

Dwindling numbers

Shortage of high school football officials hitting close to home

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A shortage of football referees is looming ominously as the start of high school football season in Northeastern Oregon approaches.

The Northeast Oregon Football Officials Association, which provides officials for high school and middle school varsity and junior games in Union, Wallowa, Baker and Grant counties, has just 19 people available to officiate this season, seven short of the minimum needed, according to Pete Caldwell, commissioner of the association.

“It is the lowest number we have had,” said Caldwell, who has been with the Northeast Oregon Football Officials Association for about 25 years.

Caldwell attributes the decline to the fact that many members have been retiring.

“I don’t know why more younger people are not getting involved in officiating. It is a mystery,” said Caldwell, noting that the average age of his association’s members is now 61.5 years.

He said that unless the Northeast Oregon Football Officials Association is able to recruit more people to officiate, it will face the pros-



The Observer, File

Ab Orton, a referee with OSAA, walks off the field after a game between La Grande and Vale on Friday, Sept. 17, 2021. The Northeast Oregon Football Officials Association, which provides officials for high school and middle school varsity and junior games in Union, Wallowa, Baker and Grant counties, has just 19 people available to officiate for the fall 2022 season, seven short of the minimum needed, according to Pete Caldwell, commissioner of the association.

pect of requesting schools on some occasions to change their schedules so that all games can be played. For example, on Fridays, when there are a high number of games scheduled, schools may be asked to move some contests to Thursday or Saturday to reduce the logjam, making it possible for officials to be provided for all of them.

Caldwell, who noted that rescheduling had to be done several times in 2021 when there was also a shortage of officials, said it is not easy.

“It is a huge headache,” he said.

Doug Hislop, of La Grande, an official with the Northeast Oregon Officials Foot-

ball Association for the past 52 years, said rescheduling games is not an ideal alternative. He said he fears that the complications created by the process may lead some schools to cancel some contests.

Caldwell is hoping people will step forward to serve as officials to reduce the shortage. Previous officiating experience is not needed.

“We can teach anyone to be an official,” he said.

Caldwell said those starting out may first be assigned to middle school and junior varsity games before officiating varsity contests. This will allow them to develop their skills in a less pressure packed

MORE INFORMATION

People interested in serving as football officials for the Northeast Oregon Football Officials Association should call Pete Caldwell at 541-910-7020.

participate in athletics as a youth growing up in Idaho.

“I had the opportunity to play football and wrestle because we had officials,” he said.

Others are drawn to officiating because of their love of a specific sport — football, for example.

“It gives people a chance to be part of the game,” Caldwell said.

Officials are paid on a per game basis, making \$73.50 for officiating class 4A games. Officials are paid a little less for officiating varsity games involving schools in the 3A, 2A and 1A classifications for smaller schools.

environment, he said.

Caldwell said many people who serve as officials are driven to do so because they want to help youth.

“They want to give back to the community and kids,” he said.

Hislop said this a motivating factor for him, noting that he will never forget how referees made it possible for him to par-

Wallowa County’s Hanley Miller has an eye on national titles

Future in professional rodeo seems bright for local teen

By KATY NESBITT

For the Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — In a county well known for its pro rodeo the last full weekend of July, it’s no surprise to find a pro rodeo cowboy in the making. Hanley Miller is already a state champion and asked to perform at the 2022 Chief Joseph Days Rodeo.

As a high school freshman this spring, Miller won the tie-down competition at the state rodeo finals. With that title, the Pro Rodeo Cowboy Association paid for his PRCA card; at 15, he was too young to compete but was allowed to test his skill against the pros as an exhibitionist.

Just before Chief Joseph



Contributed Photo

Hanley Miller, an incoming sophomore at Joseph High School, is the 2022 Oregon State tie-down champ. This July he ran with the pros as an exhibitionist at the Chief Joseph Days Rodeo.

Days, Miller placed 29th in the tie-down aggregate at the National High School Rodeo finals in Gillette, Wyoming. With three more years in high school and two until he is old enough to hold a PRCA card, he has ambitious goals.

“I want to win a national title in tie-down and qualify for the NFR (National Finals Rodeo),” he said.

Miller, an incoming sophomore at Joseph High School, fought hard for that state championship in

tie-down. He said he had a tough go in the second round of state finals after being very consistent all year.

“I had to forget about it and move on,” he said.

The excitement of the crowd carried him through, and his mother, Dena Miller, said, “he took care of business” and got the win.

This past year he teamed roped with partner Bayli Ladner, of Klamath Falls. The pair placed fourth at the Oregon State Finals Rodeo in Prineville. This coming year, Miller said he is adding steer wrestling to his events, with an eye on earning points toward the all-around competition.

The high school rodeo season is three competitions in the fall and four in the spring.

Miller said he had a rope in his hand as a toddler and was horseback by the age of 3. It wasn’t long before he was a regular at local junior and ranch rodeos

and a hand at Chief Joseph Days, either untying calves at timed event slack competitions or cooling down the pickup men’s horses.

At the age of 7, he competed in his first rodeo outside of Wallowa County — the Cayuse Junior Rodeo in Pendleton. He started competing in junior high rodeo competitions as a sixth grader and qualified for nationals, held in Huron, South Dakota.

Miller’s seventh grade year was during the COVID-19 shutdowns, so he and his family opened up their arena to kids in Wallowa County to come rope and ride. Up to 50 would attend an afternoon of roping, barrels and pole bending.

“There were no fall sports so we had rodeo practice open to the community all fall on Tuesdays and Thursdays,” Dena Miller said.

The following year as an eighth grader, the young cowboy qualified again

for the junior high rodeo national in Des Moines, Iowa. With three more years of high school, the sky’s the limit.

“To see your kid want something and work for it is really emotional,” Dena Miller said.

Hanley Miller’s skills aren’t confined to the rodeo arena. Along with the rest of his family, he moves cattle for the Fence Creek Ranch, and he started training horses by the age of 11.

“People will call up and say, ‘I want a roping horse,’ and I work with them,” Miller said.

Keen on perfecting his rodeo skills, while encouraging others to do so as well, Miller and his family are hosting a breakaway and tie-down roping clinic with PRCA champion Nathan Steinberg.

“We are excited to share our passion and bring someone with his qualifications to come to the county,” Dena Miller said.

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