

# EAST OREGONIAN SPORTS

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Mike Baleztena/Contributed Photo

Pilot Rock football coach Mike Baleztena talks with quarterback Tanner Corwin and lineman Caden Thornton before a game during the 2020 season. Baleztena is stepping away from coaching to spend more time with his family.

## Time for family

### Pilot Rock football coach Mike Baleztena steps down

By ANNIE FOWLER  
East Oregonian

**P**ILOT ROCK — For the past seven seasons, Mike Baleztena has walked the sidelines as the Pilot Rock football coach.

This coming fall, Baleztena will be cheering on his son Bryson on the cross-country course, leaving the Rockets in the capable hands of a yet-to-be-named coach.

“For the last couple of years, I only got to see three of Bryson’s cross-country meets,” Baleztena said. “During hunting season, I can only go one or two days. I want to spend the next couple of years hanging out with him until he goes to wherever. I love football, but I don’t get to spend a lot of time with my son.”

Baleztena sent his players a message a few weeks ago, and he let them know he always will be there for them.

“When you coach, it doesn’t stop,” Baleztena said. “I have been with these

boys since the third grade. It will be rough. I sent out a message to the boys. They understood. I am not bailing on them, but I want to spend more time with Bryson. Especially after being sick.”

Baleztena was diagnosed with stage 4 kidney cancer during the summer of 2020.

On Aug. 28, 2020, doctors removed a 5-inch tumor, his left kidney and both of his adrenal glands. Fortunately, the tumor was not attached to the pancreas.

A few weeks ago, his most recent CT scans and blood work came back good.

“Hopefully that is the way it stays,” Baleztena said. “The past 18 months, I have been very happy and very blessed. I can’t even put into words how lucky I am to get a second chance.”

#### A Rocket for life

Baleztena grew up in Pilot Rock, graduating in 1986.

He played football, did track and played basketball his senior year.

“There was no finesse there,” he said of his time on the basketball court.

After high school, Baleztena spent four years in the Navy as an electrician for C-130s — a four-engine turboprop military transport aircraft.

When he returned from his military service, he went to Blue Mountain Community College, where he was a thrower on the track team.

Baleztena, who works for the Umatilla County Road Department, started with the Rockets football program in 2012 as the line coach. He took over as head coach in 2015.

That first year, the Rockets played in the Columbia Basin Conference with powerhouse Heppner, Weston-McEwen, Stanfield and Irrigon. They finished 0-8.

In 2017, Pilot Rock dropped from 11-man ball to 8-man ball, which had Baleztena scrambling to adjust his game plan.

“That year, we played an independent schedule,” he said. “We were going out of the gate trying to figure it out.”

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Baleztena

## COVID-19 impacts EOU’s sports season again

By JEFF BUDLONG  
For The Observer

**LA GRANDE** — Something returned to Eastern Oregon University’s athletic schedule it wishes could have left behind in 2021 — forfeits due to COVID-19.

The women’s basketball team will not play both home Cascade Collegiate Conference games this weekend against Warner Pacific and Multnomah because of outbreaks in those programs. The men’s game with Warner Pacific also was canceled while the Multnomah contest on Saturday, Jan. 8, still is on. The wrestling team lost a dual with Warner Pacific scheduled for Jan. 12.

“It is really disappointing, but it is something that we are all dealing with,” said Mountaineers head women’s basketball coach and EOU athletics director Anji Weissenfluh. “It could and most likely will happen to all of us because the new variant is highly contagious.”

Conference COVID-19 guidelines state that anytime a school elects not to participate or has been required to cease based on federal, state or county mandate, the contest will be a forfeit for record and standing purposes.

“It doesn’t feel good to win by forfeit,” Weissenfluh said. “It never feels good to any coach or team. Student-athletes and coaches do



Eastern Oregon University Athletics/Contributed Photo

Eastern Oregon University’s Leilani Padilla controls the ball Dec. 18, 2021, during the home game against Walla Walla University. EOU was set to play home games Friday and Saturday, Jan. 7 and 8, 2022, against Warner Pacific and Multnomah until COVID-19 outbreaks on those teams led to forfeits.

this because they love this and they want to play.”

The EOU women’s basketball team sits at 10-7 overall and 7-2 in conference play after receiving the pair of forfeits. It is the third forfeit

the Mountaineers have received this season after Corban forfeited a Dec. 31 contest. The men are losing a game because of COVID-19 for the first time this season.

Weissenfluh said the start-stop

nature the season can take creates problems with conditioning for all athletes. The Mountaineer women are not scheduled to return to the

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### OSAA

## Potential football changes frustrate 1A schools

By NIK STRENG  
The Oregonian

**PORTLAND** — During a Wednesday, Jan. 5, meeting of the Oregon School Activities Association’s Football Ad Hoc Committee, coaches and administrators from Oregon’s Class 1A schools voiced concerns over a proposal that could completely change how small-school teams operate.

