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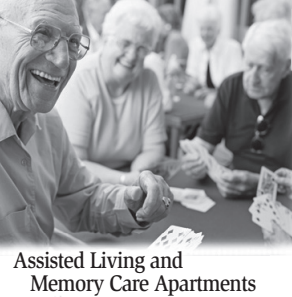
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Lions turn their attention to the postseason

Back-to-back wins give
Cottage Grove the No. 2 seed

BY MATT HOLLANDER
The Cottage Grove Sentinel

With wins over Sweet Home and Elmira in the final week of the regular season, the Cottage Grove girls' basketball team locked up the Sky-Em League's No. 2 seed. The Lions will host a play-in game Saturday evening, however their opponent is still to be determined. The play-in round matchups will be finalized after the OSAA rankings freeze at 10 p.m. on Tuesday.

Cottage Grove (15-10, 7-3 Sky-Em) defeated the Huskies 64-27 on Tuesday and the Falcons 54-45 on Friday. And while the Lions knew they were facing inferior opponents, coach Kerry Clawson said the team wasn't focused on the scoreboard.

"The win is one measure; it's not the only measure," she said. "We keep looking to the

future and we try not to think about progress in terms of wins and losses, but if we are performing the things we've practiced."

Tuesday's game was also Senior Night for Conner Borigo, Jenna Borrelli, Sara Gardner, Ashlee Neely, Taylor Sayles and Amanda Anderson. Clawson said that Borigo will go down as an all-time great and that the group as a whole was a constant reminder of why she got into coaching in the first place.

"We haven't had a lot of drama with these kids. They just come here to play basketball and they're friends with each other. We've had a girl on our team who can score 30 points, but the others don't resent that," she said.

After beating Sweet Home (1-19, 0-10 Sky-Em), the Lions — who are currently ranked 13th — could have lost to Elmira (6-16, 3-7 Sky-Em) and still claimed second place in the league. However, a strong finish in the rankings would help them avoid Cascade, Henley and Sutherlin in the first round. Those top-three ranked

teams have a combined record of 67-1.

"Our season is coming to a close, and we owe ourselves the respect of a hard-fought game, no matter who our opponent is," Clawson said.

As far as keys to success in the postseason, Clawson said that they are no different from what they've learned through the regular season: be patient, work to distribute the ball and limit turnovers.

Tuesday, Feb. 17

Cottage Grove 64, Sweet Home 27

Sweet Home	2	8	6	11	— 27
Cottage Grove	17	16	16	15	— 64

Sweet Home: Miller 10, Stockman 6, Porter 5, Tow 4, Brownell 2
Cottage Grove: Borigo 20, Thielman 11, Neely 9, Mootz 8, Nichols-Ferguson 7, Sayles 4, Albrecht 3, Arnold 2

KENNEDY

Continued from 1B

1995. When he first took the job, Cottage Grove had lost 36 games in a row. They would run that figure up to a state record 59 games before the Lions broke through.

It was a different era for Cottage Grove basketball, but perhaps more significantly, a different era of high school athletics in Oregon. At that time, Cottage Grove competed in the Midwestern League. As one of the smallest schools in the state's highest classification, Cottage Grove struggled mightily to compete against schools like Marshfield and Sheldon.

But when its population fluctuated in the early 1990s, Cottage Grove dropped down a class to compete in the 3A Sky-Em League and was immediately more competitive. The 1992-93 team placed seventh at the state tournament and finished 21-6 overall.

The next year, Cottage Grove

was back at the 4A level. And though the 1994-95 team was ranked among the top 20 and missed the playoffs by one game, it was bittersweet success for Kennedy, who thought he had developed a team capable of winning the 3A championship.

When Kennedy resigned after that season, he left with a clear idea of how schools should prioritize athletics.

"It's my feeling that if you can't fund middle-school sports, you should cut all sports," he told the Register Guard on Mar. 2, 1995. "If you don't give kids the chance to excel, what are you doing? Let's decide what we can be good at and do it."

After a brief stint as an assistant with Lane Community College, Kennedy took on the Lincoln program, where he has been, more or less, ever since.

"I still liked coaching so I went down to the middle school to try to make sure kids had enough preparation to not get slaughtered," he said. "It be-

comes abusive when you put kids in a losing situation."

Though the competitive balance of high school athletics was still out of his control, Kennedy has made good on his promise. He has held 7 a.m. open gyms every morning at the middle school for decades; arranged for his teams to play extra games before and/or after the regular season; and even scheduled the Chinese national team for an exhibition game one year.

"I have two things I try to do: one, teach them to pursue excellence; and two, risk failure in public. To step onto a court in front of a crowd is a type of courage that normal people don't have to exhibit," Kennedy said.

Shepherd was a neighbor of Kennedy's when he was in middle school, and Kennedy would take him to those early morning shoot-arounds.

"It's a pretty enormous commitment that he's maintained for a lot of years. I can say without a doubt that his efforts have had an impact on varsity players," he said.

Kennedy was a big supporter of the OSAA's reorganization in 2006, which moved Cottage Grove into the fourth highest of six classifications. To him it made sense for the Lions to play similarly rural schools, and it also reduced the number of teams in each league, making it easier for teams to schedule winnable games if needed.

However, after watching the boys' team struggle to win their first league game of the season, he pointed out just how important it is to have a strong program at every level.

"It's getting more competitive all the time, and you need to start kids in competitive programs at a younger age," he said. "Lincoln plays a 10-game schedule, but its not enough to stay competitive. The good teams are playing a harder schedule."

While his career has now spanned across six decades, Kennedy was never tempted to return to varsity coaching.

"I had this rule: when you're getting old you want to keep the blessings and shed the burdens. Coaching at that level has a lot of burdens," he said.

One aspect that he took the greatest issue with was playing time. However, at the middle school level he can guarantee that each player gets into every game, and he receives no argument from parents.

Kennedy said he is still open to coaching off-season leagues or on a short-term basis, but he is "done shouldering the burden of building the program." That begs the question, who will pick up the torch?

"It will be difficult," Shepherd answered. "Cottage Grove as a community needs to recognize that as things change, if we want to continue to offer kids the opportunities to improve — over and above a season — it takes kids being in the gym and playing as much as they would like to. Of course, it still needs to be fun, and Al brought that component. Particularly in the later years, he kept kids playing who otherwise may have become frustrated and left. I would love and wish for three or four AIs to come along and take over different aspects of Cottage Grove basketball."



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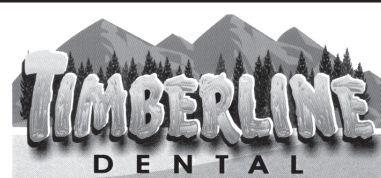
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