

# EAST OREGONIAN SPORTS

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## Nine-man football back on the table

By **RONALD BOND**  
*Wallowa County Chieftain*

WILSONVILLE — Nine-man football appears to be back on the discussion — at least at the 2A level — in a move that would have a major impact locally if put in place.

But it's a move Greg Grant, Heppner athletic director and football coach, and a member of the Oregon School Activities Association's Football Ad Hoc Committee, believes is necessary to help build programs back up.

"It's to help everyone. The impetus behind this is that with roster sizes, schools are making decisions and foregoing JV football at a higher rate," he said. "If you don't play JV football, your program is dying, and sub-varsity football is the lifeblood of your program."

The outcome of the latest meeting on Wednesday, Jan. 19, was that the committee is again considering the addition of nine-man football.

In fact, the committee recommends nine-man for all 2A schools — schools that play 11-man currently. It continues to back the idea of eight-man football for larger 1A schools and six-man for the smaller schools.

"The idea behind this amongst a lot of the schools is we could play JV games if we had a few more kids available," Grant explained. "If you play nine on a Friday night (varsity game), then you can play nine or eight on a Monday (JV game). ... Let's say (with) a roster of 20-30 kids, you could sustain JV football. And that's the goal."

### Considered, dropped, then brought back

Nine-man football was considered early on by the ad hoc committee, as it was looking at implementing the

setup for larger 1A schools and all 2A schools, a move that would have, in effect, nixed eight-man football altogether.

But a survey of 1A schools found they overwhelmingly supported sticking with eight-man as opposed to nine-man. In the Jan. 5 meeting of the ad hoc committee, it appeared that nine-man talk had been shelved altogether.

Instead, the committee cited support among 2A schools of adjusting to nine-man in its reasoning for bringing it back to the table.

"The group reviewed correspondence and testimony from members of the 2A classification indicating that a majority of schools surveyed supported moving to the 9-player game for the next time block," the committee wrote in its update.

### A regional effect

The change, if implemented, would have an impact in the region. The Blue Mountain Conference, as it is set to stand in the fall, has several Umatilla and Morrow county schools, including Irrigon, Heppner, Riverside, Stanfield, Umatilla and Weston-McEwen. Enterprise and Grant Union round out what the BMC would look like, though Enterprise has been an eight-man team the last four years, and still has the option to play down.

However, at the nine-man level, there would be flexibility for schools to play some 11-man contests — Grant said Heppner already is slated to play Warrenton and Kennedy this fall, and that those will be 11-man games — or, if needed, drop a player off to play an eight-man team.

"I fully believe there are going to be some nine-man schools that are going to play some neighboring eight-man



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

**Weston-McEwen's Blane Peal (14) runs the ball Nov. 13, 2021, against the Heppner Mustangs in the quarterfinal round of the Oregon School Activities Association Class 2A state football tournament at Les Payne Field in Heppner. The OSAA Football Ad Hoc Committee now recommends nine-man football for all 2A schools beginning this fall.**

schools," Grant said, noting for example that Columbia Basin schools who are at nine-man could, in theory, play eight-man schools in the Grande Ronde Valley. "They are appropriate regional matchups."

And while there may be some pushback, Grant said the move will hopefully help the sport in the long run.

"The idea is not about our school and about our classification, it's about what can we do to improve the number of kids playing," he said. "Here we go. We're going to give it a shot, and I'm going to explain to people in my football crazy town that we're going to put two fewer kids on the field. I'm not crazy about it, but I know it's for the greater good."

Umatilla High School head football coach Chad Smith said moving 2A

schools to nine-man would affect his team, which is 3A, but has been playing down to 2A in football.

Last year, Umatilla finished with 26 players, he said, the highest in some time.

"Right now, our goal is to get 30 to 35," he said.

While that gives Umatilla enough to field 11 players at a time, he said, many 2A schools struggle to have that many players. Umatilla played smaller Gaston last season, Smith said, and this year Gaston is on the schedule to play in Umatilla. The team already reached out to say it can't play 11-man football.

Playing nine-man means some Umatilla players won't have the opportunities to gain experience, he said, but dropping to nine players is not nearly as difficult as going from 11 to eight. He said that's a "huge transition."

When the final decision comes down, Smith said, Umatilla obviously will adjust as needed.

"I understand where they're coming from, he said. "I'm just torn for what it means for us."

### Six-man title supported

Additionally, the committee said it is fully supporting

making six-man football a sanctioned sport that could play for an official OSAA title, an option that was not in place during the pilot program for six-man.

That would allow Echo back into the official title picture on the gridiron.

The committee also made a decision to change its stance on playoff eligibility for teams that do play down. The committee elected to drop its position from the prior meeting and allow teams playing down eligibility for the postseason.

