Sports

FIRST IN A 3-PART SERIES ABOUT HOW HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES IN NORTHEAST OREGON ARE DEALING WITH CANCELLATION OF SPRING SPORTS

A sports season lost

By Brett Kane
EO Media Group

PENDLETON — Lane Maher has a routine he uses to train for his track and field season every year.

First, the Pendleton senior track star warms up the muscles with a round of stretching. Then, he'll start his running drills. Next, he practices his hurdling to perfect his technique and endurance.

It's a straightforward but effective regimen that has worked well in his favor the past three years — Maher was the Intermountain Conference champion in both the 300- and 110-meter hurdles as a junior, and went on to become the 300-meter hurdle 5A state champion that same year, and also placed second in the 110-meter hurdles.

While he still takes to the track every day, things are more different now than they've ever been before.

This year, he won't have any meets to compete in, new records to break, a team to practice with, or another state championship to vie for. Maher is one of hundreds of high school senior athletes across the state whose spring season was taken from them after the Oregon School Activities Association, following Gov. Kate Brown's decision to close public schools for the rest of the academic year, canceled all sporting events because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Finding out that your favorite sport has been canceled, in the last season you'll get, was very hard for me to deal with," Maher said. "There was so much potential in this season for a lot of people that was washed away because of this situation."

Maher had big goals in mind for his final season with the Bucks. He wanted a shot at another state title, as well as to break the Pendleton High School record for the 110 hurdles, which is currently held by Kelly Simpson with her time of 14.46, set in 1999.

"This is my bread and butter," Maher said. "This is what I love to do, and this season is something I'll never get back. This spring is a lot different. Trying to find something to do and stay busy is hard at this point."

Maher plans to attend the College of Idaho at Caldwell after graduation, where he will pursue a degree in engineering. He will also continue his track career at the college.

Maher isn't the only local senior athlete whose high school athletic career unexpectedly came to an end.

Hermiston senior utility player Bailee Noland was ready for her senior softball season — the Bulldogs' second in Washington's Mid-Columbia Conference. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, instead of spending her spring days out on the diamond with her coaches and teammates, she's been working on a farm.

"I believe it's a great opportunity for me to learn new things every day that I will need in the future, and I love working outside, so it was a win-win," she said. "But softball was always the reason I was so excited for the end of the school year, because I knew I was going to get to ball out with my teammates."

Noland

Noland signed a letter of intent to play softball at Salt Lake City Community College in December 2019, so she will still get to take to the diamond once again — but as a Bruin, not a Bulldog.

"I'm missing the atmosphere the most," she said. "Us girls would walk into practice, and we would all start joking and laughing. It was a great time, and when we would go play on the field, it was even better. Having fun, I believe, made us play better."

Stanfield senior Kendra Hart is also feeling the heavy absence of softball in her life. A Stanfield student, Hart is a left-handed pitcher at Echo, with whom Stanfield co-ops in softball.

Hart is a three-sport athlete, competing in volleyball, basketball and softball, but she noted that softball was her favorite of the three.

"I was really just looking forward to playing the sport," she said. "I was looking forward to laying it all out there and making memories."

While her time on the diamond as a Tiger came to an untimely end, Hart will be back on the field next spring, as she will be joining the softball squad at Columbia Basin College (a community college in Pasco, Washington,) while studying dental hygiene. In the meantime, she has been helping her parents around the house, applying for scholarships, and polishing up her softball skills when she can.

Hart

"I was pretty upset about it," she said about the cancellation of her senior season. "It still seems so unreal. It hasn't quite hit me yet that my high school sports career is over for good. It sucks. I'd do anything to be back on the field with my teammates."

The rest of the series

Part 2, featuring Union County athletes, will be published in the Saturday, May 9, issue and the series will conclude in the Saturday, May 16, issue with a profile of Baker High School athletes.

"Finding out that your favorite sport has been canceled, in the last season you'll get, was very hard for me to deal with."

— Lane Maher, Pendleton High School track star

Ben Lonergan / East Oregonian

Pendleton High School athlete Lane Maher longboards on Airport Road in Pendleton on Thursday afternoon. The hurdler has spent what would have been his senior track season longboarding, running and golfing to stay active.

EVENTS

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Hells Canyon Motorcycle Rally organizers announced in a post on the event's Facebook page on Saturday that the rally, which brings thousands of riders to town, would not happen.

