 p.m.

La Grande at Baker, 5 p.m.

PREP BOYS WRESTLING

Union, Elgin, Imbler, Joseph, Enterprise at OSAA 2A/1A Special District 4, Adrian High School, TBA

PREP SWIMMING

La Grande, Cove at 4A/3A/2A/1A State Championships, Tualatin, High School, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Feb. 20

COLLEGE BASEBALL

Eastern Oregon at Western Oregon, noon
Eastern Oregon at Western Oregon, 3 p.m.

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

Eastern Oregon at Lewis & Clark College, noon
Eastern Oregon at Lewis & Clark College, 2 p.m.

COLLEGE WOMEN'S LACROSSE

Linfield at Eastern Oregon, 1 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 24

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

Eastern Oregon at Menlo College, 10 a.m.
Eastern Oregon at Menlo College, noon

PREP GIRLS WRESTLING

La Grande at OSAA/OnPoint Girls State Championships, Culver High School, TBA

Friday, Feb. 25

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

Eastern Oregon at William Jessup, noon
Eastern Oregon vs. Hope International, Rocklin, California 4 p.m.

Postseason push



Eastern Oregon's Xavier Lovelace (3) drives to the basket during the second half of a home game against Montana Western on Saturday, Oct. 30, 2021, at Quinn Coliseum, La Grande.

Eastern Oregon basketball teams head to conference championships with high hopes

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — As winter's end gradually approaches, basketball season is reaching its culmination.

The Eastern Oregon University men's basketball team has overcome a series of obstacles under first-year interim head coach Chris Kemp, while the women's team sparked a major run in the second half of the season to finish near the top of the Cascade Collegiate Conference.

"I think our guys are playing the best basketball they've played all year," Kemp said. "I have high hopes that we're peaking at the right time."

Overcoming adversity

The Eastern men's season has been far from predictable.

Just four games into the year, the program's all-time leading scorer, Max McCullough, suffered a season-ending injury. Experienced guard Paul Pennington was injured early on as well, missing the first half of the year. The injuries were a recipe for disaster for a first-year coach, but the Mountaineers buckled down and found a way to succeed.

Transfers Phillip Malatare and Xavier Lovelace have stepped up in a big way, helping the Mountaineers clinch a spot in the 2022 conference tournament.

Eastern will enter the tournament anywhere from the fifth to eighth seed depending on the outcome of the team's final two regular season matchups on Feb. 18-19.

Kemp noted that Malatare and Lovelace have been the team's two most solid contributors this season, as expected when the program signed the transfers. Malatare is averaging 18.5 points and 5.1 rebounds per game, while Lovelace is putting up 12.8 points and 8.4 rebounds per contest.

Kemp expressed that the team's success and mentality have been spawned from much more than the team's top scorers. Rotation players including Preston Chandler, Pennington, Justin Jeske, Cooper Lumsden, Zane Wright and Ismael Valdez also have contributed to the team's success.

"A lot of those returners have stepped into newer roles and really blossomed," he said. "That whole returning group has been a huge plus for us, just how they've played together and gelled as a group."

In the wake of early-season injuries and the COVID-19 pandemic playing a big role in player availability, the Mountain-



EOU freshman Adyson Harris (25) breaks away at Quinn Coliseum, La Grande, during the Mountaineers' 79-75 win over Oregon Institute of Technology on Friday, Jan. 21, 2022.

eers managed to secure a winning record. As the postseason approaches rapidly, the team is as healthy as it can be and has its eyes set on a playoff push.

"I think that we grew a lot in our mental toughness," Kemp said. "There have been some huge hurdles, but we've learned a ton and I think we'll be able to draw on that as we move forward."

The two most likely matchups for the Mountaineers are on the road at either Corban or Southern Oregon — Eastern went 1-1 against both schools this year. Kemp noted that they are aware of who the potential opponent could be, but the Mountaineers are looking to stay focused regardless of where they will travel.

"The guys have a mentality of just being road dogs, which is what we call it," Kemp said. "We have to go be the same team on the road as we are here."

Women's team among conference elites

The Mountaineers women's team did not get off to an ideal start, but conference play presented Eastern with a chance to rise to the top.

The team began the year 2-5, but rallied to a 19-9 record heading into the final weekend of the season. Eastern has remained among the top three in the Cascade Collegiate Conference, alongside Lewis-Clark State and Southern Oregon.

Eastern's final road series against Mult-

nomah and Warner Pacific will determine the team's final placement heading into the Cascade Collegiate Tournament. Either way, the Mountaineers have clinched home-court advantage in the quarterfinal round by finishing in the top four of the conference.

For some teams, home and away makes little difference. For Eastern, Quinn Coliseum has been a nightmare for opposing women's basketball teams coming in to play the Mountaineers. Eastern compiled a 10-1 record at home this year, while going 7-4 on the road.

The Mountaineers have relied on a three-pronged scoring attack this year. Junior Sailor Liefke has led Eastern with 16 points and 3.5 assists per game, while senior Taylor Stricklin is averaging 13.2 points and 8.4 rebounds per game. Freshman Adyson Harris has been a pleasant addition to Eastern's rotation, averaging 12.2 points and 4.6 rebounds per contest.

As Cascade Collegiate Conference teams battle out the final weekend to decide tournament seedings, Eastern has four likely opponents. The Mountaineers could face Oregon Tech, Warner Pacific, Northwest or the College of Idaho. Regardless, Eastern has clinched home court advantage in the first round — tip-off of the conference quarterfinal matchup at Quinn Coliseum is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Feb. 22.

High school playoff basketball is finally back



DAVIS CARBAUGH
CARBAUGH'S CORNER

It's not March, but there's madness in the air for prep basketball fans.

Local basketball teams are fighting for state playoff contention at district tournaments this weekend, giving one final push to keep their seasons alive. While the COVID-19 pandemic has played a role in the past two postseasons, fans are back in the

stands in full effect this year to create an exciting environment for playoff hoops.

In the opening rounds of the 1A Old Oregon League tournament, fans and students alike poured into Baker High School to support their athletes. Six different schools competed in the quarterfinal rounds across the boys and girls brackets, drawing large crowds for each contest. Playoff basketball truly proves the idea that every team enters the postseason with a 0-0 record, as Cove and Pine Eagle battled out a late-game thriller on the boys side

and Elgin and Wallowa competed in a defensive showdown.

Playoff seedings and bragging rights are on the line in the championship games at 1 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. on Feb. 19 in Baker City. Third-place matchups, which are scheduled to start at 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m., will be make-or-break for Old Oregon League teams looking to clinch a state playoff spot.

Union heads to the 2A Blue Mountain Conference Tournament as a top seed on the girls side and a promising three-seed on the boys side. The Pendleton Con-

vention Center is sure to be packed on the final day of tournament action as 2A schools compete for berths into the state tournament.

La Grande is set to square off with Baker on both the boys and girls sides on Feb. 19. The boys' matchups against the rival Bulldogs have been a bit of an anomaly this year. The Tigers were run out of their own gym by Baker on Jan. 28, losing 67-41. Less than two weeks later, La Grande bounced back with a resounding 55-28 win in Baker City. The third matchup of the season on Feb. 19 will deter-

mine who takes home the Greater Oregon League crown.

With games on consecutive days and little time to prepare in between matchups, district tournament contention is not for the faint of heart. As regular-season records are thrown out the window, local district tournaments present the opportunity for teams to determine their own postseason fate.

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