"Ultimately the group shifted their stance in this area to recommend that schools meeting the criteria and choosing to play down would be eligible for OSAA playoffs, but that these schools would be reviewed on an annual basis by the Football Ad Hoc Committee," the update from the OSAA said.

The committee also is seeking feedback on a potential change to the season schedule.

It is considering adding a week to the beginning of the season or to the end, making the season 10 weeks for nine games to be played. It says the consideration would help with odd-numbered leagues, help officials whose ranks are stretched thin and help with transportation issues, among others.

The next ad hoc committee meeting is slated for Wednesday, Feb. 2.

— *East Oregonian* news editor Phil Wright contributed to this article.

## Bend's Tommy Ford is headed to his 3rd Winter Olympics

By **MARK MORICAL**  
*The Bulletin*

BEND — A little more than a year after suffering a devastating knee injury and being airlifted from a Swiss mountainside, Bend's Tommy Ford is writing the ultimate comeback story: He's headed to his third Winter Olympics.

Ford, 32, and a life-long Bend resident, was included among the six men named to the U.S. Olympic Alpine Team by U.S. Ski & Snowboard on Friday, Jan. 21. The Beijing Games are set for Feb. 4-20, and the men's giant slalom, Ford's specialty, is scheduled for Feb. 13.

Ford has reached the Olympics again after enduring four surgeries and a concussion he is still recovering from.

"This is such a cool opportunity!" Ford was quoted in a press release Jan. 21 from U.S. Ski and Snowboard. "I'm stoked to be a part of the team. It is freeing to be able to do what I know how to do with the support of those who believe in it."



Ford

Ford's nomination to the team comes as somewhat of a surprise because he has not raced at all on the World Cup this season. In fact, he has not raced a World Cup since Jan. 9, 2021, when he had a horrific crash in Adelboden, Switzerland, in the midst of a banner year. He was knocked unconscious and suffered significant injuries to his knee, wrist and head.

The past year has been a painful, often emotional challenge for Ford, who has dealt with bouts of depression while simultaneously rehabilitating his knee so he can return to racing.

Before the crash, Ford had posted four World Cup top-10 results in giant slalom in the 2020-21 season, including a podium finish.

He was on his way to one of the best seasons of his long career.

Ford said he tore two ligaments in his right knee, broke his tibial plateau and tore his meniscus. After his surgeries, he spent most of the offseason home in Bend recovering.

"I'm feeling more and more

normal," Ford said in an interview with The Bulletin one month ago. "I'm able to ski in a comfortable way, and I'm just trying to push back into some training and run some gates. The knee's been feeling really good and responding really well to training."

Ford was first able to get back on snow in mid-November at the U.S. Ski Team training camp in Copper, Colorado.

"That was wonderful," he said. "The first couple days were pretty slow, just sliding around and getting comfortable. Once I started to go faster and link some turns, it was a really neat reminder of why I ski."

Ford — who grew up racing for the Bend-based Mt. Bachelor Sports Education Foundation — competed in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia, and the 2018 Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Racing in giant slalom, he finished 26th at Vancouver and 20th at Pyeongchang. He did not compete in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, because he was recovering from a broken leg he suffered while freeskiiing in France.

### ON THE SLATE

#### Schedule subject to change

#### THURSDAY, JAN. 27

**Prep girls wrestling**  
Hermiston at Kennewick, 6 p.m.

**Prep boys wrestling**  
Hermiston at Kennewick, 6 p.m.

**Prep girls basketball**  
Irrigon at Nyssa, 5:30 p.m.  
Grissold vs. Powder Valley, 6 p.m.  
Riverside at Umatilla, 6 p.m.

**Prep boys basketball**  
Long Creek/Ukiah vs. Crane, 4:30 p.m.  
Grissold vs. Powder Valley, 7:30 p.m.  
Riverside at Umatilla, 7:30 p.m.

#### FRIDAY, JAN. 28

**Prep girls bowling**  
Hermiston at Atomic Bowl, Richland, Washington, 12 p.m.

**Prep boys wrestling**  
Hermiston vs. Chiawana, 7 p.m.

**Prep girls basketball**  
Irrigon at Vale, 5 p.m.  
Hermiston at Richland, 5:45 p.m.  
Pilot Rock vs. Union, 6 p.m.  
Heppner vs. Grant Union, 6 p.m.

**College women's basketball**  
EOU vs. Bushnell, 5:30 p.m.

Echo vs. Lyle/Wishram, 6 p.m.

**Prep boys basketball**  
Pendleton vs. Crook County, 6:30 p.m.  
Irrigon at Vale, 6:30 p.m.  
Grissold at Nixyaawii, 7:30 p.m.  
Echo vs. Lyle/Wishram, 7:30 p.m.  
Pilot Rock vs. Union, 7:30 p.m.

**College men's basketball**  
EOU vs. Bushnell, 7:30 p.m.

**College women's basketball**  
EOU vs. Bushnell, 5:30 p.m.

# And Then There Were None

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