

Travel costs

Local high school athletics facing gasoline price burden head-on



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — With local spring sports seasons in swing, a new hurdle has presented itself to local high school teams.

The recent increase in fuel prices in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has pushed the price of gasoline to record highs, affecting nearly every local entity. For sports teams who frequently travel for games and events, the increase in fuel prices is creating a mixed bag of effects on schools in Union County.

According to the American Automobile Association, Oregon's statewide average gas price as of Saturday, March 26, was \$4.72. The mark is the fifth highest average out of all 50 states, with neighboring states California and Washington ranked in the top four.

Gas in La Grande, as of the same date, reached upward of \$4.73 per gallon and \$4.59 on the lowest end of Union County.

With most schools sticking to competition within the Eastern Oregon region, the high gas prices will not have a major toll on travel this season. However, some local figures in high school athletics are wary of possible

ABOVE: Students at La Grande Middle School board school buses after class on Thursday, March 17, 2022. The recent increase in fuel prices in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has pushed the price of gasoline to record highs — if the costs remain high, it could affect the ability of sports teams to travel for games and events.

RIGHT: La Grande's Sam Tsiatsos tags out J.R. Starr, of Hermiston, on Thursday, March 17, 2022, at Weber Field in Hermiston. Local high school athletes have not had a regular spring season since before the COVID-19 pandemic, and high gasoline prices may present another unpredictable hurdle.

impacts in the future.

For Union High School's spring sports, no immediate schedule changes are in sight.

"We have not made any changes at this time. We are still functioning as normal," Union Athletic Director Chris Dunlap said.

With school set to end in the coming months, the impact of gasoline prices may be a decision that is

taken into consideration by the time the next academic calendar comes around.

"To be equitable from what we've done, we would stick to the schedule we currently have and honor those," Dunlap said. "Moving into next year, if prices stay high, that might dictate what we're able to and not able to do."

Dunlap noted that prior to next year's sports seasons, more fund-

raising efforts may be necessary for Union athletics if gas prices are still at similar high rates.

"I think as we go forward in the spring we won't see much change, but all school budgets may be negatively impacted," La Grande baseball coach Parker McKinley said.

The La Grande baseball team recently returned from its annual trip to Arizona for the Coach Bob National Invitational at Shadow Ridge High School in Arizona.

While the La Grande athletic department pays for the entry fee, the travel and hotel costs rely on fund-raising efforts.

McKinley said the overall cost for gas during the trip was well over double, if not triple, the costs for fuel that it took to bring three vehicles to the tournament in years past.

"It's hard — the experience itself is such an invaluable experience for these kids," McKinley said. "It's not something I feel like you can put a price on."

McKinley also noted that he is concerned that high gas prices will impact the overall experience sports brings to high school students.

"I hope we don't see any experiences taken away from the kids, since they already missed so much over the last two years," he said.

Imbler Superintendent Doug Hislop noted in a previous article by The Observer that there are currently no plans to limit travel for the school district's sporting events.

Most of Imbler's travel for spring sports is within Eastern Oregon until state competitions. The Imbler School District provides its own bus service, which is budgeted into yearly expenses.

La Grande softball coach Cody Bowen hopes to not see a major impact, seeing as most of the team's significant travel is later in the playoffs.

Local high school sports athletes have not had a regular spring season since before the COVID-19 pandemic — if high gasoline prices persist, sports teams could be facing another unpredictable obstacle.



Bowen



McKinley



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File

EOU baseball team plays first official games on new turf at Pioneer Park in La Grande



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Eastern Oregon University's McKlaine Elgin covers the plate ahead of a Bushnell University runner at Optimist Field, La Grande, on Saturday, March 26, 2022. The EOU Mountaineers lost 5-1 in game one and 6-4 in game two on Saturday but rebounded with two victories the next day. The doubleheaders marked the first official games on the new turf infield at Pioneer Park.