"We know that this will come as an enormous disappointment for you as an attendee, and we understand the gravity of the situation for all vendors, local business owners, and members of the community," the post reads. "We deeply apologize for any inconvenience that this may place on your business or family. This is not a decision we have taken lightly, but we feel it is our responsibility to do our part to help protect all event attendees, sponsors, staff, and volunteers."

The Rally is giving full refunds to people who have signed up, or re-registering riders and vendors for 2021.

The East-West Shrine All-Star Football Game, a fundraiser for the Shriners Hospital for Children in Portland, has been played every summer since 1973 in Baker City.

The event has raised more than $12.5 million over its history, which dates to 1952 when it was started in Pendleton.

The game is part of a weekend of associated events, including breakfast at Geiser-Pollman Park, a run/walk and a downtown parade featuring Shriners in their various whimsical vehicles.

Baker High School's Sam McCauley was to be a member of the East squad for this year's game. His teammate, Riley Flanagan, was an alternate.

Other events

The Baker City Cycling Classic, a multi-stage bicycle race, is scheduled for June 26-28.

A May 1 post on the event's Facebook page notes that the event is still planned, though with the possibility of rescheduling it to Aug. 14-16 if necessary.

The North Powder Huckleberry Festival, set for July 25, has been canceled in part because the event's steering committee and volunteers have not been able to meet to plan the Festival, according to a Saturday post on its Facebook page.

CLASSES

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Lattin called that change "disheartening" because of the important role the community partnerships and family engagement have played in the success of the District's innovative summer programming.

In inviting Summer Academy partners to today's online meeting, Lattin emphasized how vital they are to the success of Summer Academy.

"Our partnerships are important, and we want to work together as we navigate uncharted territory," she said.

BIGHORNS

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There are more than 50 strains of that bacteria, and they have varying levels of lethality.

The test results prompted ODFW to cancel the two bighorn hunts scheduled this summer and fall in the Lookout Mountain unit.

Those hunts included three tags — two for Oregon hunters and one for a nonresident.

Ratliff said ODFW has confirmed 10 to 12 bighorns have died, the most recent being found on April 5. Of the carcasses that were fresh enough to be tested — two had decomposed too much — all were infected with the same strain of bacteria.

Biologists don't know — indeed, they might never confirm — how the herd was infected, Ratliff said.

Two people who have domestic sheep in the Lookout Mountain unit volunteered to have some of their animals tested, but results are pending.

Even if the domestic sheep are carrying the bacteria, that wouldn't be conclusive proof that the bighorns were infected by contact with domestic sheep, Ratliff said.

He said ODFW will pay to test domestic sheep, and he encourages owners to call the agency at 541-523-5832.

Ratliff said ODFW also tested one llama, which did not have the bacteria.

ODFW will continue to monitor the Lookout Mountain herd through the summer.

The agency's strategy will depend on how many sheep die, Ratliff said.

One option that has proved successful in other bighorn herds infected with virulent diseases is the "test/cull" strategy.

The goal is to test as many bighorns as possible and fit them with identifying collars.

Sheep that are infected would be euthanized to prevent them from sickening other bighorns.

Collaring the sheep would allow biologists to capture those animals later and test them again. That's important, Ratliff said, because some sheep are likely to be "intermittent shedders," meaning they carry the bacteria but shed it only some of the time.

Those sheep might test negative but then later begin shedding and possibly infecting other bighorns, he said.

Intermittent shedders might also need to be euthanized to protect the herd.

The Lookout Mountain herd was established in the early 1990s when a few dozen bighorns were captured elsewhere and released along Fox Creek. The animals have thrived in the steep canyons on the breaks of the Snake River.

"It's been the healthiest herd in Oregon," Ratliff said.

The only previous concern among Lookout Mountain bighorns was a minor rash of pneumonia that lasted a couple of months in 2012, he said. Those illnesses were caused by a virus rather than a bacteria, but it was a mild type that killed few bighorns, Ratliff said.

Although the Lookout Mountain bighorns aren't known to mingle with the Burnt River Canyon herd — the two generally are more than a dozen miles apart — ODFW is monitoring the Burnt River bighorns for coughing or other signs of pneumonia.

So far the biologists haven't seen any such evidence, Ratliff said.

Like the Rocky Mountain subspecies, the California bighorns are vulnerable to a variety of bacterial and viral infections that can lead to fatal pneumonia, Ratliff said.

"Bighorn sheep are susceptible to a lot of things," he said. "They're not the strongest species out there."

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