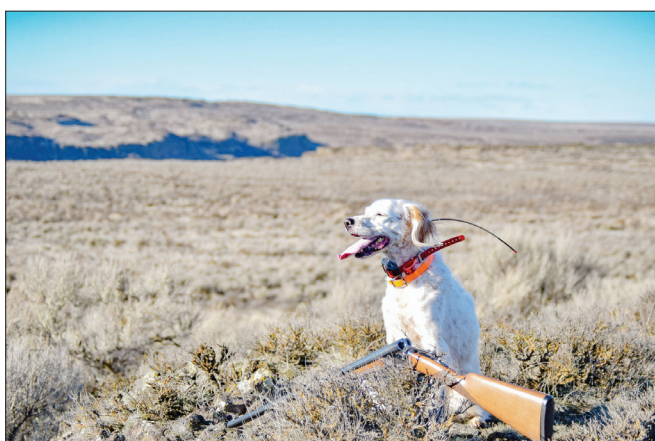


Regret, relief and reflection at season's end



BRAD TRUMBO
UPLAND PURSUITS



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Finn taking a quick break in channeled scablands.

The rich aromas of a moist, finely blended pipe tobacco drifted from the crooked briar-wood clenched between my teeth. Taking a slow pull, I puzzled over the two spent 20-gauge shells lying before me, signaling a close to the 2020 upland bird season. Each season brings new and unique experiences, and lessons learned, and relearned.

Unique experiences of 2020 included a road trip to North-Central Montana for sharp-tailed grouse, and making a new hunting buddy from Almira, Washington, on the basalt-channeled scablands chasing quail and pheasant. Both experiences offered complete surprise and education.

A tip from some Helena residents led me to the Conrad area of Montana, only to find it a complete bust. Having hunted sharp-tails in far Eastern Montana and finding coveys thick as starlings, I was confident in my setter's ability to find birds. Map scouting for large grasslands and sagebrush tracts had me a bit concerned, but I identified a few areas that looked good among the patchwork of cropland.

Upon arrival, I found a single tract in 50 square miles with a semblance of the native prairie I sought. Over the course of a few days, my setters never

once got birdy. We saw not a single game bird along farm roads or public access. Thoroughly disappointed, we packed it in early, headed for Flathead Lake, and camped in a beautiful lakeside state park for a pick-me-up.

On the contrary, in December 2020 I met a social media acquaintance near Grand Coulee, expecting prospective covers to resemble our local bird numbers. Darren McCall and his daughter Kinzie were gracious enough to show me some of their best covers, while I ran my best dogs. Wading into the first field of the day, dappled in Great Basin wild rye and other choice grasses, a scene reminiscent of the Dakotas erupted as waves of pheasant took to wing hundreds of yards ahead of us and the dogs.

Moving on to the quintessential quail cover of the scablands, every grassy pocket held pheasant, but we put up not one quail covey. The sagebrush and bunchgrasses were cloaked in ice and the landscape a glimmering prism, punctuated by the milky green of

sage and chocolate basalt outcrops. Darren claimed a single rooster, and we enjoyed an exhilarating hunt behind Yuba as she taught a clinic on pinning hens.

The common lesson relearned from both Montana and Grand Coulee was that quality habitat produces birds. The Montana habitat was abhorrent, while the scablands were characterized largely by native vegetation.

Also noteworthy, the western wildfires may have kept me from the Oregon sage grouse season, but exceptional mourning dove flights on my homestead amid the smoke were a fair consolation. Finn and Yuba hunted at peak performance, Yuba in particular. Following a second surgery in August 2020 to correct hip dysplasia, she now has no hip sockets. I feared her stamina and stability would prove a challenge over the fall but, being freed of crippling arthritis, her exuberance, determination and skill were redefined.

Yuba's pheasant savvy comes as a result of passion and drive that have helped

hone her skills over the years. I lost count of her finds this past season, and the tenacity in which she pursued downed birds was an inspiring spectacle.

Taking another pull, the sweet aroma triggered further memories. The time has past to hang up the vest, stow the side-by-side, and box the pipe for another grueling nine months of anticipation. And, as always, it was done with a pang of regret, yet a sigh of relief.

Season's end signals a close to the crack-of-dawn, frozen finger mornings, and cutting, combing and plucking a thousand invasive weed burrs from the notoriously tangly setter coats. It also brings halt to the sight of high-tailed points beneath the golden rays of the crepuscular hours, and the rush of wings against crackling grasses and shrub limbs.

My girls and I are getting no younger. The same can be said for my upland brethren. And to me, a picture is worth 1,000 birds. It's going to be a long wait for September. May the memories of the stellar days afield, and time spent toting the scattergun with friends and family, simply following the dogs and admiring the splendor of the uplands, see us through to the early 2021 grouse season.

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Charlie Riedel/Associated Press

Seattle Mariners pitcher Yusei Kikuchi, from Japan, throws to Kyle Lewis during spring training baseball practice on Feb. 25, 2021, in Peoria, Ariz.

Mariners: 'If you look around the league, there's not many center fielders that throw people out'

Continued from Page B1

the AL West in 2022.

But as much as Lewis proved last season, he has still played just 76 total games in his major league career. His first taste of the majors didn't arrive until September 2019. And while he was great last season, Lewis played against only the AL and NL West.

So while there is optimism about just how good Lewis could end up being as Seattle's center fielder, he understands being successful in a full season this year may be more important than what he did last year.

