

Birds:

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into a shallow draw. Cattle were grazing on the distant ridgeline among the bunchgrasses.

The weedy cover held nothing, but at the convergence of cattle, bunchgrass, and setter, Yuba came to a jerking halt. I closed in on Yuba, smiling with the anticipation of a covey rise. Yuba relaxed as I approached and peeled off in pursuit over 200 yards across a saddle in the ridge. This was no Hun covey. Her final point came with confidence and I circled widely to pin the bird between us, but the bird was not about to quit. I caught a glimpse of the rooster low-crawling through the sparse bunches and couldn't help but laugh as the bunchgrass faded into starthistle, exposing the rooster, and pressuring him to take wing. Yuba stood steady to flush with an exasperated look.

A year later I dropped two setters in that covert, and their teamwork put a wily rooster in the bag. The main lesson was that good pheasant coverts need not be brushy, wet, or draw-bottom habitats. I've since found a number of unsuspected back-pocket pheasant sites in what I would call prime Hun cover.

Grazed lands add an element of randomness as you can never predict the condition of the parcels. Many times, I have parked at the foot of a steep slope, gnawed to the soil, and thought, no way am I plodding up and over that greasy grassless mud mound. But I never let myself get away with a lazy mindset. You never know what hidden gem may lie on the other side of the hill.

My older pup, Finn, ran a parcel like this one New Year's Day. It was a muddy slope with a perennial creek along the road, denuded of vegetation. I nearly drove on to the next parcel, but Finn and I hoofed it up and over,



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Llewelin setter Finn with a hard-won late-season rooster from the sparse partridge covers.

crossed a few fences, and found a single 20-acre strip of beautiful Hun cover between two wheat fields.

This day, the cover was empty, but recent scat suggested a covey may have been present with better timing. Two whitetail sheds provided consolation, laying on the wide-open hilltop among a struggling rabbit-brush community.

Draw bottoms thick with woods rose and blackberry nearly always hold quail. Bunchgrass islands among sagebrush can hold a surprising number of pheasant. Riverside bluffs on the Snake and Owyhee are known for chukar. Not every new cover is a good find, but when the stars align, you can stum-

ble upon a covert so fine you don't dare expose it, not even to your mother as she gabs over the phone from her Del Ray Beach retirement condo — like the wild pheasant stronghold I found last month, again while seeking Huns.

Go into every late season hunt expecting to hike longer and harder, experience the unknown (maybe only to you), and come away with valuable information. Catalog your new covers and don't be too quick to judge. New sites often warrant a second look before writing them off. Not all covers will be worth even the first look, but crossing off terrain that's not worth your time can be just as valuable as finding a

new gem.

Aerial imagery is an amazing tool for mapping out covers across the season, but it takes ground work to validate the imagery. Each parcel is like a new mine claim. Will you strike it rich or bust? The unknown is part of the fun. And one thing about gambling is certain: if you don't play, you can't win. It takes homework, boots on the ground, and endurance to score wild birds in the late season public covers.

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CCC:

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down to each conference when it comes to its postseason policies. The Cascade Collegiate Conference has little wiggle room for canceling games or moving the schedule around in order to meet those deadlines, hence the forfeit rule.

"At this point, we have not said anything about putting a pause on anything," he said. "We're beholden to some deadlines to complete our season and have our representatives make it to the NAIA national tournaments, so you kind of have to work backwards from those deadlines."

Member schools control attendance policy

The Cascade Collegiate Conference has no conference-wide policy for a potential limit on fan attendance, relying on member schools to make the best decision based on their location and the current status of COVID-19 in each community.

"That is a school-to-school policy, so it's all kind of depending on what's happening at that particular location in terms of caseload and what the school feels comfortable with," Cashell said.

Cashell also noted there is not a minimal threshold if multiple teams were dealing with COVID-19 shortages at the same time.

"Ultimately, we don't know week in and week out what the virus is going to do," Cashell said. "Trying to reschedule things is problematic then, because you have no idea if we'd even get to that point."

The three wins received by the Eastern women's team will count toward head coach Anji Weissenfluh's career record as she pursues 500 career wins. The Mountaineers propelled to 9-1 in the Cascade Collegiate Conference standings after recent forfeiture victories.

"Basically the rules in the NAIA state that forfeits do count towards overall stats," Cashell said. "They do count towards your win-loss record as a team and as a coach."

It remains to be seen if COVID-19 cancellations will continue to plague the winter sports season. Fortunately for the Mountaineers, all five of the school's involved cancellations have resulted in wins for Eastern. With that being said, the script could quickly flip as the pandemic is hardly predictable. At the midway point in the winter sports seasons, the Cascade Collegiate Conference is set on pushing through and finishing off winter sports despite the cancellations.

ON THE SLATE

Schedule subject to change

TUESDAY, JAN. 18

Prep girls basketball

Pilot Rock at Enterprise, 5 p.m.
Echo at Condon, 6 p.m.
Weston-McEwen at Heppner, 6 p.m.
Irrigon at Riverside, 6 p.m.
Elgin at Nixyaawii, 6:30 p.m.

Prep boys basketball

Huntington at Long Creek/Ukiah, 4:30 p.m.
Elgin at Nixyaawii, 5 p.m.
Pilot Rock at Enterprise, 6:30 p.m.
Weston-McEwen at Heppner, 7:30 p.m.
Irrigon at Riverside, 7:30 p.m.

WEDNESDAY, JAN. 19

Prep girls basketball

La Grande at Pendleton, 5:30 p.m.
Nixyaawii at Imbler, 6 p.m.

Prep boys basketball

La Grande at Pendleton, 7 p.m.
Nixyaawii at Imbler, 7:30 p.m.

College women's basketball

BMCC at Treasure Valley, 4:30 p.m.

College men's basketball

BMCC at Treasure Valley, 6:30 p.m.

THURSDAY, JAN. 20

Prep girls bowling

Hermiston vs Southridge, 3 p.m.

Prep boys wrestling

Hermiston at Hanford High School, 6 p.m.

College women's wrestling

EOU vs. Southwestern Oregon CC, Salem, TBA
EOU at Corban, 5 p.m.

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