

SPORTS



Patrick Webb

Coach Jeff Eaton, center, was still giving positive encouragement to his Naselle team at the WIAA state championship game, even when they were down 80-26 to eastern Washington powerhouse Odessa in December 2019.

Naselle coach praised for decades of service

By PATRICK WEBB
Chinook Observer

NASELLE, Wash. — The community said thanks to head football coach Jeff Eaton as he retired after an undefeated season, capping three decades of guiding Comet athletes.

Naselle topped Mossyrock 48-22 in last week's season finale.

"He is going to be missed," said Brian Macy, athletic director, who attended Eastern Washington University with Eaton in the 1980s. "Just think of the positive impact he has had on our community."

"It's just amazing — you don't get people who are willing to stick around in one place for so long. ... He loved doing what he was doing — it didn't seem like work for him."

Eaton, 57, grew up in Naselle, learning his trade as an offensive lineman in seventh grade. He played for Western Washington University for three years before completing his degree at Eastern. When he moved back home to take a job at the Naselle Youth Camp, he helped coach for one season at Ilwaco in 1988 before being offered the Naselle position.

"I have been thinking about it for a couple of seasons," said Eaton, who is eager to catch up on 30 years of missed elk and deer hunting. "This one has been pretty challenging year."

The announcement gave former players an opportunity to comment on what playing for Eaton meant to them.

Hayden Gudmundsen, who is married to Eaton's niece, Taylor, cherishes his memories. He played quarterback for Naselle in his 2015 senior season, the year Naselle switched to playing eight-man football.

"For the past 30 years, Jeff Eaton has been Naselle football," Gudmundsen said. "Dedicating so much of his life to not only coaching but mentoring so many players has led to an incredible impact on kids and the community. Personally, Jeff made being a Comet football player one of the most enjoyable times of my life."

Former lineman Carson Bergeson, a 2018 graduate, was full of praise for Eaton. "He is very passionate about the game of football," he said. "He loves to work with kids and give them as much knowledge as he can about the game — and always has a good attitude."

Eaton recalled many highlights.

In 2008, Naselle advanced to the state 2B semifinal against powerful Napavine. "They were supposed to beat us up," said the coach, remembering the 18-13 scoreline with pride, even though it was a loss. "They went on to win a close final against Asotin, which was highly favored that year."

More recently, his last two "normal" seasons saw Naselle among the top four 1B schools in Washington. Quarterback Cole Dorman and Eaton's nephew, Jacob, spurred the Comets through a sparkling season into a state semifinal loss to Almira-Coulee-Hartline in 2018; the following year saw Ethan Lindstrom

led Naselle to the state championship game. A rainy day and a pulverizing by mighty Odessa couldn't dampen Comet fans' spirits as they celebrated the rare achievement of reaching the final.

"Those semi- and final highlights were when we were getting into the groove with eight-man," Eaton said. "We had a good solid group of kids those years — they were big moments."

Earlier, Eaton's two sons, Robert and Dustin, went through the program, taking starring roles.

"That was probably the biggest highlight, looking back," their father said. "Both boys were good football players. They played all sports, but football was their best sport."

The oldest, Robert, now an oysterman, was an all-state football player selected for the east-west all-star game in 2012. Dustin, a deputy with the Pacific County Sheriff's Office, received all-league recognition at quarterback, all-state football honors and selection for the all-star game. Unsurprisingly, daughter Abbie was active in sports, too.

Eaton was mindful of allowing his assistant coaches more direct contact with his sons, especially when Dustin played quarterback. "I knew that I could not be the offensive coach," Eaton laughed. "If I had been the offensive coach, we probably wouldn't have talked at dinner!"

Naselle stadium announcer Chris Dorman added to the applause. "A calm, fair man with an occasional 'bite' that garnered the respect of players and led programs to big stages," he said.

His son, Cole, captained the Comets to the state semi-final in 2018. "Since he didn't get after us too much, we knew that when he did, we were doing something wrong which had to be fixed," he said.