ON THE SLATE

Saturday, March 26

COLLEGE BASEBALL

Bushnell 5, Eastern Oregon 1

Bushnell 6, Eastern Oregon 4

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

Eastern Oregon 2, Providence 1

Eastern Oregon 7, Providence 3

PREP SOFTBALL

Rocky Mountain (Idaho) 9, La Grande 3

Union/Cove 13, Warrenton 2

Eagle (Idaho) 16, La Grande 2

Sunday, March 27

COLLEGE BASEBALL

Eastern Oregon 8, Bushnell 2

Eastern Oregon 16, Bushnell 13

Tuesday, March 29

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

College of Idaho at Eastern Oregon (2), 2 p.m.

Friday, April 1

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

Eastern Oregon at Warner Pacific (2), 2 p.m.

COLLEGE TRACK & FIELD

Eastern Oregon at NNU

Invitational, Nampa, Idaho, TBA

PREP BASEBALL

La Grande at Seaside/Jewell, 4 p.m.

La Grande vs. North Marion, 7 p.m.

PREP SOFTBALL

Banks at La Grande (2), 2 p.m.

Elgin/Imbler at Union/Cove (2), 2 p.m.

PREP TRACK & FIELD

Cove, Elgin, Imbler, La Grande, Powder Valley, Union at Carnival of Speed, McLoughlin High School, 10 a.m.

PREP BOYS TENNIS

Pendleton at La Grande, 3 p.m.

Saturday, April 2

COLLEGE BASEBALL

Eastern Oregon at British Columbia (2), 1 p.m.

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

Eastern Oregon at Warner Pacific (2), 11 a.m.

COLLEGE WOMEN'S LACROSSE

Eastern Oregon at Corban, 1 p.m.

PREP BASEBALL

La Grande at Astoria, noon

Sunday, April 3

COLLEGE BASEBALL

Eastern Oregon at British Columbia (2), 11 a.m.

Monday, April 4

PREP SOFTBALL

Echo/Stamfield at La Grande (2), 2 p.m.

Tuesday, April 5

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

Eastern Oregon at College of Idaho (2), 1 p.m.

PREP BASEBALL

Union/Cove at Weston-McEwen, 4 p.m.

PREP SOFTBALL

Pilot Rock/Nixyaawii at Union/Cove (2), 3 p.m.

PREP TRACK & FIELD

Elgin, Imbler, Powder Valley at Small Schools Meet, Grant Union, 4 p.m.

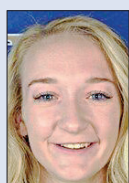
PREP BOYS TENNIS

Vale at La Grande, 4 p.m.

SPORTS SHORT

Liefke named NAIA Honorable Mention All-American

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer



Liefke

LA GRANDE — After a phenomenal season on the hardwood, Eastern Oregon University women's basketball player Sailor Liefke earned national recognition for her overall performance.

The junior guard from Sunnyside, Washington led the Mountaineers with 16.1 points per game this year. She averaged 3.4 assists and 4.3 rebounds

en route to a first-team all Cascade Collegiate Conference selection. Liefke shot 42.5% from the field and 34% from beyond the arc this season.

Liefke is the first Mountaineer to earn a spot on the NAIA women's All-American teams since Jane Nelson did so in the 2019-20 season. Liefke's selection marked the 12th overall All-American selection under Eastern head coach Anji Weissenfluh.

The junior was an anchor for

Eastern, starting in all 30 games and totaling 24 double-digit scoring efforts.

The Mountaineers finished the season 22-11 overall and 18-4 in conference play. After losing to Southern Oregon in the Cascade Collegiate Conference tournament semifinals, Eastern earned an at-large bid to the NAIA National Championships. Despite a tight game in the 4/13 matchup, Eastern ultimately fell 73-67 to Sterling College to mark the end of the season.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Eastern Oregon's Sailor Liefke (22) looks to pass around the Oregon Institute of Technology at Quinn Coliseum, La Grande, on Friday, Jan. 21, 2022.