

FOOTBALL: Hermiston won its state title in 2015

Continued from 1A

"I really feel this is going to be a hiatus, not the end," he said.

5:20 p.m. Spoken like a true politician, Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock split his loyalties down the middle as he prepared to enter the stadium gates.

Murdock's granddaughter, Leslie Browning, attends Hermiston High School, though on Friday he stood alongside Susan Bower, whose son, Nick, plays quarterback for the Buckaroos.

"Hermiston folks are certainly our friends, but when it comes to football, it's fun to have a good time," said Bower, president of Eastern Oregon Business Source.

Murdock lamented the loss of what he described as a fun rivalry between friendly cities.

"There's been people coming to these games for years," he said. "It's kind of hard to let it go."

5:50 p.m. Two school buses filled with members of the Hermiston High School dance team and cheerleading squad file into lot near the livestock pens behind the Round-Up arena.

Hermiston Athletic Director Larry Usher is helping out at the grill as Bulldog students and fans gathered for burgers at the pre-game tailgate.

Usher isn't very romantic about the end Pendleton-Hermiston rivalry. In fact, he doesn't think Hermiston would care that much about Friday's game if it was earlier in the season and didn't affect playoff position.

"I disagree with the people that think that it's a shame that it's going away," he said.

Hermiston High School, with its 1,648 students, is more than double the size of its counterpart in Pendleton. Usher pointed out that Hermiston's other former rivals on the Interstate 84 corridor — La Grande, Baker and Ontario — had already dropped off their schedule.

While Hermiston's



Hermiston's fans cheer after Dayshawn Neal scored a touchdown in the first quarter of the Bulldogs' 42-15 win against Pendleton on Friday in Pendleton.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

population advantage has lead to better results on the field against the Bucks, Tom Ditton can remember the time when results were reversed.

When Ditton attended HHS in the 1960s, the town's population was 1,050, fewer people than there are high school students today.

Ditton's teams lost all three years he played for the Bulldogs.

"I used to say it was kind of like a graduation requirement," he said. "To come up here and get beat."

Despite the lopsidedness of the games back then, Ditton said the rivalry was friendly and has continued that way until the very end. He still counts some of the boys he played against as his friends.

For Ditton, there won't be any bragging rights regardless of who wins the game.

"There's nothing to brag about," he said. "We're all in this together."

5:50 p.m. Standing in the former Albertsons parking lot for the PHS tailgate party, Chuck West made no bones about his rooting interest.

"I'm a true blue Buckaroo," West said, wearing a bright green PHS jacket.

West is a retired teacher

and assistant coach for the Buckaroos varsity basketball team, though his family has plenty of ties to Hermiston. His wife, Dorene, was an HHS cheerleader, and while their son Shann was a four-sport athlete at PHS, he is now the Hermiston tennis coach.

Even West himself spent six years teaching at HHS — he was there in 1984 when the Bulldogs defeated Pendleton for the first time in 62 years. Despite the apparent conflicts, both he and Dorene insisted there is no feuding at the dinner table.

"I've been on both sides," Dorene West said. "Now that I don't have kids playing, I can't lose."

6 p.m. Buckaroos players arrive at the tailgate, high-fiving excited fans who cheer as they run past.

Two students, sophomore Vanessa Schmidt and senior Kacey Robbins, wore the jerseys of their boyfriends, Buckaroos receiver Tanner Stephan and linebacker Brendan Bedolla, respectively. Schmidt said the week at school has been intense as they prepared for the game.

"I feel like everybody has been super hyped," she said.

While Pendleton and

Hermiston kids are largely friends, Schmidt said they are very competitive when it comes to one-upping each other in sports.

"We want to make it a good game," she said. "We're feeling pretty confident."

6:20 p.m. Before the crowd begins to migrate to the arena, the cheerleaders perform a short routine to "Sweet Caroline."

Their audience continued to mill about the area before perking up once Neil Diamond hits the chorus.

Good times never seemed so good

Holding a sign that read "Beat the Bucks," Hermiston sophomore Max Rahm doesn't have a long institutional memory of the Pendleton-Hermiston rivalry, but she does know it's their last game against each other, a fact that escaped some of the friends hanging out with her.

Rahm said Hermiston's impending move to the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association was a chance to make new memories for the Bulldogs.

Wearing a crown and a purple-and-gold scarf, junior Derek McBride took a similar position. He respected the

tradition of the rivalry but was also excited for the new experience.

One of McBride's favorite Pendleton-Hermiston memories was last year's game, where he absorbed the excitement and energy of being in the student section.

"There's nothing like a rivalry game," he said.

The high school students interviewed at the tailgate all agreed that the school that won had ultimate bragging rights, or "the final say" as McBride called it.

6:30 p.m. While some fans might play down the significance,

Hermiston School Board member Jason Middleton said it would be huge for the Bulldogs to score a win in their final matchup with Pendleton.

"It's always been one of the biggest rivalries," said Middleton, a 1990 HHS graduate. "It was one we always enjoyed winning."

For decades, Middleton said Pendleton had the upper hand. But as Hermiston has grown as a community, that has helped to even the score.

Off the field, Middleton said the towns will continue to thrive hand in hand representing Eastern Oregon.

"A rivalry's a rivalry, but at the end of the day, we both live in this agricultural community," he said. "I think everybody looks at us as one group."

7 p.m. A packed Hermiston visitors' section has a lot to cheer about after the Bucks kickoff to the Bulldogs.

The crowd erupts several times as Hermiston jumps out to 14-0 lead, only to grow a little more restless when Pendleton scores and the Bulldogs stall on a few drives.

An occasional "Let's go Dawgs" or a stray cowbell punctuates the quieted crowd, with McBride finding himself on the arena's dirt track, shouting words of encouragement to team.

Highland Hills Elementary School Principal Jake Bacon and Micah Mercer, and arts and multimedia teacher at Hermiston High School, sat together and analyzed the

plays as they unfolded.

Mercer graduated in 1999, and played on a series of Bulldogs teams that beat the Bucks.

"It was going to die eventually," Mercer said of the rivalry.

As for the bragging rights? Hermiston had already established its advantage when it won its state title in 2015, a team that counted Mercer as an assistant coach.

Even in its heyday, that's an honorific Pendleton hasn't achieved.

7:39 p.m. Standing side by side, Garrett Later and Greg Piper made for an interesting pair.

Later, who proudly says he is Hermiston born and bred, wore his HHS letterman jacket while his cousin, Piper, had a green PHS shirt underneath his jacket. Later, who graduated from HHS in 2007 and played defensive end for the Bulldogs, said winning this game would be icing on the cake, though he will miss the game and its legacy.

"I don't like that they're going to Washington and all that," he said. "It's like you're walking away from home."

Piper, whose daughter teaches at PHS and granddaughter runs cross-country for the Buckaroos, described the game as Umatilla County's Super Bowl.

"It's all about having fun," he said.

8:46 p.m. After Pendleton dominated the second quarter, halftime was filled with award presentations. But the second half belonged to Hermiston, and eventually one crowd got louder while the opposite side grew silent. A Hermiston interception and a quick touchdown gave the Bulldogs plenty of breathing room. On their next drive, the Buckaroos punted on fourth-and-8, down 35-15 with 8:53 left in the game.

"That's it," said someone in the Pendleton stands, which began to clear out soon after the change in possession. "That's the end."

For how the game ended, and more photos, see today's sports section.

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