"Jeff will leave a huge hole to fill," said Naselle superintendent Lisa Nelson. "He has been such a stalwart for our program and a great role model for our kids. We were really lucky to have a quality guy like Jeff at the helm to run a classy program for so many years. He has had a great career and will be missed dearly."

Eaton acknowledged his role as instilling values.

"One of the biggest reasons for me is to be out there with the kids and teach them some things to help them along the way," he said. "Maybe in years to come, they will be saying, 'Old Coach Eaton said that way back.' There are life things — sticking to it, not quitting, showing up for jobs. Life lessons."

Among favorite achievements has been guiding boys who were not immediate stars.

"It's seeing those successes, especially kids that were not the great athletes, who found a niche," Eaton said. "They were able to do good kinds of things. That was pretty rewarding, especially when they learned things like when not to quit."



Jeff Eaton

PREP FOOTBALL ROUNDUP

Warrenton wins a wild one

The Battle of Undefeated 3A football teams took place Friday night in Warrenton, where the Warriors emerged as still unbeaten over four games, with a wild 42-34 win over visiting Yamhill-Carlton.

The Tigers nearly overcame deficits of 22-6 and 34-20 entering the fourth quarter but fell eight points short.

Warrenton held a 16-6 lead after a low-scoring first half, before a third quarter explosion in which the Warriors outscored Yamhill 18-14.

Warrenton failed on all three two-point conversions in the third quarter, leaving the Tigers within striking distance. But Yamhill could not overcome three turnovers and six penalties for 60 yards, while Warrenton's Josh Earls locked up the victory with a 39-yard interception return in the fourth quarter.

Warrenton quarterback Hordie Bodden had 112 yards and four touchdowns passing, and added 113 yards rushing with a TD.

Knappa chops down Vernonia

The 2021 Logger Bowl went Knappa's way for the fifth consecutive meeting, as the Loggers of Knappa pounded the Loggers of Vernonia, 40-8, in a Northwest League football showdown Friday in Vernonia.

After getting shut out in its first two games, Knappa not only scored its first points of the season, but ran Vernonia ragged.

With two of its seven ball carriers topping the 100-yard mark, Knappa ran the ball 52 times for 479 yards (9.2 yards per carry) to completely wear down Vernonia, which had just 13 players in uniform.

Knappa's first drive of the game ended with an interception, but the visiting Loggers drove 80 yards in 11 plays on their next drive, resulting in a 3-yard touchdown run by sophomore Tucker Kinder.

Vernonia fumbled the ball away on its very next play, and Knappa put the game away five plays later, with Kinder catching a 22-yard

scoring toss from junior Tanner Jackson, Knappa's only completed pass of the night.

Junior Mark Miller finished as Knappa's top rusher, with 154 yards on 24 carries. Jackson gained 146 yards on eight attempts, which included a 70-yard TD run in the third quarter.

Estacada 36, Astoria 6

Two teams playing good football the previous two weeks met on the field Friday night at CMH Field, where the short-handed Estacada Rangers continued their hot streak and won their third straight, 36-6 over Astoria.

Less than seven minutes into the game, the Rangers held a two touchdown lead. They scored on their 10-play, 66-yard opening drive, capped by a 22-yard scoring run from Isaiah Schaffer.

Three players later, Cory James intercepted an Astoria pass and returned it 40 yards for a touchdown.

Astoria's lone score — a 1-yard run by Michael Moore on the opening drive of the second half — was quickly erased when James returned the ensuing kickoff 85 yards for a touchdown.

Tillamook 18, Seaside 14

Friday night's upset special took place in Tillamook, where the Cheesemakers held off previously unbeaten Seaside, 18-14 in a Cowapa League football game.

Tillamook built a 12-0 lead in the second quarter, before the Gulls answered with a 12-yard touchdown pass from Tanner Kraushaar to Jarred White before halftime, and a 3-yard run by Aedyn Cook in the third quarter that gave Seaside a 14-12 advantage.

Tillamook scored to retake the lead going into the fourth quarter, and a late score by the Gulls was disallowed because of a clipping penalty.

Cook and Andrew Teubner combined for 145 yards rushing, while Teubner had 10 tackles defensively.

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