"I thought I was going to have that opportunity last year. But being able to still learn and get information, or being in the big leagues and having those different experiences, going to different ballparks last year is definitely helpful for me moving forward," Lewis said. "It has done a lot for my confidence level and feeling like I've been around a while, even in different capacities, whether it be practices, whether it be just meeting rooms, day-to-day has definitely helped my confidence as well."

Lewis finished last season hitting .262 with 11 home runs and 28 RBIs. His OPS of .801 was very good, but his 71 strikeouts were higher than desired. Lewis also struggled badly as the league began to adjust over the final month. He hit .373 for the first 28 games with six home runs and 18 RBIs. Over his final

30 games, Lewis hit .154 and struck out 43 times.

Some of that was to be expected. Manager Scott Servais said the message to Lewis was to focus on whether his process and approach at the plate were remaining consistent, not on the numbers.

"That's what we're really harping on with guys like Kyle, all of our guys really, understanding the batting average is going to come and go," Servais said. "That's really what you find out of course this season is are guys mentally able to handle the ups and downs. Now, the more you go through it, the more qualified and capable you are to handle it, but you need to go through it."

"A lot of our guys haven't gone through 162 games of a big-league season yet. It's just where we're at in our development."

One area where Lewis wanted to get better this offseason was on the defensive side, specifically with his throwing. He had some spectacular moments in center field as a rookie, but last season was his first opportunity to play the position full time.

"If you look around the league, there's not many center fielders that throw people out. They're typically out there, they can cover a lot of ground, they're very athletic, they make plays," Servais said. "We've seen Kyle do all those things, but the throwing arm kind of gets forgotten and he doesn't want to be that player. He wants to be a complete player."

ON THE SLATE

- SATURDAY, MARCH 20**
Prep football
 Hood River Valley at Pendleton, 1 p.m.
Prep volleyball
 Hermiston at Hood River, 2:45 p.m.
 Pendleton at The Dalles, 11 a.m.
 Weston-McEwen at McLoughlin, 11 a.m.
 Stanfield at Grant Union, noon
 Heppner at Irrigon, 1 p.m.
 Echo at Condon, noon
Prep cross-country
 Hermiston at Richland MCC meet, 10 a.m.
Prep girls soccer
 Hermiston at Chiawana, noon
 McLoughlin at Pendleton JV, noon
- MONDAY, MARCH 22**
Prep boys soccer
 Pendleton at Ontario, 1 p.m.
- TUESDAY, MARCH 23**
Prep girls soccer
 Pendleton at The Dalles/Dufur, 4:30 p.m.
Prep boys soccer
 The Dalles/Dufur at Pendleton, 6 p.m.
- THURSDAY, MARCH 25**
Prep football
 Hermiston at Chiawana, 7 p.m.

- Irrigon at Umatilla, 5 p.m.
Prep girls soccer
 Hermiston at Walla Walla, 2 p.m.
 Prep slowpitch softball
 Hermiston at Pasco (2), 4 p.m.
- FRIDAY, MARCH 26**
Prep football
 Pendleton at Redmond, 7 p.m.
 Stanfield at McLoughlin, 7 p.m.
 Joseph at Echo, 7 p.m.
 Pilot Rock at Lone/Arlington, 7 p.m.
Prep volleyball
 Echo at Bickleton, 5 p.m.
 McLoughlin at Riverside, 1 p.m.
- SATURDAY, MARCH 27**
Prep football
 Weston-McEwen at Heppner, 2 p.m.
Prep volleyball
 Ridgeview at Pendleton, 11 a.m.
 Hermiston at Pendleton, 3 p.m.
Prep girls soccer
 La Grande at Hermiston, noon
 McLoughlin at Riverside, 1 p.m.
 Umatilla at Stanfield/Echo, 1 p.m.
Prep boys soccer
 McLoughlin at Riverside, 3 p.m.
Prep cross-country
 Walla Walla, Southridge at Hermiston, 3 p.m.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Caution tape blocks off the bleachers at Weston-McEwen High School ahead of a volleyball match against Umatilla on Monday, March 15, 2021.

Fans: Indoor sports are still limited to only 50 people

Continued from Page B1

The Hermiston football team was able to welcome 400 fans on March 19 against Kennewick, which included a small number of tickets for the visiting team.

"We are excited to have people in the stadium," Hermiston athletic director Larry Usher said. "We are doing what we can to make it enjoyable for our seniors. Next week, when we go to Edgar Brown (in Pasco, Washington), they will get to have about 1,800 fans. We get to

have a couple of parents per kid go."

While stadium seating was limited at Kennison Field, Hermiston High School offered fans an opportunity to come together outside the facility to watch the Bulldogs' two home games.

The booster club barbecued hamburgers and hot dogs, and fans brought their own chairs to settle in and watch the games on a big screen.

"We have had tailgate parties," Usher said. "We gave away prizes and had games.

We try to make it enjoyable. A home football game is a community event."

While football games get to add more fans, indoor activities still are limited to 50 people, including players, coaches and officials. Fan numbers will go up if Umatilla County moves to moderate or low risk.

At Weston-McEwen High School, school officials locked the doors after Irrigon arrived for their match on Tuesday, March 16. The same happened for the Nixyaawii vs. Pilot Rock volleyball game on

Thursday, March 18.

"It was super quiet in the gym," Irrigon coach Vanessa Pacheco said of the March 16 match.

Morrow County, which is in the low risk category, has been able to enjoy additional fans for a couple of weeks.

The March 18 Heppner football game against Grant Union had approximately 300 fans, and volleyball teams can have 50% occupancy in the gym.

"It has been nice to have the fans back," Heppner volleyball coach Mindy Wilson said.

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