In December, the ad hoc committee met and officially supported a reorganization of the state’s smallest football teams. This would combine Oregon’s 2A and 1A schools into three groups: a nine-man football Division 1 classification mostly made of 2A teams, a nine-man football Division 2 classification made of smaller 2A teams and bigger 1A teams, and a six-man football classification for the smaller 1A programs. Teams that do not want to participate in

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### ON THE SLATE

#### Schedule subject to change

#### SATURDAY, JAN. 8

**Prep girls basketball**  
Ellensburg at Hermiston, 1 p.m.  
McLoughlin at Ontario, 3 p.m.  
Heppner at Grant Union, 4 p.m.  
Pilot Rock at Union, 4 p.m.  
Elgin at Nixyaawii, 4 p.m.  
Echo at Bickleton, 4 p.m.  
Spray/Mitchell/Wheeler at Lone/Arlington, 4 p.m.  
Weston-McEwen at Stanfield, 4 p.m.

**Prep boys basketball**  
Ellensburg at Hermiston, 2:45 p.m.  
Weston-McEwen at Stanfield, 4 p.m.  
McLoughlin at Ontario, 4:30 p.m.  
Heppner at Grant Union, 5:30 p.m.  
Pilot Rock at Union, 5:30 p.m.  
Elgin at Nixyaawii, 5:30 p.m.  
Echo at Bickleton, 5:30 p.m.  
Spray/Mitchell/Wheeler at Lone/Arlington, 5:30 p.m.

**College men’s basketball**  
EOU vs. Multnomah, 3 p.m.

**Preps boys wrestling**  
Echo/Stanfield, Heppner/Lone, Riverside at Jo-Hi Invitational, noon  
Hermiston at Rollie Lane, Nampa, Idaho, TBD

**Prep swimming**  
Pendleton at Jay Rowen Invite, Redmond, TBD

#### MONDAY, JAN. 10

**Prep girls basketball**  
Stanfield at Enterprise, 5 p.m.

**Prep boys basketball**  
Stanfield at Enterprise, 6:30 p.m.

#### TUESDAY, JAN. 11

**Prep girls bowling**  
Kennewick at Hermiston, 3 p.m.

**Prep girls basketball**  
Hermiston at Chiawana, 5:45 p.m.  
McLoughlin at Umatilla, 6 p.m.  
Heppner at Riverside, 6 p.m.  
Echo at Lone/Arlington, 6 p.m.  
Pendleton at Walla Walla, 7:30 p.m.

**Prep boys basketball**  
Hermiston at Chiawana, 7:30 p.m.  
McLoughlin at Umatilla, 7:30 p.m.  
Heppner at Riverside, 7:30 p.m.  
Echo at Lone/Arlington, 7:30 p.m.

#### WEDNESDAY, JAN. 12

**Prep girls basketball**  
Nixyaawii at Griswold, 6 p.m.

**Prep boys basketball**  
Nixyaawii at Griswold, 7:30 p.m.

#### THURSDAY, JAN. 13

**Prep boys swimming**  
Hermiston at Hood River Valley, 3:15 p.m.  
**Prep girls bowling**  
Hermiston at Hanford, 3:30 p.m.

**Prep girls wrestling**  
Kamakin at Hermiston, 6 p.m.  
**Prep boys wrestling**  
Kamakin at Hermiston, 7 p.m.  
La Grande at Pendleton, TBD

#### FRIDAY, JAN. 14

**Prep girls basketball**  
Burns at Umatilla, 5 p.m.  
Ridgeview at Pendleton, 5 p.m.  
Walla Walla at Hermiston, 5:45 p.m.  
Baker at McLoughlin, 6 p.m.  
Irrigon at Riverside, 6 p.m.  
Heppner at Pilot Rock, 6 p.m.  
Enterprise at Weston-McEwen, 6 p.m.  
Joseph at Griswold, 6 p.m.  
Nixyaawii at Cove, 6 p.m.  
Echo at Klickitat/Glenwood, 6 p.m.  
Lone/Arlington at Trout Lake, 6 p.m.  
Grant Union at Stanfield, 6 p.m.

**Prep boys basketball**  
Pendleton at Ridgeview, 6:30 p.m.  
Burns at Umatilla, 6:30 p.m.  
Walla Walla at Hermiston, 7:30 p.m.  
Baker at McLoughlin, 7:30 p.m.  
Irrigon at Riverside, 7:30 p.m.  
Heppner at Pilot Rock, 7:30 p.m.  
Enterprise at Weston-McEwen, 7:30 p.m.  
Joseph at Griswold, 7:30 p.m.  
Nixyaawii at Cove, 7:30 p.m.  
Echo at Klickitat/Glenwood, 7:30 p.m.  
Lone/Arlington at Trout Lake, 7:30 p.m.  
Grant Union at Stanfield, 7:30 p.m.